



Appleseed This Week

Alabama Appleseed Helps Katrina Victims Without Clear Home Title Get Federal Rebuilding Grants

Two years after Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast on August 29, 2005, victims of the storm continue to struggle to rebuild their lives. What follows is the first in a series of reports on Appleseed's ongoing work to address the problems caused and revealed by the devastating storm.

August 23, 2007 - Alabama Appleseed, along with its pro bono partners, is finalizing a detailed compilation of state's elderly survivors of Hurricane Katrina on the Gulf Coast, part of a major effort to assist thousands of low-income people seeking federal assistance to rebuild their homes without clear title to their property.

The typically elderly residents of so-called "heir property" have lived in homes passed down to them by family members who died without leaving a will. The result is that the property is legally owned by all descendants of the original purchaser, giving any one of them the right to sell the property even if they have never lived there.

In the aftermath of Katrina, Alabama Appleseed recognized that Katrina survivors without clear title couldn't qualify to receive from \$85,000 to \$150,000 in federal grants. In January, the Center received a major grant from the national **AARP Foundation** to survey elderly victims, organize a pro bono network of lawyers to assist heir property owners clear their titles and to find long-term solutions to related problems exposed by Katrina.

Working with **Anne Mitchell**, a senior partner at **Baker, Donelson, Bearman, Caldwell & Berkowitz** in Birmingham, the Center has compiled a "how-to" manual for pro bono lawyers and law students to help heir property owners. On August 22 the manual was presented to a meeting of Alabama State Agriculture Extension Agents who also will assist in clearing heir titles. The Center's Katrina Legal Fellow **Craig H. Baab**, who heads the project, estimates that as many as half the state's 1,200 families seeking home rebuilding grants, including hundreds still living in FEMA travel trailers, will have heir property restrictions.

Baab, however, asserts the problem goes far beyond Katrina survivors. "Low-income families need to be educated on the importance of having a will and making sure they have a deed on their property. The law needs to be reformed so that it isn't as easy for outside developers to take advantage of low-income heir property residents and buy their property without their consent."

Three other Appleseed Centers are also taking steps to address the post-Katrina heir property problem. **Louisiana Appleseed** recently released a paper authored by **Malcolm Meyer, Sr.**, a partner at **Adams and Reese** in New Orleans, proposing that the state's chief justice appoint a "special master" to handle claims made by heir property owners, in part to settle disputes over

property ownership between family members. The report is part of an effort by a group of judges, lawyers and legal service providers to come up with a solution to the problem that would be part of the state's overall disaster response program. **Georgia and Texas Appleseed** are fashioning programs to assist heir property owners in their states who want to return to their Katrina-damaged homes.

For more information on Appleseed, visit www.appleseednetwork.org. To support the work of Appleseed, donate [here](#).

Appleseed, a non-partisan and non-profit organization, is a network of public interest law Centers working to identify and address injustices in their communities. Appleseed works to build a just society through education, legal advocacy, community activism and policy expertise, addressing root causes and producing practical solutions. As one of the nation's largest legal pro bono networks, Appleseed Centers work both independently and collectively, bringing their own experiences to create local solutions that are nationally relevant. We connect the top private practice lawyers, corporate counsel, law schools, civic leaders, and other professionals to tackle problems locally, at their root cause.

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