

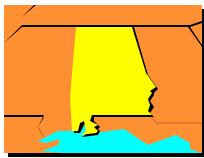
Hotlines and Hurricanes: How Legal Hotlines Became Disaster Responders



Last year's hurricane season left a legacy of legal problems in addition to the devastation to lives and property. Several Gulf Coast States realized that providing telephone access to services was the quickest way to address the legal needs of the victims. Texas has had a long standing statewide legal hotline, Legal Hotline for Texans, and quickly used its hotline infrastructure for rapid deployment of legal assistance to the thousands of Katrina victims living in Texas. Programs in Alabama and Louisiana responded to Katrina by jump-starting a statewide legal hotline for disaster assistance. Alabama Legal Services Disaster Hotline Network will form the basis of a statewide intake and advice mechanism for the Legal Services of Alabama statewide organization. Louisiana's Bar Association, in partnership with various groups, opened a legal hotline for Katrina victims within days of the storm's passing.

This article describes how these programs used the hotline model for rapid response to a natural disaster.

Alabama



Legal Services of Alabama Disaster Hotline Network began taking calls about six weeks after Katrina hit the Gulf Coast on August 29th, 2005. The hotline was launched with a start up budget of just under 1 million dollars that included staffing, equipment, office space and furniture. Debra Hansen, Director of the Alabama Disaster Hotline Network, anticipates that ongoing staffing and operating costs will be about \$500,000 annually. The start up budget included an allocation of Legal Services Corporation funds, Access to Justice Funds allocated via the Alabama Law Foundation and funds awarded in

the wake of Katrina for the development of the DHN, including an AARP Foundation grant for older Katrina victims. LSA responded to the needs of hurricane victims by quickly getting a toll free number and an attorney based in Montgomery to handle statewide calls. The goal of this effort was originally to respond to victims of Katrina and Hurricane Ivan, a September 2004 Hurricane. Debra reports that the subject matter of legal problems stemming from these disasters is unfolding according to the length of time that has passed. The initial problems experienced by hurricane victims related to obtaining approval for FEMA benefits and finding housing. The next layer of problems involved collecting insurance proceeds on damaged and destroyed housing. Katrina victims are not yet at the stage of experiencing problems with home repair contracts. Debra explained that surprisingly, family law issues also arose after the hurricanes- issues related to wills lost in the destruction and child custody issues which resulted from people leaving children with family members while they went in search of replacement housing or jobs.

Once the hotline was up and running, the new LSA Executive Director, Melissa Pershing, recognizing that the call center infrastructure was already in place, saw the opportunity to implement a centralized telephone intake system for the 10 LSA field offices statewide. LSA handled over 8,600 cases last year; about 70% of them were closed with counsel and advice. The poverty population of Alabama is 700,000 persons, one-quarter of whom are children.

The Disaster Hotline Network is in the process of evolving into the intake, advice and referral arm of LSA. Furthermore, a Spanish Legal Hotline was launched in March with a separate toll free number. The hotline currently has a staff of twelve, however, unlike many centralized intake units, the hotline attorneys are stationed in four of the LSA offices. The Montgomery, Mobile, and Huntsville hotline attorneys are located in the same office or building as the local LSA office. The Birmingham hotline attorney is housed at the Cumberland Law School of Stanford University with the idea that law students will participate in the hotline work in the future.

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While integrating call routing, instant messaging and a centralized case management database allow the four Call Centers to operate as a single unit; dispersing the call center locations among Alabama's four urban areas and the LSA's programs four regions allows:

- Each Center to take advantage of potential law student, attorney and other volunteers in four urban areas instead of just one;
- Any center to take over operations for any other center or even the entire state should another center or centers be affected by a natural or other disaster;
- Each call center to rotate shifts in order to provide coverage from 8 am to 8 pm Monday through Friday and 9 to noon every Saturday--without any one staffer having to work evenings more than one week a month or work more than one Saturday a month.

Additionally co-locating three of the call centers with a local office (and the fourth at a law school) is meant to help minimize the "us" and "them" kind of feelings that sometimes arise between local office staff and call center staff and facilitate call center staff interaction with local communities.

As the hotline morphs into a statewide intake system, it will serve as a filter for cases that can be handled by counsel and advice or limited brief service. Not only does this lift much of the burden of eligibility screening from local offices, but reduces no shows at the local office and reduces local office paralegal or attorney time ferreting out facts and issues needed just to dispense information and advice. Local offices should have more time to provide extended representation and to do outreach to those communities, in those areas and with those groups and individuals who do not have or are less likely to use telephones.

As the hotline becomes more experienced and sophisticated, hotline staff are developing checklists and scripts for specific areas of law most common to legal services. This will assist local offices when hiring new personnel by directing them to a resource they can use during their initial training time with LSA. The call center also looks for specific issues that LSA's statewide practice group advocacy directors are interested in and refers those cases.

Work-Flow

The Call Center is open from 8 AM to 8 PM Monday-Friday and from 9 to Noon on Saturday. Each call center takes a turn on the evening and Saturday shifts. As calls come in they are placed in the phone queue. The calls are picked up by screeners who do a conflicts check, eligibility screening, and find out the reason for the call. The screener then inputs the demographic information into the **Legal Files case management software** and the intake is passed to the attorney in the local office via the software. The hotline tries to avoid doing call backs and at present there are enough staff members so that calls are flowing through efficiently. Existing Soft-phone technologies would allow screeners (or volunteers) to pick up from their homes (LSA will begin using a pilot program to allow some staff members to work from home during evening or Saturday shifts). The average number of calls so far has been about 45 per day, but only limited outreach or publicity has been performed to alert Alabama residents to the existence of the legal call center.

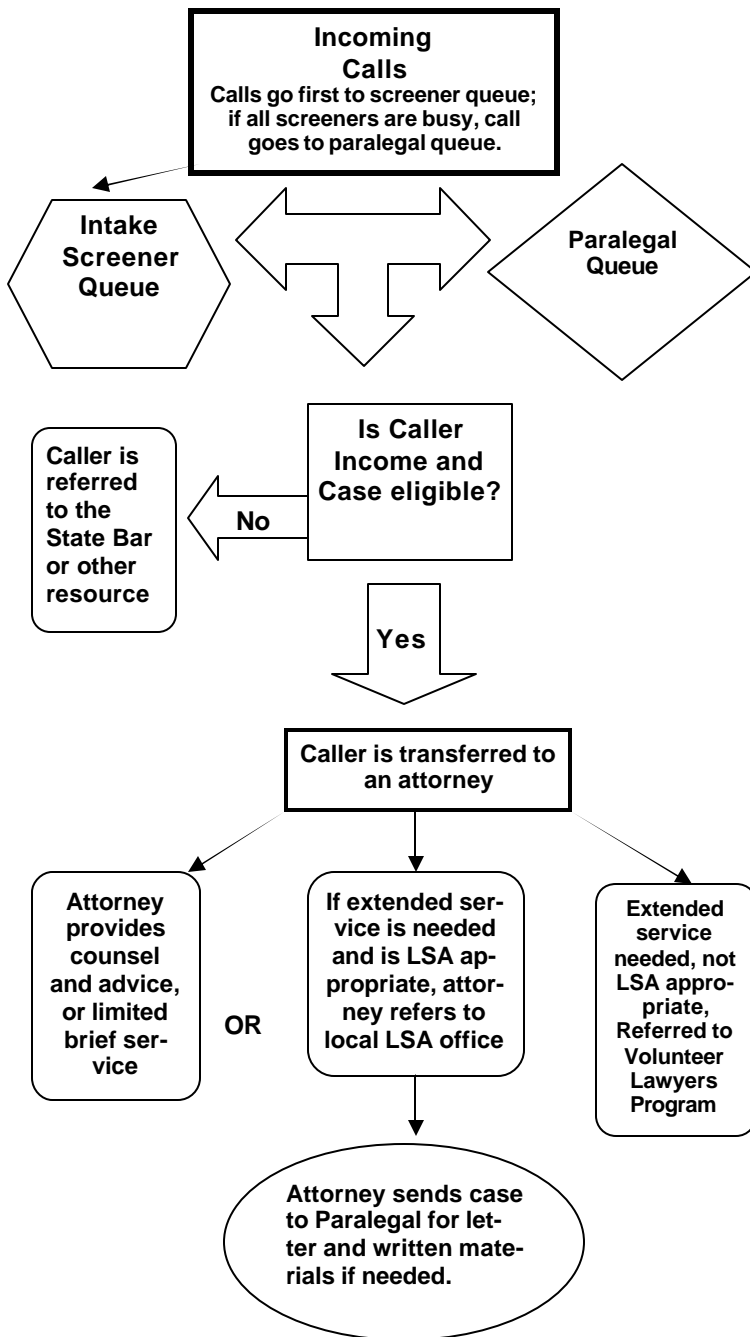
The attorneys provide advice and referrals. The paralegals send out letters and brochures at the attorneys' instruction. Every caller who receives advice gets a follow up letter. The attorneys also perform limited brief services. In order to make a referral for full representation, the hotline attorney calls the supervising attorney in the local office. It is up to the supervising attorney whether the case will be accepted for full representation. Once the **Legal Files software** is deployed in all the offices, the supervising attorney will be able to access the client case file. In the meantime, the hotline is copying the information from the file into an email and sending it to the supervising attorney. The supervising attorney then contacts the client directly. The hotline can also refer cases to the Volunteer Lawyers Project.

The hotline has two toll free numbers, one for English callers and one for Spanish callers. Calls are answered in queue by the next available intake screener. As long as the staff member is logged into the phone system, it does not matter where they are located. The screener then calls the attorney on duty in his office to handle the call, as only screeners, and not attorneys, are part of the call queue. If the attor-

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ney is not available, the screener will try another attorney or a paralegal who can give advice under the supervision of an attorney. The hotline staff consists of four attorneys, four intake screeners and four paralegals. The intake screeners are the first to determine income and case eligibility. In the event all intake screeners are busy, the paralegals will take the calls. In the event no intake screeners or paralegals are available, the attorneys will take the initial call. After the attorney completes the call, the paralegal sends out the advice letter, resource information or brochures.



Equipment

LSA uses CISCO phones with Asterisk- an open source call distribution system with Voice Over the Internet Protocol (VoIP). The program encountered some initial problems with implementation of the phone service and needed to get extra routers and T1 lines to help the call distribution flow and call quality.

The hotline uses web-based **Legal Files case management software**. Presently just the hotline is using this software but it will replace the current software in use at the LSA offices. Debra is very happy with the software. Although it is expensive, it is efficient at tracking needed information and allows the user to create a variety of templates.

Quality Control

To prepare for the opening of the hotline, the attorneys all attended an intensive week long training which included LSC procedures and **Legal Files** operation. The Advocacy Director and the hotline advocates are part of subject matter practice groups and attend statewide meetings to keep in touch with developments. As new attorneys are hired, they will go to the Montgomery office to spend a day for on the job training.

Debra currently reviews all the case notes entered by the hotline staff. LSA has an in-house website where the attorneys can refer to substantive materials. It serves as a portal to the LSA website, www.alabamalegalservices.org, which has an array of client material including FEMA information. The hotline attorneys can also call the advocacy director for assistance with a particular legal issue. The hotline will also send clients certain pro se materials, particularly for child custody and child support issues.

The most challenging aspect of launching the hotline, according to Debra, has been working through the technology. This has largely been an issue of testing, retesting and tweaking VoIP call quality in concert with securing sufficient bandwidth (without overspending) to operate LegalFiles Citrix and VoIP technologies

**Legal Services of Alabama Disaster
Hotline Network: 1-877-373-2333
Debra Hansen, Hotline Director
dhansen@alsp.org**

Louisiana State Bar

The response of Louisiana lawyers to the devastation of Hurricane Katrina was rapid and substantial. According to Monte Mollere, Access to Justice Director at the Louisiana State Bar Association, the Association, just days after the hurricane hit, began working with the Baton Rouge Bar Association, the Young Lawyer Division and FEMA, to quickly institute a one stop legal hotline for victims of Hurricane Katrina, and later victims of Hurricane Rita. The hotline, which began as a paper-based system, was converted to a viable online system with the assistance of Texas Rio Grande Legal Aid, LSU Law School, Southern University Law School, Loyola Law School and the staff from the Bar's Access to Justice Program. The conversion allowed for web-based access by pro bono attorneys (both in Louisiana and outside of the state) and the Louisiana legal services providers. The hotline continues to provide services to this day.



Since it opened for business in September 2005, the hotline has helped almost 8,000 callers. The hotline will assist with all hurricane-related legal issues, but Landlord/Tenant, Insurance, and FEMA problems comprise the majority of the calls to date. The hotline is staffed by an administrator, LSU and Southern University law students, Pro Bono Legal Corps fellows, and contract attorneys. Law students handle the initial calls. They address immediate problems, and refer the caller to a hotline attorney or to a local legal services office, depending on the situation presented. Additional referrals are made where appropriate. The Louisiana Supreme Court's original rule which allowed out of state attorneys to provide advice only, was expanded to allow out of state lawyers associated with one of six local legal services to provide expanded client services. The call center is assisting with the coordination of these volunteers.

The call center employs technology to efficiently and accurately handle calls and make appropriate referrals to local full-service programs. The call center has stable funding through December 2007, but because it has been so popular and effective, the providers and the Bar are working to define it as a permanent part of Louisiana's justice network and a resource to the state's vulnerable populations.

**Louisiana
State Bar Association
Disaster Legal Hotline
1-800-310-7029**

Texas

The Texas Legal Services Center responded to the influx of Katrina victims by creating the Disaster Relief Hotline as part of the Legal Hotline for Texans. (*The Legal Hotline for Texans has been profiled in previous issues of LHQ*). With a statewide telephone legal hotline already in place, TLSC was well positioned to respond nimbly. TLSC hired Peggy Fuller, as a full time attorney for the Disaster Relief Hotline. Peggy is a Louisiana evacuee from New Orleans and had been a Legal Services attorney there. Many of the calls to the Disaster Assistance Hotline involve areas of both Texas and Louisiana law and many also arise from resettlement issues such as FEMA appeals, unemployment compensation benefits and divorce and custody issues. According to Peggy, the Texas Disaster Relief Hotline offers advice and assistance to both Katrina and Rita victims. (Rita struck in September 2005). Areas of assistance include Landlord/Tenant and Housing issues, Consumer Law, Insurance, Public Benefits, FEMA, and Family Law. TLSC received a grant from AARP Foundation to help with this effort.

Clients can call in on a toll free number at any time and leave a message. Peggy returns the client calls. The TLSC Disaster Relief Hotline provides mostly advice and referrals but can offer some direct assistance on FEMA appeals, review of repair contracts and insurance policies, and help with obtaining continued unemployment compensation benefits.



**Texas Legal Services Center
Disaster Relief Hotline
800-622-2520**