

Can You Imagine?

The following e-mail from a law school professor in Louisiana was sent to a list serve of her colleagues in the legal ethics field.

I know your hearts, in particular, are for lawyers since they are your clients. Think of this...

5,000 - 6,000 lawyers (1/3 of the lawyers in Louisiana) have lost their offices, their libraries, their computers with all information thereon, their client files - possibly their clients, as one attorney who e-mailed me noted. As I mentioned before, they are scattered from Florida to Arizona and have nothing to return to. Their children's schools are gone and, optimistically, the school systems in 8 parishes/counties won't be re-opened until after December. They must re-locate their lives.

Our state supreme court is under some water - with all appellate files and evidence folders/boxes along with it. The 5th Circuit Court of Appeals building is under some water - with the same effect. Right now there may only be 3-4 feet of standing water but, if you think about it, most files are kept in the basements or lower floors of courthouses.

What effect will that have on the lives of citizens and lawyers throughout this state and this area of the country? And on the law?

The city and district courts in as many as 8 parishes/counties are under water, as well as 3 of our circuit courts - with evidence/files at each of them ruined. The law enforcement offices in those areas are under water - again, with evidence ruined. 6,000 prisoners in 2 prisons and one juvenile facility are having to be securely relocated. We already have over-crowding at most Louisiana prisons and juvenile facilities.

What effect will this have? And what happens when the evidence in their cases has been destroyed? Will the guilty be released upon the communities? Will the innocent not be able to prove their innocence?

Our state bar offices are under water. Our state disciplinary offices are under water - again with evidence ruined. Of particular interest to you...our state disciplinary offices are located on Veteran's Blvd. in Metairie. Those of you who have been watching the news, they continue to show Veteran's Blvd. It's the shot with the destroyed Target store and shopping center under water and that looks like a long canal. Our Committee on Bar Admissions is located there and would have been housing the bar exams which have been turned in from the recent July bar exam (this is one time I'll pray the examiners were late in turning them in - we were set to meet in 2 weeks to go over the results). Will all of those new graduates have to retake the bar exam?

Two of the 4 law schools in Louisiana are located in New Orleans (Loyola and Tulane - the 2 private ones that students have already paid about \$8,000+ for this semester to attend). Another 1,000+ lawyers-to-be whose lives have been detoured. I've contacted professors at both schools but they can't reach anyone at those schools and don't know the amount of damage they've taken. Certainly, at least, this semester is over. I'm trying to reach the Chancellor's at Southern and LSU here in Baton Rouge to see if there's anything we can do to take in the students and/or the professors. I think I mentioned before, students from out of state have been stranded at at least 2 of the other universities in New Orleans - they're moving up floor after floor as the water rises.

Our local news station received a call from some medical students at Tulane Medical Center who were now on the 5th floor of the dormitories as the water had risen. One of them had had a heart attack and they had no medical supplies and couldn't reach anyone - 911 was busy, local law enforcement couldn't be reached, they were going through the phone book and reached a news station 90 miles away!! It took the station almost 45 minutes to finally find someone with FEMA to try to get in to them!!

And, then, there are the clients whose files are lost, whose cases are stymied. Their lives, too, are derailed. Of course, the vast majority live in the area and that's the least of their worries. But, the New Orleans firms also have a large national and international client base. For example, I received an e-mail from one attorney friend who I work with on some crucial domestic violence (spousal and child) cases around the nation - those clients could be seriously impacted by the loss, even temporarily, of their attorney - and he can't get to them and is having difficulty contacting the many courts around the nation where his cases are pending. Large corporate clients may have their files blowing in the wind where the high rise buildings had windows blown out.

I woke up this morning to the picture of Veteran's Blvd which made me think of my students who just took the bar. My thoughts wandered from there to the effect on the Disciplinary Offices and I thought of you. Then my thoughts continued on. I'm sure I'm still missing a big part of the future picture. It's just devastating. Can you imagine something of this dimension in your state?

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