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STRENGTHENING LOCAL IMPACT

Best Practices and Challenges in
Disaster Legal Services Outreach

Prepared by: ABA YLD Disaster Legal Services Team

**Co-sponsors: ABA Standing Committee on the
Disaster Response and Preparedness, Equal Justice
Works, and Pro Bono Net**



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EXECUTIVE **SUMMARY**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



In May 2025 the ABA Young Lawyers Division's Disaster Legal Services (DLS) Program, with Pro Bono Net, Equal Justice Works and the ABA Standing Committee on Disaster Response & Preparedness, convened a 90-minute virtual town-hall to identify field-tested outreach practices and start conversations on how the disaster legal services community might prepare for a future with leaner federal disaster support.

Three key insights rose to the top, echoed in all eight breakout groups and reinforced by panelists:

“Blue-sky” planning can no longer be optional.

Increasing frequency and intensity of extreme weather events, paired with less orchestration at the federal level makes preparedness more critical than ever.

Stakeholder investment in activities like whole-community summits, cross-sector networking, referral pathway refreshers, and practical resource updates – before disasters strike – can help shift DLS from reactive triage to proactive, trusted engagement.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

02

Local, trust-based outreach is the most effective model.

Throughout the session, participants continually returned to the theme of building trust and formal partnerships with state and local “Voluntary Organizations Active in Disasters” (VOADs), and strengthening ties to libraries, churches, and local government agencies.

Building networks with those on the front lines of communities and disaster response elevates broader understanding of disaster legal services needs and resources.

03

Low-tech, high-touch channels still work.

Brochures, flyers, radio spots, library tables, and in-person pop-ups consistently outperform digital-only tactics.

Participants reported higher turnout when they leaned on “analog” assets, especially in rural counties where cell service is spotty and social-media ads rarely convert.

By emphasizing relationship and content development in “blue-sky” times, legal service programs can maximize their reach in the critical days and weeks post-disaster.



EXPERT **TAKEAWAYS**

EXPERT TAKEAWAYS

The session began with a robust conversation on outreach successes, challenges, and needs from experts representing pro bono organizations, VOAD leadership, direct legal aid providers, and bar foundations.



Skip Koenig

Neighborhood Legal
Services of LA
County



Christa Figgins

National
VOAD



Matthew Flood

West Tennessee
Legal Services



Kim Bart Mullikin

North Carolina
Bar Foundation

Current Outreach & Funding Realities

Experts noted that with shifts in the federal emergency management response framework, the surest way to reach survivors is to work through trusted local networks, over reliance on federal venues.

Red Cross and other shelters, churches, local Multi-Agency Recovery Centers (MARC)s, and other VOAD pop-up resource fairs serve as “trust centers” – and are the key to meeting disaster survivors where they are. All agreed that outreach venue and strategy will depend on factors such as event type and rural vs. urban areas.

EXPERT TAKEAWAYS

Once the venues were identified, decidedly low-barrier tactics—flyers in school backpacks or grocery bags, notices on laundromat boards, brief spots on local radio—proved more effective than social-media pushes, which tended to succeed only after those paper or word-of-mouth prompts had already built awareness.

Paying for this outreach remains piecemeal: programs braid bar-foundation micro-grants, VOAD or United Way dollars, small corporate gifts, and the occasional state allocation, but no one has a single stable source and all expect further Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) retrenchment, which significantly impacts the ability to sustainably support outreach work nationwide.

Capacity Bottlenecks & Work-Arounds

Human bandwidth is a significant choke-point. Rural drives swallow half a work-day, and pro-bono rosters shrink as complex needs peak long after the disaster has passed.

To compensate, some teams pull in urban lawyers by video using satellite internet connectivity, letting them serve cut-off areas without ever leaving home. Others train faith leaders and VOAD case-managers as first-contact navigators who collect basic facts and forward them to legal aid, creating a lay “community justice worker” layer that filters simple questions and reserves scarce attorney time for complex cases.

EXPERT TAKEAWAYS

Local staff and volunteers stationed at community recovery centers play a similar triage role. Technology clearly helps—satellite internet gave one flood-struck county instant bandwidth—but experts were unanimous that these tools work only after relationships are in place; the internet may amplify reach, but trust draws people in.

Open Questions & Gaps

Even with these promising experiments, several uncertainties still linger. Practitioners admit there's no consistent way to trace which channel actually prompts a survivor to seek help, leaving them unable to prove return on outreach dollars or refine tactics in real time.

Messaging itself remains tricky: teams struggle to craft language, tone, and visual cues that feel trustworthy and culturally resonant across different regions and immigrant communities, yet are distinct enough to avoid confusion with other relief providers.

A broader data problem sits underneath both issues: intake forms and outcome codes vary from program to program, so insights can't be pooled and compared.

Finally, valuable know-how is still locked in individual memories; without a shared, living playbook, each disaster season begins with avoidable reinvention and hurried re-training.



COMMUNITY **VOICES**

COMMUNITY VOICES

Over 50 participants, representing over 40 legal service organizations participated in the breakout session. Each group was challenged to identify ways they were successfully conducting outreach to disaster survivors and capacity limitations they consistently experience. They were also encouraged to share fresh ideas and document things they'd like to know more about from other organizations, giving us a peek inside their curiosities and emerging trends in disaster response and outreach.

Across the breakout rooms, responses were oriented around 5 key themes:

01

Capacity & Preparedness

A resilient disaster legal system depends first on people—skilled staff, prepared volunteers, and trusted local partners who can respond quickly when a crisis strikes.

Participants emphasized that building and keeping this human capacity is only part of the picture: teams also need ongoing training, clear roles, and practical tools to stay ready when the next disaster hits. Yet funding shifts, daily workloads, and burnout can thin the bench just as needs surge—and pro bono attorneys are often personally affected too.

COMMUNITY VOICES

CAPACITY & PREPAREDNESS

What's working?	Toughest challenges?
Statewide strategy sessions and “blue-sky” summits keep relationships and roles clear between disasters.	When funding drops off, programs lose staff, expertise, and momentum—erasing knowledge that’s hard to rebuild.
Early, role-specific disaster-law trainings for core staff and volunteers help teams respond faster with less ramp-up.	Heavy daily workloads, travel demands, and compassion fatigue limit time for outreach and training.
Updated guidebooks, templates, and practical toolkits give new staff proven starting points instead of reinventing the wheel.	Pro bono attorney pools shrink when local lawyers are personally affected by the same disaster.
Community Justice Worker (CJW) models expand local capacity by equipping VOAD case managers and trusted community partners to handle basic triage.	Small or lower-profile disasters often get limited coverage and less public attention, making it harder to “stay visible.”

Maintaining and building capacity requires strong commitment to flexible, community-based models that help programs stay connected, retain hard-won knowledge, and be ready to deliver when survivors need help most.

COMMUNITY VOICES

02

Sustainable Funding

Strengthening core capacity lays the groundwork—but without stable funding, it's difficult to sustain.

Participants described a familiar patchwork: one-time grants for major events, creative small grants stitched together to keep programs afloat, and ongoing worries about what happens when dollars run out. While some groups are tracking new sources — from state recovery programs to national corporate giving and private philanthropy — there's wide agreement that these dollars alone can't cover the scale of need.

There was broad agreement that without a steadier financial foundation, it's nearly impossible to sustain staff, preserve institutional knowledge, or invest in better tools for outreach and service delivery.

Additionally, uncertainty around the federal disaster response framework — and associated DLS funding — gave many participants cause for concern.

“ Without reliable federal funding for Disaster Legal Services, both before and in response to a disaster, communities are left vulnerable just when they need legal support the most.

— Skip Koenig ”

COMMUNITY VOICES

SUSTAINABLE FUNDING

What's working?	Toughest challenges?
Programs build mixed funding portfolios by combining state, federal, and small private grants to reduce over-reliance on any single source.	Uncertainty about future availability of new and existing funding streams makes long-term planning difficult.
Some legal aid organizations align with large community funders—like United Way or American Red Cross—to match outreach with trusted relief funding streams.	Short-term, event-specific funding makes long-term planning and staff retention difficult.
Many teams actively track expansion of disaster-related programs (like HUD/CDBG) to anchor longer-term stability.	Narrow eligibility rules limit who can be served, which sometimes leaves certain types of funding unused or restricts how it's spent, creating administrative burden.
National groups like Equal Justice Works tap private law firm and corporate partners to add dollars not tied to local budgets.	Constant monitoring for new opportunities and shifts in grant availability drains already limited staff capacity.

While big questions about stability remain, many are finding and proposing practical ways to piece together funding support and stay ready for whatever comes next.

COMMUNITY VOICES

03

Service Delivery Mechanisms

Once funding and staffing are in place, the next question is how to actually reach survivors and deliver help in ways that feel local, trusted, and clear.

Participants described the most effective outreach as a mosaic of low-barrier and face-to-face channels paired with highly-trusted local partners: flyers in churches and laundromats, mobile “Justice Buses” near FEMA disaster recovery centers, pop-up legal clinics at community fairs, and partnerships with libraries and schools.

Many agreed that trust centers — like VOAD resource fairs, ARC shelters, or local government events — make the biggest difference, especially in rural or hard-to-reach areas. At the same time, participants noted that effective outreach isn’t one-size-fits-all: operations must adapt to geography, scale, and community needs to build trust and connect people with services when they need them most.

“ We hadn’t had a major mountain disaster in the 10 plus years that I’ve been in this position, and honestly it forced us to reevaluate, reconsider, and regroup on a whole lot of aspects of our disaster response.

– Kim Bart Mullikin ”

COMMUNITY VOICES

SERVICE DELIVERY MECHANISMS

What's working?	Toughest challenges?
Outreach through familiar local places — libraries, churches, post offices, grocery stores — makes it easier to connect face-to-face.	Geography matters: what works in coastal cities may fail in rural or remote areas with long travel times.
Mobile clinics like the “Justice Bus” meet survivors where they are, often near FEMA or DRC locations.	It's easy for survivors to confuse legal help with other disaster aid — for example, not realizing legal staff are separate from FEMA or the Red Cross.
Local events (County Days, fairs, school presentations) give programs predictable outreach calendars and venues.	Printed materials only go so far without continued in-person follow-up or a trusted local point of contact.
Low-tech tools — brochures, flyers, printed “Know Your Rights” handouts, or short videos — remain the most effective in many communities.	Trusted partners (like American Red Cross or local VOADs) often need more training to understand what legal aid can and can't do.

Effective outreach relies on clear operations, trusted local messengers, and practical tools — all of which depend on strong information and feedback systems.

COMMUNITY VOICES

04

Learning and Impact

Knowing who needs help — and whether outreach efforts actually reach them — is essential to effective disaster legal services.

Participants noted that programs often lack quick access to real-time information on which communities are most impacted and where legal help can add the most value alongside other agencies. Better access to response-focused data — like FEMA registration or state and local needs data — can help programs plan where to deploy mobile clinics, which neighborhoods to canvass,

or which trusted local partners to engage first.

Clear impact data during and after outreach is equally vital. Many programs still struggle to keep track of who was helped, what legal issues came up, and where gaps remain, which is vital to show the impact of outreach, shape future priorities, and make the case for continued funding and policy improvements.

“We need to put some better systems in place to capture that information, because it really would be interesting to see statistically what is working and where, and what didn’t work... to help us fine tune our efforts.”

– Christa Figgins

COMMUNITY VOICES

LEARNING AND IMPACT

What's working?	Toughest challenges?
For major disasters, FEMA partners can share aggregate data on registration numbers, highly-impacted communities, and certain demographic or household characteristics.	Delays in data sharing from Federal and State partners can result knowledge gaps and misallocation of scarce resources.
Some programs have created technology tools that pull FEMA data from the OpenFEMA and Census datasets, using that to drive outreach decision-making.	Core client and outreach data is often incomplete or scattered across teams and systems, making it hard to see who was reached and what issues emerged.
Some teams have local needs assessments and conversations with agencies or emergency managers to identify priority areas before or after disasters.	Lack of standardized impact data points makes large scale data analysis challenging.
Case management system modifications can help pull aggregate data on disaster-impacted clients.	Limited staff time means data collection, reporting, and analysis often fall through the cracks, missing chances to show real community impact.

Better tracking and shared learning strengthen every other part of the work — guiding smart outreach, showing impact, and setting the stage for our collective action.

COMMUNITY VOICES

05

Partnerships & Collaboration Infrastructure

Strong disaster legal services rely on trusted partnerships that extend well beyond legal aid alone.

Participants described how non-legal partners — like VOADs, state emergency managers, libraries, banks, and schools — can help spot issues early, distribute clear information, host outreach events, and connect survivors to legal help when it matters most. At the same time, partnerships with other legal stakeholders make it possible to share the load, exchange lessons, and refer

cases smoothly across regions. This work depends on durable collaboration infrastructure: things like formalized roles in existing disaster response structures, intentional communication and knowledge-sharing venues, and agreed-upon protocols.

Together, these components allow organizations to reliably build new partnerships, and leverage existing ones even better.

“

We already have relationships with these organizations, and so the easy part is going around to them and saying, “hey, in addition to housing and consumer issues, we also do disaster work.”

– Matthew Flood

”

COMMUNITY VOICES

PARTNERSHIPS & COLLABORATION INFRASTRUCTURE

What's working?	Toughest challenges?
DLS-specific committees and statewide alliances keep legal partners connected and ready to back each other up when local resources are stretched.	Building and maintaining strong partnerships takes time and clear communication — both are hard to sustain when teams are small and funding is short-term.
Intentional legal services representation on VOAD boards helps cross-pollinate awareness of services between legal and non-legal intermediary stakeholders	Non-legal partners often don't know what legal services do or how to connect survivors.
Resource distribution by and joint outreach events with trust centers in disaster-stricken communities builds public awareness of DLS	Staff turnover can fragment local knowledge if clear contact lists, protocols, and documentation aren't kept up to date.
Community calls with other legal service organizations facilitates knowledge sharing and general mentorship and support	Partners may want to share the outreach load but lack shared tools or processes to coordinate easily.

Robust partnerships and clear collaboration infrastructure help disaster legal services stay visible, trusted, and ready.



COLLECTIVE **ACTION**

COLLECTIVE ACTION

The ideas shared throughout the workshop and reflected this paper show that real progress is already happening.

Across the country, programs are putting proven solutions into action: statewide alliances that coordinate groups of organizations into one flexible network, mobile “Justice Buses” and participation in local fairs to meet people where they are, simple brochures and flyers in trusted community spaces, and integration into cross-sector disaster response alliances to build more awareness of disaster legal services within those networks.

These are practical steps that organizations are using now, and continue to adapt and improve through real experience.

Yet even with these local successes, deeper friction points continue to surface: fragile staffing and burnout that stretch core capacity, funding that shrinks when headlines fade, outreach channels that struggle to connect in rural or overlooked communities, gaps in learning and shared tools that force each new response to start from scratch, and partnerships that lose momentum when people or roles change.

Some solutions to these challenges need to be built and sustained together.

Others depend on each organization taking clear, practical steps in its own community — but doing so strategically and consistently as part of a larger, connected effort.

COLLECTIVE ACTION

These activities build on what's working today and offer clear, actionable ways to strengthen disaster legal services – together.

01

Host Regular “Blue-Sky” Summits

Trusted partnerships can fade when day-to-day work crowds out big-picture planning. Annual or biannual “blue-sky” summits – which bring together both legal and community partners – allocate time to establish referral pathways, coordinate how outreach happens on the ground, share materials, and reflect on lessons learned.

Secure Legal Aid Seats in Cross-Sector Collaboratives

02

Too often, communities have no clear voice in legal services planning, and legal services has no clear voice in community response planning. Formal legal aid seats in VOADs, COADs, and even local emergency management associations ensure the legal needs of survivors aren't overlooked when planning for and responding to natural disasters.

COLLECTIVE ACTION

03

Build (or Contribute to) Shared Training & Resource Hubs for Community Partners & Volunteers

Volunteers, libraries, shelters, faith groups, and even banks can be trusted messengers in times of crisis, but many don't know how to spot legal issues or connect people to help. Intentional training and resource hubs with key information on disaster legal issues, legal referral channels, and key contacts can support those trying to connect survivors to help.

Create Trusted, Uniform Outreach Language and Materials

Survivors often don't know what disaster legal help is, whether it's legitimate, or how it fits alongside other aid. Clear, consistent outreach language, paired with easy-to-adapt template materials and relatable examples, helps bridge that gap. A trusted "look and feel" and ready-to-go distribution kits means teams spend less time reinventing core messages and more time getting them in front of people who need them most.

04

COLLECTIVE ACTION

05

Develop a Shared Disaster Legal Data Commons

Good outreach depends on knowing where to show up — and proving afterward who was reached and why it mattered. A shared Data Commons would help programs pull down key public data, like FEMA or census snapshots, to guide local outreach. Shared data standards for talking about who was helped, what trends emerged, and what gaps remain can help programs combine local stories and numbers to make the case for funding and policy change.

Map Viable & Creative Funding Pathways

06

Many programs piece together local grants, state bar funds, or disaster relief dollars to keep services afloat between big disasters — but too often, this knowledge stays siloed. Working together to map what funding pathways actually work means programs can test new sources and share what does and doesn't work. This process can help programs stay flexible and reduce over-reliance on single sources of funding.

COLLECTIVE ACTION

07

Establish Formal Information & Learning Exchange

Many programs face the same questions: Who else is doing this? What works? What pitfalls should we avoid? A standing information & learning exchange gives teams a place to swap ideas, do problem solving, and share real lessons learned so no one has to start from scratch. Importantly, this venue can also give dedicated space for deeper collaboration — a home for working groups focused on big shared priorities like developing shared data standards, building service delivery toolkits, or testing new funding ideas together.

This white paper reflects what experts and community partners shared about what's working, what's not, and what's needed to keep disaster legal services strong.

No single program or state can do this alone. The ideas here show how we can each take practical steps in our communities, strengthen connections at the state level, and work together nationally to solidify the backbone that keeps us ready.

Together, we can face the next disaster with more confidence that survivors will find clear pathways to legal help — and that we'll be ready to meet them where they are.

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