

## Allegheny County Bar Association Celebrates the Completion of its *Disaster Legal Assistance Manual for Volunteer Attorneys*

By: Lorrie K. Albert, Esq.  
Pro Bono Coordinator,  
Allegheny County Bar Foundation

One does not initially think of Western Pennsylvania as often affected by natural disasters. However, there were tornados in the 1990s. A few years ago, a microburst hit the Duquesne area without warning and more recently, the damage caused by Hurricane Ivan and the Gateway Center flooding affected not only members of our community, but the legal practices of members of the Allegheny County Bar Association.

After Hurricane Ivan hit local neighborhoods in Southwestern Pennsylvania, Robert Racunas, then President-Elect of the Allegheny County Bar Association, initiated the idea of the Bar Association developing a plan in the event of another disaster.

In September of 2005, Hurricane Katrina struck Louisiana, and many evacuees were expected to arrive in Allegheny County. The ACBA was asked to establish a volunteer *pro bono* legal assistance plan to assist the evacuees. The culmination of these events led to the development of a Disaster Plan subcommittee of the Public Service Committee, charged with creating the ACBA's *Disaster Legal Assistance Manual for Volunteer Attorneys*.

The subcommittee reviewed other bar association disaster manuals, and in particular, the Louisiana State Bar Association's Emergency Disaster Training Manual and the Texas State Bar and Houston Bar Associations' Resource Materials, to be used as prototypes for the ACBA's Manual.

During his closing remarks as ACBA President at the Bench Bar Conference in June 2006, Racunas announced the completion of the Disaster Manual. The ACBA is now prepared to launch an emergency pro bono legal assistance program in the event of a disaster.

The Manual sets forth the details of the volunteer program and includes critical emergency and legal assistance information. Included in the Manual is an overview of FEMA and non-FEMA legal assistance, a description of the process of providing legal assistance to disaster victims, answers to frequently asked questions on issues such as housing, property, insurance, unemployment compensation and other relevant issues. There is an extensive referral sources section, as well as a comprehensive appendix with

forms, statutes, important telephone numbers and legal services contact numbers.

Katrina taught us that a bar association may incur as much damage as others impacted by a disaster. If the ACBA incurs such damage, the Pennsylvania Bar Association, through its Pro Bono Coordinator, David Trevaskis, has agreed to provide back-up assistance, which is vitally important to a successful plan.

The ACBA was honored with the opportunity to have Disaster Manual Subcommittee Chair Renee Colbert introduce the ACBA's Disaster Manual at a recent seminar at the PBA Annual Conference in June.

The Manual truly was a concerted effort by the entire bar. Many thanks are given Chair Renee Colbert, Pamela Dalton-Arlotti, Shelly Pagac, Melaine Rothery and Sheila Scanlon, all who served on the Disaster Manual Subcommittee; the ACBA Sections and Committees who contributed their knowledge of relevant Pennsylvania and federal law; and all who helped with the development and completion of this valuable resource tool. Finally, special thanks are given to Robert Racunas, whose leadership and initiative brought his vision of an assistance manual to fruition.

The Manual is now available online and can be viewed at both the ACBA and ACBF web sites [www.acba.org](http://www.acba.org) or [www.acbf.org](http://www.acbf.org) . It will remain posted on the web sites and will be updated periodically. It is our hope that the Disaster Manual will not only assist Allegheny County, but will be a valuable resource across Pennsylvania