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YOUR PROGRAM'S DISASTER PLAN

When disaster strikes there are two groups of challenges to legal aid programs: the continuation/restoration of the office(s) and equipment, and services to clients. To be prepared it is imperative that each program have an updated disaster plan in place before each new hurricane season. While a disaster plan may be modeled on those of other programs, an effective response requires each program to assess its own needs and those of its clients. Although management plays a major role in the formulation of any plan, it is essential that all segments of the staff be involved in the process because disasters affect the entire program in all of its functions. All staff should be knowledgeable regarding the implementation of the plan.

At a minimum, a legal aid program's disaster plan should address the following :

- A. Staffing and Personnel;
- B. Office Space and Equipment;
- C. Communication;
- D. Baseline Housing Survey; and
- E. Delivery of Legal Services.

A. Staffing and Personnel

A legal aid program's disaster plan should include the following related to staffing and personnel:

1. Identify at least two¹ disaster "point" people who will lead the disaster team:

one for administrative issues and another for issues regarding the delivery of legal services. These point people will attend the annual pre-disaster-season training, participate in the FLS disaster listserv, and will serve as the main communicators of information regarding disaster issues internally with program staff and externally with FLS, the Florida Bar Foundation and others.

2. Identify such additional program staff as are needed to develop and implement all parts of the plan, and list their responsibilities.

3. Address who has the authority to close and re-open office(s) and whether the closing/opening of offices is tied to other events, such as local courthouse operations.

4. Specify disaster personnel policies with regard to postponement of scheduled vacations, personal leave for personal issues arising from disaster such as day care and transportation, and cash assistance for impacted staff.²

5. Include copies of any disaster-contingent cooperative agreements with other legal aid programs or private firms for borrowing/lending clerical assistance and/or printing of community education flyers.

B. Office Space and Equipment

A legal aid program's disaster plan should include the following related to office space and equipment:

1. Include copies of all insurance policies, and contain an updated determination that insurance coverage is adequate in the event of disaster damage or destruction of buildings, equipment and continuation of business as appropriate.³

2. Include an updated inventory of office equipment that contains the date of

purchase and any maintenance contracts, as well as a current vendor list. In addition, the computer equipment inventory (including desktops, laptops, servers, peripherals, printers, and network devices) should contain serial numbers, model, brand, assignment, and physical location.

3. Describe the program's protocol for backing up computer files and maintaining backed-up files offsite.

1. Describe the disaster-preparation protocol for protection of office(s), computers, other office equipment and files.⁴

5. Include copies of any cooperative agreements with other legal aid programs or law firms for borrowing/lending computer and telephone equipment, and/or borrowing/lending of office space.

C. Communications

A legal aid program's disaster plan should include the following related to communications:

1. Describe an emergency communication plan, listing key personnel and alternates responsible.

2. List any arrangements with other legal aid programs and/or law firms for forwarding calls in the event an office is destroyed or disabled, and include copies of any cooperative agreements.

3. If available and desirable, outline how to arrange a voice mail system with two mail boxes on which messages can be left: one for staff and one for clients and others.

4. Include an updated staff contact list that contains cell phones and emergency contacts.

5. Include a list of public service announcement contacts at local radio, television and print media outlets, and identify staff responsible for making these contacts.

D. Baseline Housing Survey:

A legal aid program's disaster plan should include the following related to baseline housing survey:

1. Include an updated survey of affordable housing in the geographical area covered by the program. Please see section on Long-Term Recovery for resources and an explanation of how to conduct the survey.

E. Delivery of Legal Services:

A legal aid program's disaster plan should include the following related to delivery of legal services:

1. Outline responsibilities and a protocol for maintaining a program wide docket and calendar containing at least basic information regarding each case.

2. Contain a list of local resources, including voluntary agencies, religious organizations, local emergency management agencies, the local FIND group, the contact person from each, and the legal aid staff person who has established a relationship with each.

3. Contain a list of agencies to receive post-disaster consumer flyers, such as law enforcement, clerks' offices, local offices of state agencies, local government

offices, and the above listed resource organizations.

4. Include model clientconsumer flyers in the appropriate languages regarding disaster issues.⁵

5. Establish a disaster team headed by an experienced attorney,⁶ and Assign responsibilities among staff or via referrals for handling the additional caseload caused by a disaster, i.e., FEMA and other disaster benefits cases, landlord/tenant, insurance, and building contractor problems.

6. Assign responsibility among staff for handling the issue of long-term rebuilding.

7. Assign responsibility among staff for coordination of people who volunteer to help the program after a disaster.