

Lawyer Referral

The Lawyer Referral and Information Service Newsletter



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State Bar's Sandy Hotline helped thousands of New Yorkers

By Eva Valentin-Espinal

Through the coordinated efforts of the Lawyer Referral and Information Service (LRIS), 100 volunteer attorneys provided free legal consultations to Superstorm Sandy victims through a specially created hotline.

To date, the Sandy Hotline received more than 2,900 calls. As expected, many of the calls involved insurance questions, Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) appeals and landlord/tenant disputes. As the

official disaster legal service hotline for New York State, the State Bar's Sandy Hotline provided FEMA with valuable statistics on the types of problems that hurricane victims were experiencing.

The Superstorm Sandy call volume and topics of concern varied week to week, from straightforward issues about automobile insurance coverage to FEMA denials to persons living in illegal apartments. Some examples:

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Washed up-Superstorm Sandy took its toll on the landscape, as well as people, including washing the Rockaway Boardwalk from the beach to 97th Street and Shore Front Parkway in Far Rockaway, Queens. [Photo by Diana R. Torres]

2012 Referral Stats

Panel attorneys across 44 counties received a total of 2,568 referrals.



Q&A

In an effort to assist you and your staff with some common inquiries below are answers to frequently asked questions.

What is the LRIS membership fee?

LRIS panel members pay an annual fee of \$75 (\$125 for non-NYSBA members).

What is the referral fee if a client retains my services?

LRIS panel members agree to remit 10% of their entire fee if the fee is \$500 or more.

Do I need to carry malpractice insurance?

Yes, LRIS panel members are required to provide proof of malpractice insurance in the minimum amount of \$100,000.

How much should I be charging for the initial ½ hour consultation?

The consultation fee is \$35.

What if I can't help a client that was referred to me?

If you decline a referral for any reason, you should refer the client back to the LRIS. A LRIS client can also be seen by another attorney in your firm but the referral will be tracked as a referral to you.

Do I have to have an office in the County that I want to receive referrals from?

Yes, attorney members must have an office in one of our 44* service counties to be eligible to participate in our referral panel.

How do I sign up?

Download the LRIS application at www.nysba.org/joinlr or call 1.800.342.3661 or email lr@nysba.org to have an application mailed to you.

* Go to www.nysba.org/joinlr for a complete list of service counties.

Note from the Chair

First, I wish to specially acknowledge Eva Valentin-Espinal for making the Hurricane Sandy Hotline (a Herculean task) such a success! Second, I wish to update our readers on the committee's activities during the past year. In keeping with providing oversight to the service, since last spring the Lawyer Referral Service Committee has worked diligently to improve the LRIS Rules, specifically: the procedures in place for suspending panel members found to have violated terms of the panel member agreements, or found to have been formally sanctioned or suspended by a state court or disciplinary governing body as delineated in sections XIV. B. and C. The results of the committee's fine work are now posted on the LRIS website (www.nysba.org/joinlr): LRIS Rules (Amended January 2013). I also wish to extend special

thanks to the committee members who participated in this effort—they did an excellent job.

For some background: the statewide lawyer referral service was established by the House of Delegates in 1980, and began operating in 1981. The Lawyer Referral Service regulations have been amended periodically for various contingencies, including adding rules requiring that panel members carry legal malpractice insurance, and also amending the rules in 1998 to expand the reach of coverage into counties where local referral services were not 'substantially comparable' to the NYSBA service. The committee took on this assignment to establish a fair, clear, and durable procedure for the service,

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Seamless Customer Service...

How we screen and refer clients

The better our staff and your staff work together – the better you look. From the moment we answer a call, we begin managing your client's expectations.

The LRIS staff receives close to 75 calls per day from members of the public seeking legal assistance. These calls are screened by our staff to elicit pertinent information regarding the nature of their legal problem. Callers that would be more appropriately helped by other organizations, such as other bar referral services, legal aid societies, or governmental agencies are given contact information for these offices.

Callers needing the advice of an attorney; and who can afford to pay a private attorney, are referred to



LRIS panel members on a rotating basis. They are told to expect an in-office \$35 consultation fee, and to be sure to mention that they were referred by the New York State Bar Association's Lawyer Referral Service. After the initial consultation the attorney will set their own fees.

If you or your staff have any further questions on how the service works, please contact our office at lr@nysba.org.

LawHelpNY receives annual Cometa Award

By Brandon Vogel

Thousands of New Yorkers have found access to justice simply by visiting a website.

LawHelpNY (www.LawHelpNY.org), a website dedicated to providing legal resources for low-income New Yorkers, recently was honored with the Angelo T. Cometa Award, given by the Committee on Lawyer Referral Service.

State Bar President Seymour W. James, Jr. (The Legal Aid Society in New York City) presented the award to Leah Margulies, project director of LawHelpNY, on April 5 in Albany.

Named for Angelo T. Cometa, a past State Bar president and chair of the Committee on Lawyer Referral Service, the award recognizes those who are committed to advancing the goals of the Lawyer Referral and Information Service (LRIS).

“LawHelp/NY has done a terrific job of efficiently and expertly helping the public with their legal problems,” said Anna Katherine Christian of Albany (Boies, Schiller & Flexner LLP), chair of the Committee on Lawyer Referral Service.

How it started

In 2000, Pro Bono Net developed a website to connect public service and pro bono attorneys with legal services offices and provide those attorneys with training, volunteer opportunities and other resources. Legal Services NYC proposed a similar site for the general public to help individuals find a legal aid office that might be able to provide assistance.



Cometa Award-LawHelpny.org award winners: Adriene Holder and Leah Margulies congratulated by State Bar President Seymour James at the House of Delegates dinner in April. [Photo by Eva Valentin-Espinal]

To avoid duplicating resources and to maximize effort, the City Bar Justice Center, Volunteers of Legal Service, the Legal Aid Society of New York, Pro Bono Net and Legal Services NYC formed a collaboration called the New York LawHelp Consortium.

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- A woman from Staten Island called because she had five boats in her front yard and a city-owned tree on her house. Despite the fact the fire department had deemed the situation unsafe, the city could not promise to examine the damage until a month later.
- An artist with artwork on display at a local gallery called when he had trouble accessing his work to see if anything was salvageable.
- A Coney Island pizzeria owner called with insurance policy questions regarding damage to her landmark Neptune Avenue restaurant. (The restaurant has recently re-opened for business.)

Successful model

Coordinating our efforts with local bar associations and legal service providers helped maximize our assistance to thousands of people.

The State Bar was instrumental in helping local bar associations gain access to New York City restoration centers so that they could provide on-site legal clinics for victims. The LRIS participated in ad hoc legal services provider groups that coordinated efforts to help victims in New York City and on Long Island.

The hotline could not have been possible without the help of attorneys who volunteered even though some were victims themselves. Many of our volunteers gave consultations to dozens of victims for many months.

State Bar staff referred calls to attorneys in upstate and western New York as well as New York City and on Long Island. Volunteer attorneys from California, Washington, D.C., Florida, Illinois, Michigan and Pennsylvania also helped.

This is not the first time the State Bar has worked with FEMA to assist hurricane disaster victims. In 2012 victims of Hurricane Lee and Tropical Storm Irene also benefitted from the LRIS hotline. Other LRIS hotlines helped military personnel being deployed and ice storm victims in Northern New York.

Valentin-Espinal is coordinator of NYSBA's Lawyer Referral and Information Service.

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Lawyer Referral

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LawHelpNY receives Cometa Award

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The consortium launched LawHelp/NY in April 2001 initially to focus on the New York City area. It included a comprehensive list of free legal services and “Know Your Rights” resources. In 2003, the consortium expanded the site to serve upstate New Yorkers. A Technology Innovation Grant from the Legal Services Corporation allowed a website to be developed in Spanish.

In 2006, Margulies became the project director after working in legal services offices and the corporate technology sector. “I was impressed with the depth and breadth of the resources available but disturbed that, relatively speaking, so few New Yorkers were using the site,” she said. “My twin goals were greater outreach so that more New Yorkers got free online help with a legal problem and engaging other sectors that serve low-income clients to work collaboratively with us, such as libraries and social services agencies.”

According to a 2010 report by Chief Judge Jonathan Lippman’s Task Force to Expand Access to Civil Legal Services in New York, there are more than 2.3 million unrepresented civil litigants in New York.

Technology developments

Major developments during Margulies’ tenure include the February 2010 launch of LiveHelp, a real-time, online chat service in English and Spanish. Nearly 6,000 chats were conducted in 2012.

During Superstorm Sandy, LawHelp/NY launched a Disaster Assistance blog (www.mynewyork-legalhelp.com/hurricanesandynyasistance) which contains recovery and relief information on topics such as food stamp replacement, tenant rights in a disaster, unemployment benefits and FEMA applications and appeals.

The blog, in English and Spanish, had more than 12,000 visitors in

November following Sandy. Hundreds of others visited LawHelpNY Facebook pages and its Twitter feed. “We aggressively used social media post-Sandy,” said Margulies.

Margulies noted that 523,000 visitors to the website in 2012 viewed more than 3.2 million pages of legal information.

The Spanish pages attracted more than 112,000 hits. More than 60,000 people viewed the social media pages. Easier mobile accessibility is a priority for LawHelpNY, since research has shown that more low-income New Yorkers access the Internet via a mobile phone than a home computer, said Margulies. Staffers hope to complete a mobile optimized LawHelpNY site within the next 18 months.

Vogel is NYSBA’s media writer.

Note from the Chair

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the committee, and the chair to follow upon the occurrence of such an event. The committee engaged in extensive deliberations about disciplinary actions impacting lawyers, and panel member qualification issues. A subcommittee also reviewed and summarized the disciplinary procedures of other ABA approved lawyer referral services for comparison. Against this background, the new amendments were drafted and then submitted for consideration to the Executive Committee and the full House of Delegates at the annual NYSBA meeting held this past January in NYC. I am proud to report that both the Executive Committee and HOD approved the committee’s LRIS plan amendments. Please familiarize yourself with the amended rules, and then thank the committee and Eva for the fantastic work they did and continue to do on behalf of the service and its panel members.

Anna K. Christian, Committee Chair