



## MY OPINION

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# Are You Prepared?

As we enter the second month of hurricane season, is your office prepared for a natural disaster?

This isn't something many of us thought about until a tornado hit Fort Worth in 2000, Houston suffered severe flooding in 2001, and the more recent Hurricanes Katrina, Rita, Dolly, and Ike caused massive destruction along the Gulf Coast and throughout Southeast Texas.

We would like to think it could never happen to us, but that's just not realistic. I thought the same thing until Hurricane Ike blew through my hometown of Liberty at a reported 110 mph, destroying my childhood home in its path. While we certainly cannot totally prepare for such disasters, we can ensure that our offices are ready should disaster strike. We can also volunteer to assist those who have been affected.

All attorneys should download the pamphlet prepared by the State Bar Disaster Response Task Force, *Disaster Planning for Lawyers* from the State Bar's website ([www.texasbar.com/disasterplanning](http://www.texasbar.com/disasterplanning)) for a basic overview. For more in-depth planning, the State Bar's Law Practice Management Program has prepared a guide with training manuals, articles, and other references and can offer advice and support on practice management issues in times of crisis. You can call (800)204-2222, Ext. 1300, for more information.

Finally, the Louisiana ([www.lsba.org](http://www.lsba.org)) and Alabama ([www.alabar.org](http://www.alabar.org)) state bar associations' websites have comprehensive disaster-related information and guides that may be helpful in preparing your office.

For a quick reference, you should

check out the Texas Young Lawyers Association's *Ten Minute Mentor* segments on disaster recovery and hurricane-related issues. These presentations, prepared in partnership with TexasBar-CLE, deal with preparing your office for a natural disaster, advising clients who have suffered catastrophic loss because of a natural disaster, handling insurance claims for losses due to hurricanes, rebuilding your practice after experiencing such a disaster, and volunteering and providing legal aid to hurricane victims. The videos can be viewed at [www.tenminutementor.com](http://www.tenminutementor.com).

Similarly, the Houston Bar Association has posted a series of short videos that answer frequently asked legal questions regarding Hurricane Ike. These presentations include topics such as consumer protection, insurance claims, real and personal property issues, employment issues, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) procedures and assistance, and health insurance. To watch the videos, visit [www.hba.org](http://www.hba.org).

Should a natural disaster strike, there are many ways you can volunteer to assist those affected. FEMA has a contract with the American Bar Association Young Lawyers Division pursuant to which the ABA/YLD mobilizes young lawyers in a state where a disaster is declared to organize the provision of free civil legal services to disaster victims. In Texas, the ABA/YLD acts in coordination with the State Bar and TYLA to provide these legal services. In fact, two ABA/YLD liaisons serve on the TYLA Board of Directors: Kirby D. Hopkins of The Woodlands and Chip Brooker of Dallas. Although young

lawyers organize the provision of legal services, volunteers can be lawyers of any age and experience level, and I encourage you to volunteer.

In addition, the State Bar established a Legal Disaster Hotline — (800)504-7030 — after Katrina and Rita to assist with basic legal questions following a disaster. The hotline remained active for Dolly and Ike and will be available should another hurricane or natural disaster strike. The Hurricane Ike Legal Task Force drafted a guide to assist attorney volunteers who are fielding questions from those affected. You can download the guide and sign up to assist at [www.texasbar.com/hurricane](http://www.texasbar.com/hurricane).

Texas lawyers have done a tremendous job of assisting hurricane victims. Lawyers are citizens, too. When the next disaster strikes, I am sure that Texas attorneys will lead the way in helping others. But who will help lawyers who are victims themselves? In October 2008, two 18-wheel truck rigs and two moving vans full of furniture pulled into Orange County. The State Bar of Texas and the Jefferson County Bar Association partnered to help Orange County lawyers affected by Hurricane Ike by donating 60 chairs, 55 desks and bookshelves, and 45 filing cabinets. Attorneys picked up the furniture over a 12-hour period.

So, plan now for the unexpected and prepare your office accordingly. There are numerous resources available, and there are no excuses for not having a plan in place. The time invested now will benefit you and your clients should a natural disaster strike. As the old saying goes, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure! ☆