



New York's Online Disaster and Recovery Resources

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Within days of Hurricane Sandy in October, the New York legal aid and pro bono community began providing information and services to those most affected. New York's statewide client and advocate websites are key components of this effort. While the storm was still unfolding, the LawHelp/NY team launched an online compilation of disaster and recovery assistance resources for low-income individuals, with information ranging from replacing spoiled food purchased with food stamp benefits to accessing disaster unemployment assistance. The resources are provided to the public through a combination of LawHelp/NY's Wordpress blogs in English and Spanish, and a new Disaster Recovery and Relief topic area on LawHelp.org/NY and its companion Spanish site, *AyudalegalNY.org*, that includes referral information for free legal services. LawHelp/NY's LiveHelp program, which is staffed largely by law student volunteers, also provides real-time chat based assistance to guide visitors to recovery information needed most. LawHelp/NY publicized these resources through email alerts to legal services providers, their Facebook and Twitter feeds, and a press release posted to *PRLog.org*, a free distribution service. As a result of this outreach, visits to LawHelp/NY's blog went from fifty visits pre-Sandy to over 1,000 a day in the weeks after.



The legal community's response has also been supported by *probono.net/NY*, New York's statewide advocate website. A dedicated section of the NYC Pro Bono Center (*probono.net/ny/nyc*) contains recorded trainings and webinars for volunteers developed by legal aid and bar partners involved in response efforts. The first webinar, held less than two weeks after Sandy, was attended by more than 500 volunteer attorneys and included the basics of FEMA, housing, benefits and other issues likely to be faced by storm victims. The site also hosts a comprehensive Disaster Relief

Legal Assistance Manual and information about clinics throughout New York City and Long Island in need of volunteers. Members of *probono.net/NY* have responded to blast emails calling for volunteers at these sites. As legal needs evolve in the months ahead, *probono.net/NY* also includes information about ways volunteers can stay involved and prepare to help out.

Online tools have played a critical role in supporting direct services for those most affected by past disasters in the Gulf States and other regions, providing self-help and referral information directly to the public and helping to mobilize and support a pro bono response. Training technology such as online webinars allow programs to reach volunteers regardless of their physical location, tap into the expertise of busy substantive experts, and make materials available for attorneys to reference on-demand as new needs arise. New media tools such as those employed by LawHelp/NY can help programs distribute their online resources to the public in a short amount of time. While any technology-enabled response will depend on the communications infrastructure of the affected region, existing capacities such as statewide websites can be leveraged to help respond to those in need with greater speed and efficacy.

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