

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

UH Law Center Launches Hurricane Harvey Consumer Assistance Program

New Program Offers Help to Storm Victims and Preparation for Future Disasters

July 11, 2018 — The University of Houston Law Center has received a community assistance grant to implement a two-pronged program designed to assist area residents still dealing with consumer issues related to Hurricane Harvey and to provide practical information to help people plan better for the next disaster.

The Hurricane Consumer Assistance Program was started with a \$205,000 grant from the Greater Houston Community Foundation, which was formed in the wake of Hurricane Harvey to assess relief efforts and distribute charitable and government funds to worthwhile programs.

“Our goal is to help 1,000 individuals, but one of the main targets is to get the information out there through workshops and community presentations to get people ready before the next disaster strikes,” said Ryan Marquez, a professor of practice who is heading the project.

UH Law Center students and volunteer practitioners will advise hotline callers about their legal rights, represent some people in court, send demand letters in an attempt to resolve disputes, and provide other legal assistance. The student lawyers can earn clinical credits for their efforts.

“There are many people in need of help who don’t know their legal rights or the means to pursue them,” said Marquez, who also serves as staff attorney for the Center for Consumer Law, the Texas Consumer Complaint Center, and the Consumer Dispute Resolution Course at the Law Center. “We plan to provide the help they need to continue their recovery process and obtain any legal recourse available to them.”

The number of landlord/tenant disputes has tapered off somewhat as many storm victims have found permanent or temporary housing, reached settlements on damages, or filed insurance claims, according to Marquez. The bulk of complaints now, he said, concern unscrupulous contractors who are unlicensed, unregulated, and work without performance bonds.

“A lot of people flooded the market to make quick money and then didn’t do the work,” he said.

Marquez advises storm victims to insist on performance insurance — contracting and paying for repairs piecemeal rather than all at once. “Do a little at a time,” he said. “It may be a bit more expensive, but you can limit damages from a con artist.”

Community workshops and presentations will provide information on how to head off or limit such problems in the future as well as offer advice on other issues including resolving gaps in property titles and other paperwork required to qualify for disaster assistance.

The consumer assistance program is the latest of many relief and assistance programs undertaken in the wake of the August 2017 hurricane. The Law Center's Mediation Clinic, Consumer Law Clinic, Center for Consumer Law and Texas Consumer Complaint Center continue to help resolve a wide-range of storm related disputes.

"It is good for the community because it's another effort by the school to provide free legal advice and counsel to people with Harvey related consumer problems," said Janet Heppard, associate professor of clinical practice and clinic director. "But it is also good for the law students because they get practical experience while helping members of the community and will gain knowledge about these consumer issues that they can use to provide free legal assistance after they become lawyers."

To seek assistance with a Hurricane Harvey-related consumer problem, Harris County and Houston residents can call Karen Banda, Program Assistant, at 832-842-4427, or register [here](#). Assistance is offered in both English and Spanish.

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The [University of Houston Law Center](#) (UHLC) is a dynamic, top tier law school located in the nation's 4th largest city. UHLC's Health Law, Intellectual Property Law, and Part-time programs

rank in the U.S. News Top 10. It awards Doctor of Jurisprudence (J.D.) and Master of Laws (LL.M.) degrees, through its academic branch, the College of Law. The Law Center is more than just a law school. It is a powerful hub of intellectual activity with more than 11 centers and institutes which fuel its educational mission and national reputation. UHLC is fully accredited by the American Bar Association and is a member of the Association of American Law Schools.