

/ Disaster Law 101

Disasters reshape communities overnight — and the legal system helps determine what happens next.

In the aftermath of a disaster, families must figure out how to replace lost documents, apply for federal disaster benefits, deal with insurance companies, or avoid eviction — often while displaced and in crisis.

These are legal problems. Lawyers play a critical role not only in helping communities rebuild, but in ensuring that disaster recovery systems operate fairly and effectively. That is where disaster law comes in.

WHAT IS DISASTER LAW?

Disaster law addresses the wave of civil legal needs that arise before, during, and after disasters.

After a disaster, people may need help with:

- Applying for federal disaster assistance
- Appealing a denied FEMA application
- Fighting wrongful eviction or foreclosure
- Resolving insurance disputes
- Replacing important legal documents
- Protecting themselves from contractor fraud
- Addressing language or documentation barriers that may affect immigrant families
- Ensuring equal access to disaster recovery resources for people living with disabilities

Watch Disaster Lawyering in Action

During a deadly heat wave, [Disaster Resilience Program](#) Fellow Adrianna Hutson helped secure safe housing for her clients.



[Watch to learn more](#)

Many attorneys who do this work are public interest lawyers — attorneys who provide free civil legal aid to help people who cannot afford a lawyer. Some private-sector attorneys also volunteer their time to assist disaster survivors through “pro bono” (volunteer) legal work.

Navigating disaster recovery programs, including assistance from FEMA, is a complex process. Applications are frequently denied for technical reasons, and having a lawyer can significantly improve a survivor’s ability to navigate these systems and secure help.

Lawyers are instrumental in ensuring that recovery happens fairly and that communities are able to rebuild with stability.

WHY IS DISASTER LAW IMPORTANT?

While disasters may strike broadly, recovery systems often produce inequitable outcomes. Without legal intervention, disasters can deepen existing poverty and inequality. People with lower incomes, renters, older adults, people living with disabilities, and immigrant communities often face additional barriers when trying to access recovery resources. Left unaddressed, these barriers can lead to long-term housing instability, debt, or displacement.

In many communities, access to a lawyer determines whether a family receives disaster benefits or keeps their home. Disaster law is not just about paperwork. It is about civil rights, economic stability, and the ability of communities to recover with dignity.

WHAT IS DISASTER RESILIENCE?

Disaster resilience means being prepared not only to respond to disaster, but to recover in a way that strengthens communities over time. It goes beyond

emergency readiness and short-term recovery. Resilience requires building the legal infrastructure, relationships, and community knowledge that allow individuals and communities to withstand and recover from future disasters.

Resilience is built before the next disaster strikes. True resilience requires sustained investment in training advocates in disaster-related legal issues, strong partnerships between legal aid organizations and emergency management systems, and proactive identification of service gaps.

When legal services are integrated into disaster planning, communities can respond more quickly and equitably when disaster occurs.

HOW CAN LAWYERS SUPPORT DISASTER RESILIENCE?

Resilience is built during blue-sky times — by forging partnerships, conducting community education and outreach, and identifying gaps before disaster strikes.

Lawyers are uniquely positioned to serve as connectors between disaster response agencies, legal aid organizations, local government officials, and community members. By building these relationships

during blue-sky times, the network can mobilize quickly to support the community and handle the surge of legal needs that follow a disaster.

Lawyers can get involved in disaster preparedness and response efforts in their communities by:

- Participating in local disaster response planning efforts
- Partnering with local legal aid organizations
- Collaborating with housing advocates and community-based organizations
- Learning about and educating communities about disaster benefits and documentation needs
- Volunteering to provide legal support after disasters

When legal systems are integrated into broader emergency response frameworks, communities recover faster and more equitably.

To support this work, Equal Justice Works developed a [Disaster Attorney Guidebook](#) designed to help attorneys and organizations build disaster legal capacity.

Whether someone is new to disaster response or looking to expand existing efforts, these resources can help translate interest into action.

JOIN US DURING DISASTER RESILIENCE AWARENESS MONTH

Each March, Equal Justice Works leads [Disaster Resilience Awareness Month \(DRAM\)](#), bringing together partners from across the country to highlight the important role legal services play in disaster response, recovery, and preparedness.

During DRAM, we share educational resources, host programming, and spotlight the work of attorneys and advocates helping communities prepare for and recover from disasters. We invite attorneys, advocates, and community leaders to deepen their understanding of disaster law, explore partnership opportunities, and consider how they can contribute to building more resilient legal systems.

ABOUT EQUAL JUSTICE WORKS /

Equal Justice Works is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization and is the nation's largest facilitator of opportunities in public interest law. Equal Justice Works brings together an extensive network of law students, lawyers, legal services organizations, and supporters to promote a lifelong commitment to public service and equal justice. The organization believes that a community of lawyers committed to public service can fulfill our nation's promise of equal justice for all. Following their Fellowships, more than 85% of Equal Justice Works Fellows remain in public service positions, continuing to pursue equal justice for underserved communities.