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Phone: +1 646 783 7100 | Fax: +1 646 783 7161 | customerservice@law360.com

As Climate Disasters Rise, Firms Play Vital Role In Response

By **Daniel Moritz-Rabson**

Law360, New York (October 15, 2026, 4:41 PM EDT) -- As Hurricane Isaias bore down on the southeastern United States last weekend, law firms in the region were closely monitoring the storm and preparing to assist with emergency response efforts.

Bradley Arant Boult Cummings LLP attorneys across the South watched the storm churn through the Gulf of Mexico and waited to hear from state bar associations and the American Bar Association's Young Lawyers Division, which help coordinate legal disaster relief. Lawyers at Baker Donelson Bearman Caldwell & Berkowitz PC were preparing to aid with disaster relief needs, such as helping electric utilities activate crews.

"We are proactively reaching out to our local partners to be sure they have what they need," Wendy Huff Ellard, the leader of Baker Donelson's disaster recovery and government services team, told Law360 Pulse by email hours before the storm made landfall as a Category 2 hurricane.

From 1980 to 2024, the United States experienced an average of nine weather disasters annually that created over \$1 billion in damage, according to inflation-adjusted figures from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Between 2020 and 2024, an average of 23 such events occurred each year.

As extreme-weather events occur more regularly, major law firms are increasingly providing assistance to victims left with complex legal problems to navigate in the months and years following a natural disaster.

From California to Florida, firms have become a critical node in relief efforts. Attorneys help affected people in a range of ways, including filing impact litigation, helping people recover critical documents, guiding affected residents as they navigate the federal process to receive government financial assistance, and intervening in landlord-tenant disputes.

"As more disaster work starts happening, there's a need for law firms to increasingly be involved in that work," David Bonebrake, the deputy director for program performance at Legal Services Corp., told Law360

BY THE NUMBERS ABA's Disaster Legal Services Relief Efforts

Since 2007:

250+

disasters responded to in 45
states and 5 U.S. territories

Since 2020:

20,000+

disaster legal assistance hotline
calls fielded

Since 2024:

2,000+

volunteer hours contributed

Pulse. "They bring a lot of expertise. There are areas that, typically, Legal Aid doesn't touch as much. Those are things like insurance claims, real estate, property issues. And that's where large law firms have this capacity."

Firms are regularly offering hundreds or thousands of hours of free legal assistance to disaster victims. Following Hurricanes Helene and Milton in 2024, attorneys from Bradley Arant provided legal assistance worth about \$765,000. Morrison Foerster LLP attorneys have contributed more than \$2.1 million in pro bono legal services to victims of the wildfires that swept across Los Angeles in 2025. Reed Smith LLP also offered more than \$1.1 million in aid to victims of the same fires by providing one-on-one consultations via a hotline, offering information sessions and preparing guidance materials to help residents understand the insurance process.

Many of the legal systems and response networks that now activate during natural disasters began emerging from the vast financial, personal and legal wreckage caused by Hurricane Katrina in 2005. That storm exposed the unpreparedness of the country's disaster response infrastructure to provide support for the myriad legal needs stemming from a powerful natural disaster.

The American Bar Association's House of Delegates in 2007 adopted the Model Court Rule on Provision of Legal Services Following Determination of Major Disaster, more commonly known as the Katrina Rule. Eighteen states have now adopted the rule, which allows out-of-state attorneys to offer pro bono legal services when disasters strike. Seven others and the U.S. Virgin Islands have implemented a similar procedure.

The following year, California experienced an anomalously bad wildfire season. Morrison Foerster had been preparing and updating "helping handbooks" to assist communities and individuals affected by natural disasters. But as wildfires occurred more and more frequently, the firm was updating its disaster response materials "almost monthly," said Dorothy L. Fernandez, senior pro bono counsel at Morrison Foerster.

The firm began realizing that reactive responses to disasters were impractical. Others across the state were coming to the same conclusion.

Private attorneys, members of the bar and others began meeting to discuss disaster response and how to prepare more proactively, enabling a faster emergency response when extreme weather hits. Those efforts evolved into the Disaster Legal Assistance Collaborative, which now runs as a statewide collaborative among private, public and nonprofit organizations that offer free legal assistance after catastrophes.

Other states have similarly set up collaborative efforts to coordinate and improve support systems. The ABA's Young Lawyers Division and Georgia Team Ready, a coalition of law firms, and the Young Lawyers Division of the State Bar of Georgia operate an assistance hotline in the state to help provide free legal advice after disasters.

The work of preparing for a crisis often involves the development of training resources ensuring that volunteer attorneys are prepared to tackle key legal issues that arise.

Legal services providers, meanwhile, are constantly meeting with community members, building relationships and discussing legal needs.

"You're really seeing the professionalization of disaster legal services, in my view, where our grantees now, because they're facing so many disasters, have these established teams in place," Bonebrake said. "During the blue-sky periods, when those still do exist, they are going out and building relationships both with emergency management and with the private bar, so that they could be the hub and bring everybody together to help provide services when the disaster strikes.

As natural disasters occur more regularly, states have leaned on the expertise of those used to responding, such as California, Texas and Louisiana.

In 2017, as Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, Maria and Ophelia pummeled areas including Texas, Florida and Puerto Rico, other states watched nervously.

"We in Georgia actually felt like we might be a little behind," Tamara Serwer Caldas, the pro bono partner at Kilpatrick Townsend & Stockton LLP, told Law360 Pulse. Georgia Team Ready was born the next year.

Rather than inventing an entirely new guide to help attorneys respond to common problems that arise after natural disasters, Caldas said, the members of Georgia Team Ready took an existing Texas manual and tweaked it to reflect Georgia law.

"It covers everything from landlord-tenant, employment, family law. I mean, all of the things that people don't always think about," Caldas said.

Firms stressed that collaboration between firms and legal service providers is crucial for an effective response. In addition to collaborations among law firms within each state, legal services providers and bar associations, firms often tap into their large national networks to provide resources across state lines. Major firms regularly send lawyers to disaster sites in other states to lend assistance.

While firms are often quick to mobilize resources when disaster strikes, interest fades as time goes on.

"Something that we try to really emphasize is if you are a pro bono attorney, please be interested six months from now and stay in the loop to help the survivors," Shrushti Kothari, the co-vice director of the American Bar Association Young Lawyers Division's Disaster Legal Services, told Law360 Pulse.

For many survivors, legal issues persist for years, if not decades. To ensure that there is enough legal assistance to help with those long-running needs, firms try to deploy resources in other ways, like leading fundraisers for the local legal services organizations.

"Our first response is always going to be meeting the need ... not just sending an influx of volunteers into a disaster area, or inundating the nonprofits with supplies," Hilarie Atkisson, the chief pro bono and social impact officer at Fenwick & West LLP, told Law360. Often, financial support is an early need and the firm starts with some kind of matching drive, she noted.

Fenwick, like dozens of other firms, also sponsors fellowships that pay for recent law school graduates to work on public interest projects related to climate change. In California, for example, Megan Wilhelm is using a fellowship supported by the Morrison & Foerster Foundation to try to establish a right to cool air and help renters know their rights after natural disasters.

Baker Donelson, which started its disaster recovery and government services practice in 2006, focuses

on representing the public entities and nonprofit organizations that provide services to affected communities, working with school systems, hospitals and electric utilities.

Huff Ellard, of Baker Donelson, told Law360 Pulse that the firm hopes that by helping those organizations seek federal funding and support, "we provide faster community recovery and help minimize the long-term costs that disasters will impose on individuals."

In recent years, that work has become more difficult, as navigating the administrative procedural landscape has become more complicated and less predictable.

Since taking office in January 2025, the president has cut federal grants related to disaster preparedness and mitigation and slashed jobs from the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Federal relief efforts have also become more partisan under President Donald Trump, and government rules for sending aid after disasters continue to shift.

Politico reported in March that the president has rejected disaster aid requests from Democrat-led states at the highest rate in FEMA's nearly half-century history. States with Democratic governors and two Democratic senators received federal approval for just 23 percent of disaster funding requests, while jurisdictions with a Republican governor and senators saw 89 percent of applications greenlit.

The Trump administration has also significantly slowed the rate at which the federal government approves major disaster requests, hampering response efforts. That longer approval period directly delays federal aid to the people affected and also impedes cleanup efforts from more local governments, which may hesitate to undertake restoration efforts without the guarantee of federal funds to cover expenses.

Huff Ellard described "a lot of mistrust within the programs," and a shifting administrative environment where policies are applied more stringently to deny relief.

"The lack of predictability there is very concerning. The lack of consistency there is very concerning. The lack of transparency is very concerning because we have situations now where we've seen events that have been denied with very little explanation," she said. "That's also problematic for future events because we don't even know where the applying entity went wrong."

--Editing by Karin Roberts.