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Attorneys lend a hand to emergency workers

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By David Unze, USA TODAY

In the days after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, Anthony Hayes was like many Americans: He had a desire to do something to help.

Hayes, a South Carolina attorney who worked at 4 World Trade Center before attending Tulane University Law School, acted on that desire.

He called the fire chief in Columbia, S.C., to ask what he might do for emergency first responders. A brainstorming session followed with a group of 15 firefighters, during which Hayes asked whether they regularly updated their wills and powers of attorney.

Only one raised a hand.

"I was dumbstruck, and then I became agitated," Hayes said. "How is it possible that a community does not provide basic trust and estate planning when your job is to risk your life to save me? That was counterintuitive."

Two months later, Hayes started the "Wills for Heroes" program. He returned to the Columbia Fire Department in November 2001 to offer free wills, powers of attorney and health care declarations for first responders.

Hayes says the program has expanded to 11 states: Georgia, Minnesota, California, Arizona, Texas, Illinois, Alabama, South Carolina, North Carolina, Virginia and Utah, where lawyers prepared 41 estate plans at

the state's first Wills for Heroes event in March.

Several other states, including Louisiana, Kansas, Oklahoma, Mississippi, Tennessee, Ohio, Connecticut and Michigan, are planning to come on board later this year, Hayes says. He estimates the program has helped 10,000 first responders since it began.

The services provided would otherwise cost \$800-\$1,500 depending on the law firm you choose, said Susan Link, a Twin Cities attorney who volunteers for the Minneapolis-St. Paul metro area Wills For Heroes program.

"It's one of those things that you always know in the back of your mind that you need a will," said Cold Spring, Minn., firefighter Travis Kunz, who received his estate documents during a Wills for Heroes event one recent Monday night. "Unfortunately, it's one of those things that's not on the top of the priority list."

Lauren Bennett Mulkey got involved after her husband, Louis Mulkey, died in a fire June 18 in Charleston, S.C. He was 34 and among the firefighters who died fighting a blaze at a furniture store.

She was 26, and the couple had celebrated their one-year anniversary only a day before the fire.

She was attending law school at the time and felt compelled to help her husband's colleagues as they had helped her after Louis died. She helped at a wills session three months after her husband died.

"I can't fight the fire with them, and I can't bring back my husband. But if there's something I can do to help these guys," she said. "That's a way I thought I could give back."

Many have joined her:

- In **Arizona**, lawyers have drafted 3,522 wills and other estate planning documents at 70 events in 13 of Arizona's 15 counties, said Jeffrey Jacobson, who co-founded the state's Wills For Heroes Foundation.

More than 235 attorneys have volunteered more than 4,250 hours of service, he said.

- In **Minnesota**, Bradley Hanson and Krista Durrwachter, co-chairs of the Central Minnesota Wills for Heroes program, say nearly 500 first responders have been helped by the program.

- In **South Carolina**, lawyers have drafted about 2,700 wills, Hayes said.
- In **Louisiana**, the program couldn't get going until the Legislature changed the state's ethics law, said attorney Mark Morice, who coordinates the state's Wills for Heroes program.

The state had a law that prohibited public servants, including police, fire and emergency medical technicians from receiving "anything of value" in performing their official duties unless it was part of their compensation package, Morice said.

The amendment to the ethics laws passed, and Louisiana soon will hold its first Wills for Heroes event, Morice said.

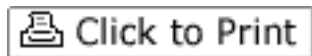
Columbia, S.C., firefighter Todd Scott, 32, admitted he didn't have a will at the top of his priority list. Then he heard about the volunteer lawyers and thought about his family. He got his documents two years ago.

"Seeing the fatalities we see on a daily basis, it makes you realize how fragile life is," Scott said. "You can go from being perfectly healthy to being the victim of an accident. The un-timeliness of death is something you can't prepare for."

Unze reports for the St. CloudTimes in Minnesota

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