

Civil Legal Aid Helps... After a Disaster

California is one of the most disaster-prone states in the nation. Earthquakes, wildfires, flooding, severe storms, and even tsunami waves plague various corners of the golden state regularly.

In 2017 alone, Governor Brown declared a State of Emergency 23 separate times, and FEMA declared six major disasters in the state. It was the worst wildfire season in California's history, including five of the most destructive fires in its history. The Northern California wildfires alone damaged or destroyed more than 10,000 structures and killed dozens of people.

In the aftermath of tragedies like these, **civil legal aid lawyers help victims reclaim stability** by helping them through the legal morass of housing issues, insurance claims, replacing lost legal identification documents, applying for benefits, and other civil legal issues that predictably arise in every disaster.

CIVIL LEGAL AID HELPS VICTIMS OF CRIME AFTER A DISASTER WITH...

- **IDENTITY THEFT.** Northern California saw a surge in identity theft following the wildfire outbreak, particularly in connection with FEMA benefits applications. Legal aid helped victims address the problem, ensuring it didn't interfere with access to relief.
- **WAGE THEFT.** The construction industry is a common place for wage theft, particularly in the rush to rebuild after a disaster. Legal aid can represent workers to ensure everyone is paid for their labor.
- **CONTRACTOR AND CONSUMER FRAUD.** Fraudulent contractors and other scammers show up frequently after a disaster and prey on victims at their most desperate moments. Legal aid assists victims when contractors take all the money up front and don't return or use unlicensed workers who leave behind dangerously shoddy construction.
- **PRICE-GOUGING.** State or local governments often increase protections against pricegouging in the wake of a disaster, but law enforcement can't address the problem alone. Legal aid assists victims of price-gouging when local law enforcement is unable to do so.
- **DOMESTIC VIOLENCE.** All too often, intimate partner violence, sexual violence, and child abuse increase after a disaster. Legal aid serves those victims by securing protective orders and by addressing accompanying civil needs, including maintaining safe and stable housing, a need exacerbated by a disaster.

*"Few people are aware that they can get free legal help after a disaster. I truly believe not enough people know about legal aid, but **we've been there every single time.**"*

– Sandra Brown, Lone Star Legal Aid

Legal Aid organizations come together to provide a coordinated response immediately following a disaster.

Legal aid providers work together and with other service providers and first responders to address myriad urgent legal needs.

Legal aid support centers collaborate to address systemic issues facing disaster victims and communities while also offering expertise on complicated legal issues

LEGAL AID OF SONOMA COUNTY assists countless wildfire victims struggling to obtain disaster benefits. Following the North Bay wildfires, FEMA saw more than double the typical amount of identity theft and FEMA fraud. Nearly 17,000 applications for FEMA benefits were submitted from Sonoma County, including numerous fraudulent claims. Less than 4,000 applicants had been approved for aid as of February 2018, four months after the fires. **Legal Aid has helped numerous people obtain their disaster relief benefits, many of whom initially received denials as a result of fraud.**

“When the government tells them no, there’s a tendency to just take that answer and say, ‘Oh, I’m out of luck.’ And it’s wrong. That’s not true.”

-Ronit Rubinoff, Executive Director, Legal Aid of Sonoma County

In addition to holding regular clinics to assist individuals with their FEMA denials, Legal Aid also routinely conducts community outreach and education seminars to explain disaster relief benefits, how to address potential identity theft, and **tips for identifying and avoiding financial scammers.**

“When housing is a problem, everything else is a problem.”

*-Kendall Jarvis, Disaster Relief Attorney,
Legal Aid of Sonoma County*



CALIFORNIA RURAL LEGAL ASSISTANCE convened tenants in a rural part of Northern California after wildfires ravaged the already limited local housing supply. A CRLA attorney spoke to the group and answered questions on tenant issues, illegal rent increases, evictions, habitability, and housing discrimination.

Even outside of disaster zones, California Rural Legal Assistance is using a VOCA grant to provide **holistic services to victims of workplace and employment-related crimes** in rural and agricultural areas of California.