

When disaster strikes, will you know what to do?

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When one imagines the aftermath of a natural disaster in the Bay Area, providing legal services may not be the first need that comes to mind.

But experience has taught us that residents affected by natural disasters do need lawyers who are prepared to help them get housing, insurance and disaster assistance quickly. With that goal in mind, the State Bar and the Alameda County Bar Association – in conjunction with representatives from Bay Area Legal Aid, the Bar Association of San Francisco and Pro Bono Net – have joined forces to establish the Bay Area Resilience Collaborative (BARC).

BARC's aim is to educate lawyers, develop a volunteer corps of attorneys willing to provide legal assistance at hotlines or disaster recovery centers and work with state and local authorities and nonprofit organizations so that if and when disaster strikes, the Bay Area legal community will be prepared to help.

To that end, Practising Law Institute (PLI) will host a free course on Sept. 24, "Providing Legal Assistance in the Aftermath of a Disaster." It will feature a distinguished range of panelists and addressing issues likely to arise in the days and weeks following a disaster. The course will be streamed live, as well as archived and available for free viewing (and Continuing Legal Education credit) on PLI's [website](#).

Be prepared

The motivating principle behind BARC is that the aftermath of a large-scale disaster is no time to be putting on programs, building a corps of volunteer attorneys or establishing a relationship with first responders and disaster relief organizations.

"We've known for a long time that California in general, and the Bay Area in particular, is due for a significant earthquake," explained Tiela Chalmers, CEO of the Alameda County Bar Association. "After Superstorm Sandy, we were inspired by our colleagues [in New York and New Jersey] and reminded again that it's really important to get planning pieces into place before a disaster of that magnitude happens here."

Learning how to help

The CLE course is intended for legal service providers and other attorneys interested in volunteering in the wake of a disaster. It will cover the framework for providing disaster legal services, types of pro bono opportunities, post-disaster housing issues faced by tenants and homeowners, the insurance claims process, working with federal disaster relief agencies, immigration issues and consumer fraud and debtor issues. Speakers include partners at Bay Area law firms, senior attorneys at legal services organizations and other subject matter experts. Although it will cover some Northern California-specific issues, the course is suitable for people from all parts of the state.

Moving forward (and moving south)

BARC's next steps are to "build out the plan so that all the institutional participants are ready to roll in the immediate aftermath of a disaster," said Sharon Ngim, program developer at the State Bar. High on the priority list is working to connect with other responders, such as the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the Red Cross and the California Governor's Office of Emergency Services.

"First responders can be concerned about lawyers barging in," Ngim added, "and we want to develop relationships so they understand that lawyers are there to provide free legal services to survivors in need under the Memorandum of Understanding between FEMA and the [American Bar Association's] Young Lawyers Division, not to chase ambulances."

BARC may be Bay Area-centric, but the State Bar doesn't plan to stop there. "We hope that the collaboration that we have developed can be replicated in whole or in part in other parts of the state," said Ngim.

Ngim noted that nationwide, young lawyers' groups including the ABA's Young Lawyers Division and the State Bar's CYLA have been playing a significant role in disaster preparedness planning, and that BARC and similar initiatives provide unique opportunities for young lawyers to provide needed leadership to the legal community.

For more information on the course, visit the PLI website:

http://www.pli.edu/Content/Seminar/Providing_Legal_Assistance_in_the_Aftermath/_/N-4kZ1z11qq8