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Lawyers travel to world disasters, provide pro bono help to victims

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Chicago attorney Marc R. Kadish does not view pro bono legal services as a gift that law firms bestow upon a few clients.

Instead, according to Kadish, pro bono work is a responsibility that comes with being part of the larger world.

And Kadish says Mayer, Brown LLP believes that responsibility includes meeting the legal needs of the victims of natural or manmade disasters.

"We want our people to be involved in the communities in which they live," Kadish, Mayer, Brown's director of pro bono activities, said Thursday. "And when a disaster occurs in your community, you want to be of assistance as part of the community."

Mayer, Brown is just one among many law firms, individual attorneys and bar associations and other organizations offering legal services and other help free of charge to people affected by disasters.

Lawyers and their firms have been among the donors who provided money and goods to people displaced by such disasters as Hurricane Katrina and the massive earthquake that struck Haiti early this year.

For example, Kirkland & Ellis LLP has donated hundreds of thousands of dollars to relief efforts in the Gulf Coast and overseas in Haiti and Asia.

Mayer, Brown also has contributed funds, including \$50,000 through its Houston office after Katrina to help meet the immediate needs of people displaced by that hurricane.

And lawyers have traveled to what

Kirkland's Christopher J. Greeno described as "some of the most broken places in the world" to provide legal representation and advice to disaster victims.

Greeno himself has been to Haiti twice — once before the recent earthquake and once after — to assist people displaced by disaster.

Lucinda E. Smith, the director of the Nashville Pro Bono Project, said volunteer lawyers were on the ground in Tennessee even before officials from the Federal Emergency Management Agency following floods May 1 and 2.

More than 200 lawyers offered advice and sometimes representation to people with questions concerning insurance, housing, contractors and other matters related to the disaster, Smith said.

"I think it helps all of us when people know what lawyers do to help people in distress," Smith said.

Mayer, Brown's efforts to help people in distress have included representing on a pro bono basis the family of a young woman killed in the 2001 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York, Kadish said.

He said the firm obtained compensation for the family through the Sept. 11 Victim Compensation Fund.

In another project, Kadish said, the firm in 2005 made a \$50,000 contribution through its Houston office to help meet the immediate needs of people displaced by Katrina.

The firm also underwrote a fellowship position for a lawyer who was housed at Texas A&M and provided legal

assistance to hurricane victims, Kadish said.

Chicago attorney Ross B. Bricker of Jenner & Block LLP is another member of the legal profession who offered assistance in the aftermath of Katrina.

Bricker is representing the plaintiffs in a pending class-action lawsuit accusing federal and state officials of actively blocking public-housing residents from returning to their homes in New Orleans following Katrina.

Bricker said the bid to prevent the longtime residents from coming back apparently stemmed from a desire on the part of some people to change the economic and racial composition of the city.

"I think it's wrong and if we can help a little bit, that's a great thing," Bricker said.

Like Kadish, Bricker said pro bono work is a requirement of being a member of the legal community and the community at large.

"One of the core values that Jenner & Block and I believe in very deeply is that everyone, regardless of the unpopularity of their cause or whether they have the means to afford counsel, deserves representation," Bricker said.

Greeno indicated that Kirkland attorneys share the same sentiment.

"As lawyers, we have a responsibility to people around the world who don't have the means to help themselves," Greeno said.

So when a disaster strikes, he said, "it's really never a question of, 'OK, are we going to help?' but 'How can we help?'"