

STUDENT HURRICANE NETWORK AND THE ROLE OF THE INSTITUTIONAL LIAISON



WHAT IS THE STUDENT HURRICANE NETWORK?

The legal questions and problems facing the individuals and communities throughout the Gulf Coast region are monumental in scale, and will remain so for months and years to come. The enormity and longevity of this crisis demand the long-term attention of all facets of our nation's legal community.

In order to address this need, law students from across the country formed the Student Hurricane Network (SHN), a national association dedicated to providing long-term assistance to communities affected by Hurricane Katrina. SHN works with law students and administrators to create and coordinate volunteer opportunities for law students to get involved in relief efforts and the rebuilding process, streamlining the process for students and public interest organizations in need of assistance. SHN also seeks to educate members of the legal community about the legal crises in the region in the hopes of obtaining additional support.

WHAT IS THE NEED?

The story of Hurricane Katrina is one of disaster, chaos, and institutional failure. The legal issues arising out of the storm are complex and often neglected. The problem is two-fold: 1) legal institutions are decimated, with offices destroyed and lawyers and staff members displaced and/or laid off, and 2) the hurricane itself has created new, pressing legal work to be handled by this reduced staff, in addition to the thousands of cases and legal problems that were pending at the time of the storm.

Katrina displaced 8,000 attorneys in southeast Louisiana, while Rita displaced another 1,000. This meant that close to half of the Louisiana Bar was simply unavailable to provide legal assistance in the months after the storms hit. Low-income legal services are attempting to rebuild; however the obstacles they face are severe. Seventy-five percent of staffers lost their homes, and some are dealing with deaths in the family and many others are dealing with family emergencies. The City of New Orleans is bankrupt, and laid off 35

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of its 39 public defenders, leading to case loads of over 3,000 per attorney. In sum, the judicial system is in disarray.

The storm itself, and the government response to it, has also created several major legal issues. Many individuals struggle to navigate the FEMA system and need assistance appealing denials of benefits. Other individuals are facing the problems associated with the death or disability of a loved one. Those who were in the criminal justice system prior to the storm have been subject to particularly egregious treatment and many civil rights violations. For example, pre-trial detainees for everything from parole violations to serious felonies have been held at maximum-security prisons throughout Louisiana with no access to attorneys for months. There are countless legal challenges to proposals for redevelopment of New Orleans. New legal issues are expected to continue to develop.

The public interest legal community in the Southeast is desperate for volunteer support. At a time when the nation has largely turned its attention away from the crisis that continues in the aftermath of the hurricane, it is important that the nation's legal community remains focused on the enduring problems the Gulf Coast faces.

HOW DID SHN COME ABOUT?

The Student Hurricane Network merges several different projects law students were working on in the immediate aftermath of the storms. In particular, the From the Lake to the River Foundation, a group mostly comprised of members of the legal community affiliated with Tulane Law School, worked with law students to create and staff a national hotline, as well as research FEMA issues. In the Northeast, about a dozen law schools met in New York City to coordinate planning for winter break pro bono trips. Near the end of October, during a conference hosted by Equal Justice Works, law students across the country gathered to discuss forming a national coalition to support legal assistance to Katrina-affected areas, and the Student Hurricane Network was born. By the end of Fall 2005, students from all across the country were participating in SHN activities.

WHAT HAS SHN ACCOMPLISHED?

SHN's first major project occurred in December 2005 and January 2006, when over 240 law students from over fifty-seven law schools across the country converged on the Mississippi Gulf Coast and across Louisiana: New Orleans, Shreveport, Alexandria, and Covington. Volunteers worked with over eighteen public interest organizations to conduct massive intake, interviews, and research. Students assisted with projects involving criminal justice, housing, immigrant labor, elections, and more. The coordination of these trips was a major task, largely handled by a small group of dedicated student leaders. These students coordinated housing, ground transportation, and placements for the volunteers. They also coordinated educational and social events for students on the ground.

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In the Spring of 2006, another round of student trips were organized, but this time SHN brought over 700 students from more than 60 schools across the country to Louisiana and Mississippi as well as to Florida, Texas, and Georgia to work with evacuees in those locations. Over several weeks beginning in February and ending in April, SHN volunteers established projects focusing on voters' rights, access to counsel, and the rebuilding of a safe, strong New Orleans.

Over Winter Break 2006-2007, over 580 students from more than 40 law schools worked through SHN in the Gulf Region. Students worked on projects ranging from immigrants' rights to additional issues affecting displaced public housing residents to community organizing. In New Orleans, SHN was able to begin most weeks of work with a large-group orientation, featuring dynamic speakers from the legal community.

Spring Break of 2007 was our largest trip season yet, with 500 law students in the region on SHN trips over one week alone! Thousands of students poured into the region over the entire break period.

These student trips serve as a valuable learning experience for the network and will continue to be a large part of the work of the organization. SHN is in the process of evaluating its impact, specifically identifying its strengths, areas for improvement and opportunities for growth. In addition to this large endeavor, SHN has worked as a clearinghouse, disseminating information about various research projects, conferences, and events. This role is expected to grow in the future. SHN is also striving to work with students in their home communities, through remote research projects, Matchmakers for Justice (matching displaced residents with law students to aid in their legal concerns,) coordinating lectures and other educational events, encouraging community service in the affected region, and educating the greater legal community about what students observed in their work.

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE INSTITUTIONAL LIAISON?

SHN is quite a unique effort by law students to band together with the people of the Gulf Coast to provide any assistance that we can. The greater number of schools participating, the greater an effort this becomes, and the greater impact we will bring to the people affected by the storm.

Institutional liaisons are crucial to SHN's success. These are students who coordinate their school's "delegation" to the SHN. These students represent the Student Hurricane Network on their campuses, particularly for recruitment and fundraising purposes. Institutional liaisons hold informational meetings on campus to introduce the organization and encourage student participation. At this time, most of the fundraising to defray students' travel costs to the affected region is campus-based. Therefore, liaisons work with their school's administration and student bar association to determine available funding.

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Institutional liaisons are also important as they represent their campuses to SHN leaders. Students from different law schools can have very different needs and experiences, and SHN leadership relies on institutional liaisons to inform and respond to these issues as they arise.

The Institutional Liaison's main role is to serve as the link between the national network and your school. The liaison learns about opportunities for research, student trips to the Gulf Coast, and other pro bono work from the national network, and shares that information with interested students at his or her school. The Liaison also provides assistance to the national network in local and school-based activities, inform the Network of the needs of his or her school, particularly concerning the student trips to the Gulf Coast and hopefully joins a committee of the national SHN.

More information about SHN and the role of the Institutional Liaison is available on SHN's website: www.studenthurricanetwork.org. For questions or to become an Institutional Liaison for your school, contact Sarah at serlinder@gmail.com.