

MALS Gets First Hurricane-Related Grant Despite months-long toll on coffers, legal org forges ahead

ANDREW ASHBY | *The Daily News*



DISPENSING AID: Volunteer attorney Jill Mallery (left) and Bryan Mauldin of From the Lake to the River help Gulf Coast evacuee Yesenia R. Escobar at Memphis Area Legal Services. Escobar and her husband Edwin are among more than 17,000 evacuee families in Tennessee. -- *Photograph by Andrew Ashby*

When it comes to hurricane relief, a \$22,600 grant, although welcome, is just a drop in the bucket.

Memphis Area Legal Services recently received the grant from the United Way of the Mid-South and will use it to continue helping Gulf Coast evacuees who are living in the Shelby County area. It's the first hurricane relief grant MALS has received since Katrina hit the Gulf Coast in August.

"We are ever so grateful to the United Way because we weren't getting any financial assistance," said Linda Seely, director of operations and pro-bono projects for MALS. "The Bar associations have been great about giving us volunteers and training the volunteers, but in terms of cash to help us move this along, it's been pretty tough."

Memphis has the 19th largest hurricane evacuee population in the United States, according to statistics from the Federal Emergency Management Agency. As of March 8, there were 9,585 aid applicants in the Memphis area from the Gulf Coast, which continues to put a strain on MALS' approximately \$3 million annual budget.

That number of applicants applies to households or families, not individuals, said Bryan Mauldin, a volunteer for MALS and president of From the Lake to the River, a coalition for disaster relief.

When the Shelby County Emergency Management Agency started setting up aid stations for evacuees right after Katrina hit in August, volunteers from MALS were there offering help to anyone.

"We knew when the hurricane hit and that people were coming, there would be legal problems," Seely said.

Toughing it out

MALS also gave free office space to Mauldin, who works with From the Lake to the River on national issues concerning disaster relief, including bringing a class action suit against FEMA over housing. Mauldin also works with the more than 50 MALS volunteers who provide legal advice to evacuees.



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Most of the evacuees who are in the Shelby County area meet the financial criteria for services from MALS, Mauldin said.

"However, that's left MALS in the position of becoming experts overnight in FEMA assistance and these particular disaster relief problems and issues," she said.

It also puts a strain on the organization's budget.

"The legal assistance corporations don't have in their ongoing budgets the kind of resources to address several thousand people who arrive in the area with multiple legal needs and no financial resources," Mauldin said.

The United Way grant is being used to provide legal assistance, from reviewing FEMA documents to dealing with insurance companies.

"We needed the money from the get-go because we've basically expended grant funds that would normally go to provide legal assistance to our regular client base," Seely said.

The grant also will help with many overhead costs, such as making copies and buying supplies. The money will replenish the MALS coffers and allow the organization to help more evacuees and its regular client base.

Big fix isn't big easy

Christa Hallman, president of Displaced Citizens of the Gulf Coast, a group of evacuees that meets Monday nights at Mississippi Boulevard Christian Church at 70 N. Bellevue Blvd., said MALS volunteers are available before every meeting to give legal advice and services.

"They take our problems and they fix them," Hallman said. "When I get a denial letter from FEMA for benefits, I take it to MALS. They will file the necessary appeals and help with the paperwork."

DCGC was set up to help evacuees with medical issues, child care and housing needs. However, the group also provides a chance for evacuees to socialize.

"We need each other now more than ever," Hallman said. "Many of us have lost our families, so we're pretty much all the family that we have now because we're scattered about everywhere."

Before Hurricane Katrina, Mauldin was a professor at Tulane University Law School. She and other Tulane professors and alumni formed From the Lake to the River to help evacuees put their lives back together and return to their homes.

"I firmly believe the decision about where the evacuee is going to live should be the evacuee's decision," Mauldin said. "It shouldn't be coerced by the kind of assistance FEMA provides. There is an inclination on the part of FEMA to say, 'We've helped you' and then leave these evacuees in communities like Memphis that have hosted them."

Mauldin said many communities don't have the infrastructure, resources, housing and job opportunities to absorb evacuees permanently. More than 17,000 evacuee families live in Tennessee alone, according to FEMA statistics, and the number hasn't dropped significantly in the past three to four months, Mauldin said.

"It's discouraging for the evacuees, it's discouraging for the communities they live in and it's going to become discouraging to communities like Memphis," she said.

This could have a disastrous effect when the FEMA benefits run out.

"I want the Memphis community to know how close these people are to homelessness, because this time they're going to be homeless in Memphis, not in New Orleans and on the Gulf Coast," Mauldin said. "It's a nightmare for the city because the federal government is not going to give you money to create jobs for all these evacuees."

Attorneys who are interested in volunteering to help Gulf Coast evacuees may call Mauldin at 412-2554 or Seely at 523-8822.