

Judge Alfonso to talk about disaster planning at National Association of Women Judges conference

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Chancery Judge Margaret Alfonso of Gulfport will share her experiences from Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath during a judicial disaster preparedness program at the National Association of Women Judges Regional Conference April 28 in Miami Beach, Fla.

Judge Alfonso will focus on the needs of children.

“The existing system of disaster management does not encompass specific needs of children,” Judge Alfonso said.

Judge Alfonso is senior chancery judge of the Eighth Chancery District, which includes Harrison, Hancock and Stone counties.

Judge Alfonso and other members of the Gulf Coast organization PACT, Professionals Advocating for Children Together, are examining issues that involve the welfare of children in times of disaster. They are seeking information from a wide variety of people and entities who deal with children’s issues in an attempt to develop their own comprehensive plan.

“I don’t have an answer. We are identifying the problems then trying to come together and brainstorm how to start solving them,” Judge Alfonso said. “Now that we have had this experience from Katrina, we need to learn from it.”

Hinds County Chancery Judge Denise Owens, who worked on program planning for the National Association of Women Judges Regional Conference, said many of the judges attending the conference have dealt with the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

Others who will make presentations on disaster preparedness include Judge Jennifer Bailey of the Eleventh Judicial Circuit Court of Miami, Judge Fredericka H. Wicker of the Louisiana state Fifth Circuit Court of Appeal of Gretna, and attorney Stacy Bercun of Miami.

The disaster preparedness panel discussion is scheduled for 9:15 a.m. April 28 at the Savoy Hotel in Miami Beach. The conference is April 27-29.

Judge Alfonso said, “I’m not telling them how to solve the problems because I still don’t know how to solve some of them. I just want to let them know some of the problems they can expect, and hopefully let them go back to their jurisdictions and start working on a plan specifically addressing the unique needs of children.”

Records preservation is an obvious problem. After the storm, many people had to return to the chancery courts for copies of documents such as custody orders so that they could enroll their children in school. In Hancock County, the courthouse records were damaged. Judge Alfonso urges Coast residents to store important documents in a safe place, or take documents with them in an evacuation.

Court-ordered mental health commitments for treatment increased after the hurricane. Custody disputes increased, including cases in which non-custodial parents living elsewhere took their children to live with them temporarily, then refused to return them to the parent having custody.

An unexpected issue courts faced immediately after the hurricane was a huge number of calls from non-custodial parents attempting to locate their children to determine if they were safe, Judge Alfonso said. Parents who couldn’t get into the storm-ravaged area called the courts which had in the past handled custody cases involving their children. Emergency services agencies got similar calls from

people searching for their elderly parents.

As a result of that experience, Judge Alfonso wants to create an information exchange system so that custodial parents could report their whereabouts to a central location, and non-custodial parents could obtain that information. Privacy issues are a complication in setting up such a system.

“We’re looking to see if this system has ever been done anywhere else so that we are not reinventing the wheel,” Judge Alfonso said.

Judge Alfonso, whose former home on Biloxi’s Back Bay was reduced to a slab, said she is still discovering new hurricane-related problems. “Every time I talk to somebody, I learn something that I hadn’t thought of before.”

Judge Alfonso has been a chancery judge for eight years. She is a former assistant district attorney for the Second Circuit District of Harrison, Hancock and Stone counties, a former assistant county prosecutor for Harrison County, and a former family court prosecuting attorney. She also previously served as an assistant state’s attorney for Cook County, Ill.

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