

# Many small law firms may be gone

September 21, 2005

*This story by Adrian Angelette first appeared in The Baton Rouge Advocate.*

As Hurricane Katrina bore down on Louisiana, the three attorneys in the William S. Vincent Jr. law firm fled their Prytania Street office in New Orleans to three cities – Baton Rouge, Lafayette and Houston.

One of them, Jared Vincent, moved in with an old law school buddy, Baton Rouge attorney Rufus Craig. Vincent continues to search for displaced clients to help keep cases current.

But like many attorneys, Vincent and the other lawyers in the firm face the question of when – and even whether – to return to New Orleans.

“If it’s economically feasible, we’d like to continue practicing down there,” Vincent said. “If the people come back, we’ll go back and hope to stay. But you’ve got to make enough money to keep the lights on.”

Vincent said some firms will hedge their bets by keeping an office in New Orleans but opening another one elsewhere.

“I hear a lot of them are trying to get office space in Baton Rouge, but the cost has gone through the roof,” he said. “As far as the sole practitioner goes, it depends on how much damage they suffered.”

The task of restarting a law practice will be particularly daunting for one-lawyer offices or small firms whose clientele was made up largely of New Orleanians who evacuated. Many lawyers will also have to cope with files and equipment destroyed by wind or water.

“A lot of lawyers lost their clients. I’m afraid many solo practitioners and small firms will be forced to leave the state,” Baton Rouge Bar Association President Greg Bodin said. “There are probably a number of small firms that ... have already moved once. How can they afford to move again?”

Bodin estimates that a third of the state’s 20,000 lawyers were practicing in New Orleans and the city’s immediate vicinity before the hurricane. Some are setting up shop in Baton Rouge.

If Baton Rouge becomes a larger hub for business in Louisiana, Bodin said, the influx of law firms might not disrupt the local legal community.

Bill Jarman, a partner in the Baton Rouge-based law firm Kean, Miller, said he’s not worried about the possibility of increased competition here. He added that his firm, which has an office in New Orleans, believes there will be opportunities in that city.

“Once the shock and depression is over, we’re going to find that there are exciting opportunities in the rebuilding of New Orleans,” Jarman said. “All the firms I’ve talked to planned on going back.”

Lawyers in his firm returned to temporary offices in New Orleans more than two weeks ago, Jarman noted.

**Rudy Aguilar**, managing partner for New Orleans-based **McGlinchey Stafford**, said some of his lawyers probably won’t return. Aguilar’s firm is assessing the living situation for the individual attorneys and their staffs before acting on a plan to reopen offices in New Orleans.

“We’re going to have personnel shifts because of a number of factors,” Aguilar said. “As soon as New Orleans is ready, we want to go back. We’re trying to make a strategic and thoughtful evaluation. We’re going to have our full complement of workers in the New Orleans office.”

Charles Landry, managing partner for Jones, Walker, Waechter, Poitevent, Carrere and Denegre, said the 165 attorneys along with their staffs should be working full time in the New Orleans offices within a month to 45 days. The firm’s building was damaged but can be repaired.

“We’ve received calls from all over the world from new clients looking at helping with the revitalization of New Orleans,” he said.

One advantage the larger firms enjoy is having technology that saved files and gave displaced attorneys easy access to cases, allowing them to resume work after the storm.

“I’ve heard horror stories about small firms that got wiped out because data in their computer systems was not mirrored in other locations,” Landry said.

The impact on the Baton Rouge legal community has been much less severe, Baton Rouge lawyer Frank Holthaus said.

Many law practices, including his own, use business plans that anticipate spells with no income.

“We keep our personal standard of living so we can go 60 or 90 days without any income,” Holthaus said.

There are few signs of out-of-town attorneys trying to grab business in Baton Rouge, Holthaus said.

“You know how you can tell that there is no problem? It’s because they’re welcome in Baton Rouge,” Holthaus joked. “If they were trying to eat out of the same trough, they wouldn’t be welcome.”

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Rudy Aguilar