

Members in Motion

West Virginia Trial Lawyers Aid Families in Wake of Floods

BY BETH A. WHITE

AT 5:30 P.M. on June 23, attorney Robert Frank of Lewisburg, W. Va., was called to prepare the Rhema Christian Center's emergency shelter for local residents displaced by area flooding. A minister at the church and a member of Greenbrier County's Emergency Response Team, Frank cleared out one room and set up 20 cots.

Two hours later, the first buses arrived, carrying residents of nearby White Sulphur Springs. Frank and his team didn't need to prepare for a handful of residents escaping the rising waters—they needed to prepare for hundreds.

West Virginia was hit with catastrophic floods that killed 23 residents, destroyed entire communities, and left thousands homeless. Eight counties were declared federal disaster areas. The deadliest flash flood in the United States since 2010, the National Weather Service called it a "one-in-a-thousand-year event."

In the wake of the floods, West Virginia's AAJ members were among the first to provide assistance. Most donated to the American Red Cross and other nonprofits that assisted residents and local businesses. Others delivered cleaning supplies, food, water, clothing, and other necessities to the affected areas. Several members spent days or weeks helping families salvage what they could.

"Initially, we focused on getting everyone a place to sleep and a meal. In the days after the flood, we began working to help those who weren't in the shelter. Families lost everything. The enormity of the loss is something that you can't communicate," said Frank.

On June 24, Frank and his wife, Dr. Abigail Frank, set up a triage station and clinic in the shelter to provide

basic medical services. Those who were assisted included a 15-year-old boy whose hands were cut to ribbons by the extension cords he had used to tie himself to his younger brother and sister as the floodwaters rose. He was able to save his brother; a body found on Aug. 9 was identified as his sister.

Charleston, W. Va., attorneys J.B. Akers and Andrew Byrd—as well as Akers's wife Maryclaire—were among those who volunteered in Kanawha County, cooking more than 2,000 meals for families and other volunteers on the first day.

"That first day, I realized the scale of what we were facing. We provided thousands of meals, but it wasn't enough. The water had receded, but deep mud trapped the elderly and disabled in their houses. People would have died in their

"West Virginians have always stuck together and helped each other when times are difficult," added Byrd. "You put everything else behind you. Some we helped called us 'angels,' but we were just doing what needed to be done. It's what a lot of people did."

Efforts are still ongoing, including legal assistance. "The worst isn't behind these families," said Akers. "There are questions about whether some of the communities can even survive. We need to continue to do whatever we can to help them."

Beth A. White is executive director of the West Virginia Association for Justice. If you would like to make a donation to assist with the continued flood recovery efforts, please email Debra Lee at debra.lee@wvaj.org.



Charleston, W. Va., attorneys Andrew Byrd and J.B. Akers (L-R) hold up a flag they saved from the porch of an elderly veteran whose home was damaged in the flood.

homes had volunteers not been there to help. We had to go back," said Akers.

While Akers's wife coordinated the food effort, he and Byrd helped families dig out, returning daily for two weeks and often working 14-hour days. "As essential as the cleanup work was, often just talking to those affected was as important to them. It was the first real conversation they'd had in days. That motivated you to go back. You wanted to be there for them," said Akers.

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