



# LONE STAR LEGAL AID

## LONE STAR LEGAL AID: THE IKE EFFECT

### A VIEW FROM THE GROUND—IKE VICTIMS FACE YEARS OF DISASTER LEGAL ISSUES

It came ashore after churning in the Gulf for days, unraveling destruction none of us could have ever imagined. In the span of 10 violent hours, on the night of Friday, September 12th, Hurricane Ike flattened most of the Texas Gulf Coast, submerging thousands of homes, prompting rooftop rescues for those who either braved the storm or were stranded by unexpectedly fast-rising storm surges. Millions of residents in tiny towns dotting the coastline, as well as major cities like Houston, Galveston and Beaumont were left pondering the same question—what do we do now?



Prior to Ike, Lone Star Legal Aid closed more than 10,000 hurricane cases and provided general legal information to over 50,000 people directly affected by Katrina and Rita. Less than one month after Ike's landfall, we have already distributed more than 50,000 English, Spanish, Chinese and Vietnamese important recovery legal information packets, remarkably surpassing in three weeks the general legal information provided post-Katrina and Rita.



On day one, Lone Star Legal Aid mobilized bilingual two-person legal teams to work onsite at local shelters and provide free legal advice relating to FEMA and other government benefits, lost or destroyed documents, evacuee relocation housing, school enrollment questions and other common disaster recovery legal matters. After more than a month, LSLA staff continues working day and night to provide legal aid relief in all 29 counties declared disaster areas by the federal government. All of these counties are in the LSLA service area. So far, our team has traveled thousands of miles across the state, advising and

helping Texans wherever possible through mobile offices staffed by Lone Star Legal Aid disaster experts at FEMA Disaster Recovery Centers (DRCs) and through the Hurricane Hotline, as well as with local community organizations, churches and shelters for the many thousands persevering in the aftermath of Hurricane Ike.



Lone Star Legal Aid's service area stretches from the Texas-Louisiana state line, all the way down through Matagorda County and up through East Texas, and as life-long Texans will tell you, it's nearly impossible to truly grasp the social fabric of the Texas Gulf Coast. Populations in small fishing cities like Oak Island and Sabine Pass are like miniature melting pots, with high Vietnamese speaking populations whose incomes rely on the obliterated seafood industry. Many are worried about lost wages. In places such as Houston, Spanish-speaking residents struggled for disaster relief

information that government entities printed only in English. Lone Star Legal Aid's staff was there to help translate and provide translated materials for thousands affected by Ike.

The reality is, every person we meet relives in harrowing detail their stories from Ike. Our team talked to one man (a member of the local volunteer fire department) in rural East Texas who mistakenly sat down to rest after seeing that his family evacuated safely in the hours before Ike. He intended to rest only a moment before gathering the pets and a few belongings and evacuating himself. Instead, he fell asleep. When he woke up, it was 11 p.m., and the power was out. After hearing what he thought was someone knocking on the second story front door of his home, which is raised on stilts, he opened the door to be met by a raging torrent of water which quickly rose four feet in the upper level of the home. He called the fire chief, not to ask for rescue, but to tell them he was stuck there so they would know to look for him after the storm passed. The house has been badly damaged and probably should not be lived in, especially by his diabetic and disabled sister. But it is all the family has. A niece sleeps in a tent in the front yard, despite warnings to watch for snakes and rats.



In addition to Lone Star Legal Aid's fieldwork, we have established a working group to address insurance issues as a whole. For homeowners with properties of lesser values, legal aid lawyers will not be their last resort, but their only one. Similarly, issues arising from home repairs, insurance settlements or the receipt of a FEMA grant or low interest SBA loan will be surfacing shortly, as home repair scam artists always follow the money.

LSLA attorneys have been meeting with FEMA, HUD and local housing authorities to achieve the best possible results for our client community, and to specifically ensure that the poorest of the poor have a

voice in the planning and regulatory process that will dramatically impact their housing options for the next 18 months, and longer.



In addition, the real possibility of a net loss of low income federally assisted housing in the coastal counties (primarily Galveston and Orange) is an issue we have been working on since Ike hit. We have witnessed firsthand the individual struggles and difficulties of federally subsidized low income coastal housing residents.

We have also been working on gathering state wide support, from not only the legal aid community but also the private bar, for a moratorium on evictions, due to the tremendous number of evictions that we predicted, and are now seeing, in our client community.

In addition to evictions, other landlord-tenant issues, including repairs and habitability, closing of premises, and lease terminations are coming in through both the Hurricane Hotline and our community outreach. Finally, we are seeing the full range of public benefits issues, including disaster public benefits, and specifically including processing delays, denials and appeals.

Though it's been more than a month since Hurricane Ike roared ashore and ravaged the Texas coast, in most places, the devastation is still palpable. Store-front windows remain plywooded up. The sandy beaches of Galveston, Surfside and Bolivar have been reduced to lifeless brown sludge wastelands. Most homes along the Texas coastline are no more—only slab foundations or broken pilings mark where houses once stood. Trees that defeated the battering, relentless 130-mile-per-hour winds are draped with electrical wires, garage doors, American flags and clothing. Long after the shocking images stopped flooding our living rooms, the impact still lingers along the Gulf Coast and across East Texas, where poverty flourished long before Hurricane Ike arrived. Like the resilience that it took to create our great southern cities, neighbors are helping neighbors, and people bond together, no matter how personally devastated they continue to be.



The fact is, around the halls of Lone Star Legal Aid, we all have a Hurricane Ike story to tell. Some of our employees lost their houses. Many were devastated by family loss and despair. Almost all of us struggled without power for weeks. But in the true spirit of why all legal aid staffers do what we do, our advocates worked alongside FEMA and other organizations from day one to make sure we reached our clients. So far, we've reached tens of thousands, opened hundreds of cases and continue every day reaching more. Lone Star Legal Aid anticipates Hurricane Ike work will continue for years to come.