In many respects, the horrific events of September 11th brought out the best in our profession.

In literally an instant, thousands of individuals and families in our city were in need of legal help. Some needed legal assistance as they faced the tragic loss of loved ones. Others needed legal aid to help address the loss of employment, temporary displacement or outright loss of a roof over their heads, or mounting medical bills and consumer debt. Many faced a complex combination of all of these civil legal problems. Still others were immigrants who had been living and working for many years in our city but who now confronted new punitive policies.

Almost overnight our profession responded to this crisis of dramatically increasing need for civil legal assistance.

The leaders of the Judiciary and the bar associations rallied the private bar to provide pro bono help. Trainings were organized and individual attorneys and law firms alike devoted countless hours to these desperate clients with new legal needs. In the immediate aftermath of September 11th, the Judiciary eased some court rules and highlighted the need for civility and collegiality among practitioners.

New resources materialized almost immediately to enable civil legal services programs to expand available legal help for the thousands of New Yorkers who had just lost jobs because of the economic impact of September 11th. Within a few days, for example, the New York Community Trust had reached out to the Legal Aid Society to offer support for our newly created disaster relief program.

Shortly thereafter, the Ford Foundation, The New York Times’ Neediest Cases Fund, Atlantic Philanthropies, the Open Society Institute, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, Reuters, The Charles Evans Hughes Memorial Foundation, American Express, the Charles H. Revson Foundation, and Morgan Stanley made significant special grants to the society for this work as did a number of churches and the Union of American Hebrew Congregations.

And, of course, the September 11th Fund operated in conjunction with the Community Trust to provide substantial special funding for civil legal services.
The model for providing disaster relief, including legal assistance, was collaborative. The city opened a disaster center at 80 Centre St., where multiple city, state and federal agencies, various social services organizations, and the Legal Aid Society staffed information and assistance tables seven days a week. This multi-service setting on the first floor at Centre Street enabled New Yorkers to get all the assistance they needed under one roof and in a single stop.

Permitting the society to provide legal assistance directly on-site made it possible for New Yorkers to receive immediate legal intervention to reverse erroneous denials of unemployment insurance, rental assistance, food stamps, emergency cash assistance, or emergency health insurance coverage in addition to correcting mistakes in the application of the new immigration rules.

Similarly, New Yorkers faced with mounting consumer debt and other bills could receive both on-the-spot financial assistance in some cases and immediate legal counseling at the Legal Aid table.

Through this early intervention, many problems that otherwise would have led to litigation were resolved at an early pre-litigation stage. This collaborative model has been perfected in the Robin Hood Foundation’s current “single stop” program in which the society and others participate.

While sometimes it seems like September 11th was only yesterday, the lessons learned then about what our profession can do to alleviate great suffering still resonate today, 10 years later.

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