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Friday, August 28, 2015

Message From the President: “Hurricanes Katrina and Rita: 10 Years Later”

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina on Aug. 29, 2005, and Hurricane Rita on Sept. 24, 2005, more than 9,000 Louisiana attorneys and judges — nearly half of the membership of the Louisiana State Bar Association (LSBA) — were displaced. Many lost loved ones, neighbors, friends and co-workers. Many more lost their homes. In the wake of the storms, we all watched in horror as the federal government failed to act.

Like so many other volunteers from around the state, the legal profession stepped in to fill the void. Judges, district attorneys and public defenders quickly worked together to rebuild a functioning criminal justice system. Civil lawyers worked to protect the rights of homeowners and other litigants. Commercial lawyers provided the business community with the guidance it needed to restart the economy. Public interest and government lawyers worked with federal and state government officials to make certain that the entire Gulf Coast received the funding that it needed to rebuild.

The LSBA played a critical supporting role in these early efforts to re-establish the rule of law in our communities. Within three days of Hurricane Katrina’s strike, the LSBA, with support from the Baton Rouge Bar Association, Louisiana State University Paul M. Hebert Law Center and the American Bar Association, established a toll-free hotline through which hurricane victims could obtain immediate legal assistance. The LSBA also provided attorneys and clients with communication platforms through which they could contact each other, coordinated attorney volunteer efforts, and worked with all stakeholders to deter crime and fraud and bring an end to the suffering.

Our work is continuing. The call center established in the aftermath of the storm gave birth to the Louisiana Civil Justice Center, a nonprofit that assists more than 10,000 Louisiana residents affected by natural disasters or financial crisis each year. The LSBA also offers attorneys and judges, particularly solo and small firm practitioners, with disaster management resources designed to equip them with the ability to match with equal courage and personal sacrifice their response to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

Ten years ago, two hurricanes dealt major blows to our great State, but they also proved that the legal profession is committed to serving the public interest and rule of law and that we will be there for our clients and communities in their times of greatest need.

Sincerely,

Mark A. Cunningham
President, Louisiana State Bar Association