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**Lawyers' Committee Disaster Relief Manual**

The Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights has created a Disaster Relief Manual with easy to read chapters on topics including: job search assistance in Louisiana, Alabama, and Mississippi, safety tips during clean up, safety tips for returning to homes, emergency benefits with sample letters to FEMA, enrolling children in school, and obtaining housing, rent and home loan assistance.

The manual can be found at [www.KatrinaLegalAid.org](http://www.KatrinaLegalAid.org) under the "Updates" section.

**Update from New Orleans USCIS Community Liaison Officer**

Sarah Mouw, the New Orleans Community Liaison Officer, reports that the Kenner, Louisiana USCIS office is running at full capacity. There are 3 USCIS officers conducting interviews from 7:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., although that schedule can vary. As distinguished from other USCIS offices, the Kenner office is not open to the general public. The officers conduct interviews for previously scheduled appointments only.

The backlog in New Orleans from application filing to interview stands at about 8 months, but the wait can vary depending on the issues involved in the case. Case processing times will improve once the permanent USCIS office opens in Metairie. Cases that were scheduled for interviews before Hurricane Katrina are given priority and are interviewed very quickly after their new addresses have been identified.

Biometrics capacity is being installed in the Metairie USCIS office, which is scheduled to open on April 10, 2006. USCIS stated however that the date is subject to change and the office could open later than that.

**Transportation Help for Evacuees to Texas**

Hurricane Katrina evacuees living in Texas shelters, hotels and motels can get a free one-way airplane, train or bus ticket to any destination in the continental United States for the sole purpose of relocation. The goal of the transportation assistance is to get people out of shelters and commercial housing and into normal housing.

Application information or assistance is available at the Travel Desk of the Disaster Recovery Centers in affected counties. Local social services or shelter managers should also be able to provide assistance to obtain this travel aid.

One-way, non-transferable, non-refundable tickets will be issued for air and train travel. Bus travel tickets may be refundable. The program is administered by the Texas Governor's Division of Emergency Management and funded by the Department of Homeland Security's Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

For more information, go to [www.katrinarecovery.disasterhelp.gov](http://www.katrinarecovery.disasterhelp.gov) and look under "articles."

### **Gulf Coast Job Search Website**

Persons looking for work along the Gulf Coast may find assistance at [www.jobsearch.org/hurricanejobs/](http://www.jobsearch.org/hurricanejobs/). The website links persons needing jobs with employers. Jobs are offered both in hurricane impacted areas and in other locations. Jobs range from permanent employment to temporary cleanup and recovery jobs.

### **Katrina Legal Fellowships Now Available**

Equal Justice Works has established the Katrina Legal Fellowships Program to send nine experienced public interest lawyers to the Gulf Coast for two years, working in the areas hardest hit by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. This new Fellowship Program will place lawyers at organizations located in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas in order to help the hundreds of thousands of people left without homes, jobs, and social services due to the damage from the hurricanes.

#### How to Apply

If you are interested in becoming a Katrina Legal Fellow, please visit the Equal Justice Works website at [www.equaljusticeworks.org/disaster-relief/index.php](http://www.equaljusticeworks.org/disaster-relief/index.php) for detailed position descriptions, benefits and application instructions. Please apply to the host organizations directly. Equal Justice Works will not accept résumés.

#### Katrina Legal Fellowships Host Organizations

Advocacy Center - New Orleans, Louisiana

Lone Star Legal Aid - Beaumont or Houston, Texas

Louisiana Capital Assistance Center - New Orleans, Louisiana

Mississippi Center for Justice - Biloxi, Mississippi

Mississippi Center for Legal Services - Gulfport/Pascagoula, Mississippi

Mississippi Immigrant Rights Alliance/ National Immigration Law Center - Biloxi and Jackson, Mississippi

Southeast Louisiana Legal Services (benefits and health care project) - New Orleans, Louisiana

Southeast Louisiana Legal Services (housing project) - New Orleans, Louisiana

Texas Appleseed - Austin, Texas

This program is part of the Equal Justice Works Katrina Initiative, made possible through the support of a \$1 million matching grant from the JEHT Foundation. For more information about the Katrina Legal Fellowships Program, please contact [katrina-fellowships@equaljusticeworks.org](mailto:katrina-fellowships@equaljusticeworks.org).

### **Lawsuits Filed in New Orleans Federal Court on Behalf of Immigrant Workers**

The New Orleans Times Picayune reported on Feb. 2<sup>nd</sup> that a lawsuit has been filed against three disaster clean-up companies alleging exploitation of migrant workers. Lawyers from the Immigrant Justice Project of the Southern Poverty Law Center filed two separate complaints in federal court in New Orleans on behalf of nearly 1,700 workers complaining that workers were required to work 12-hour days, seven days a week without promised compensation.

One complaint sues LVI Environmental Services of New Orleans, Inc., and D&L Environmental, Inc. of Florida for “grossly underpaying” workers. In some cases, the complaint alleges, workers were paid nothing after long days removing mold, mud, and debris from public school buildings. The complaint alleges that LVI used the subcontractor hiring system (hiring D&L) to “evade responsibility to pay minimum wage and overtime wages as required by the Fair Labor Standards Act.”

One of the workers, who is part of the suit, reported in an interview that D&L promised him \$13 per hour, plus \$18 per hour for overtime, in addition to meals and a hotel room. However, he was only paid \$9.50 per hour, and was told his pay was docked for meals. He stated further that he was not paid for a full week of work, nor did D&L pay for his hotel. The LVI and D&L lawsuits represent more than 700 workers.

The second lawsuit is against Belfor USA Group and subcontractors who failed to pay overtime. The Belfor lawsuit represents more than 1,000 workers.

Under the law, the plaintiffs can get double the lost wages if successful in court. Lawyers for the plaintiffs declined to identify them as legal or illegal immigrants because the law applies irrespective of immigration status.

One worker who was interviewed stated that the work site bosses were abusive, refusing to feed them during an entire workday, and firing workers who took breaks owed to them.

### **Louisiana Governor Announces Housing Assistance Plans**

Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco announced legislation for housing recovery that includes a combination of home buyouts, loans, grants, tax incentives, and property seizures to redevelop properties ruined by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

Governor Blanco wants to fund the legislative package with \$5.6 billion in federal aid that would help homeowners rebuild and avoid leaving large areas of damaged housing. The Governor’s proposal must still be debated and approved by the Louisiana House and Senate committees.

The Governor’s package is unclear on who would be eligible for the housing assistance and what amounts of assistance would be available to homeowners. The program design would be directed by a newly created Louisiana Housing and Land Trust board, made up of seven members appointed by the governor. Estimates of homes destroyed by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in Louisiana range from 167,000 to more than 217,000, with varying levels of insurance coverage and, in some cases, none at all.

Source: Associated Press, Feb. 8, 2006

*To sign up to receive this electronic newsletter, contact Maura Collins at [mcollins@cliniclegal.org](mailto:mcollins@cliniclegal.org) or visit [clinic.kintera.org/katrina](http://clinic.kintera.org/katrina) to subscribe online.*