

14 Days Later: Katrina's Impact on the Texas Legal Community

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This story by Brenda Sapino Jeffreys first appeared in the Texas Lawyer.

Just days after Hurricane Katrina swept through New Orleans, out-of-state legal recruiters, presumably drooling over the prospects of placement fees, began calling lawyers from the New Orleans headquarters of Jones Walker.

Headhunters contacted one associate five times within the first 48 hours after Katrina struck the coast of Louisiana, says Charles Landry, the managing partner of the firm's Baton Rouge office.

Landry says headhunters have solicited associates and partners in the days since Katrina hit New Orleans on Aug. 29.

"A huge number of our lawyers have been called. I'm not concerned too much that our lawyers are going to leave, but looking at it from a state[wide] perspective, this is a despicable practice," he says.

Landry says he cannot identify the headhunters, but he characterizes their solicitations as opportunistic under the circumstances.

"I want to be real clear. If any lawyer wants to seek opportunity, they absolutely should consider a headhunter, but when you get two days after a storm and one of our young attorneys gets five calls within a 48-hour period, I don't think there's all this interest in this young attorney. It's probing to see if they can get a commission," Landry says.

New Orleans recruiter Darnell Shuart, who has evacuated to Destin, Fla., says she hopes the aggressive recruiters were simply trying to be helpful.

"There's a fine line between wanting to help and appearing like you are a scavenger. People need to understand our city is suffering right now, and it's very emotional. Nobody knows what they want to do," says Shuart, of Shuart & Associates Inc.

Charles Adams Jr., managing partner of Adams and Reese, another firm with a New Orleans office, says he hasn't heard much about headhunters soliciting his firm's lawyers, but he says his 300-lawyer firm has been getting calls from job-seeking New Orleans lawyers, mostly from small and mid-sized firms. Adams and Reese also has an office in Houston.

"What we've been hounded by are lawyers who won't think their firm will survive," says Adams. "We are very interested in some of the people who are interested in us."

Landry says Jones Walker is also getting calls from New Orleans lawyers looking for employment. So is 195-lawyer **McGlinchey Stafford**, which is based in New Orleans but has offices in eight locations, including two in Texas. **Rodolfo Aguilar**, the firm's managing member, says McGlinchey Stafford will talk to lawyers seeking to join the firm, but with the firm's 88 New Orleans lawyers temporarily working in Baton Rouge, Monroe, La., Dallas, Houston and Jackson, Miss., there's currently no extra space to accommodate more lawyers.

Adams and Reese rented office space in Baton Rouge to accommodate the lawyers and staff from its New Orleans office. Jones Walker is squeezing its New Orleans lawyers into its existing offices in Baton Rouge, The Woodlands and elsewhere, Landry says.

But Michelle Bech, a legal recruiter in New Orleans, says many of the smaller firms are scrambling for office space in Baton Rouge or Lafayette—and their employees are looking for places to live.

"It's the medium-size and smaller firms that only had an office in one place that are going to suffer in the short term," says Bech, who lives in Lafayette but works in New Orleans a couple of days a week.

The housing dilemma is a big problem for many New Orleans lawyers.

Louis Colletta, an associate with New Orleans firm Courtenay, Hunter & Fontana, says his firm is set to open offices in Baton Rouge on Sept. 12. So will the firm where his wife, Katharine, works, Christovich & Kearney, but the young lawyers were bunking with a friend of Katharine Colletta's mother in Houston. Louis Colletta says he is not sure if he and his wife will be able to find a place to live in Baton Rouge by Sept. 12.

"We are going to report back next week some way or another and see what's there," says Colletta, adding that he and his wife evacuated New Orleans on Aug. 28 without vital items such as a laptop computer or work clothes.

"Hopefully our firms will be able to survive the interruption," Colletta says.

Bech, of Legal and Professional Search Group, says she is trying to assist some firms with their search for temporary office space, and help some lawyers find temporary jobs. But, Bech says, she has received calls from about 100 lawyers since Sept. 5, and most of them are looking for permanent jobs in Louisiana, Texas or elsewhere.

"A lot of people have had a desire to get to Texas but something had to really kick them in the butt to get them to Texas and to leave New Orleans, because it's so hard to leave New Orleans," Bech says.

Shuart also says her recruiting firm is getting calls from lawyers from firms in New Orleans, but many aren't sure yet if they want to look for permanent jobs outside of New Orleans.

"Quite frankly, many of them are still in shock," Shuart says.

"They are not sure what they want to do because I don't think they necessarily want to give up their firm or their city."

Houston recruiters Elaine Makris Williams, of MS Legal Search, and Larry Prescott, of Prescott Legal Search, say their firms have received some calls in recent days from New Orleans lawyers looking for jobs in Texas. But Prescott notes that the lawyers who are not licensed in Texas may have difficulty landing Texas jobs. [See "Court Issues Order Allowing Displaced Attorneys to Practice in Texas," page 1.]

"Because of Louisiana being a civil code state, and especially for litigators if all of their experience is litigating in New Orleans courts, they are going to have a really hard time finding jobs in Texas," he says. "The market is definitely a lot better these days, but there's still a lot of talent available for most openings in Texas."

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