

Will Power

Attorneys' nonprofit provides free estate planning for first responders

By Jane Jerrard

Do you have an up-to-date will? What about a healthcare power of attorney? If you don't have these important documents—or haven't updated them since you got married or had a child—there's a nonprofit organization that might be able to help you out: Through the Wills for Heroes Foundation, firefighters and other first responders can get their wills, powers of attorney and other legal documents drawn up by attorneys for free.

WHERE THERE'S A WILL ...

The Wills for Heroes Foundation is a 501(c)(3) charitable nonprofit organization that began as a one-man operation after the Sept. 11 attacks. “The program was started in November 2001, right after the towers went down, by an attorney and friend of mine named Anthony Hayes,” says Jeff Jacobson, one of the founders of the Wills for Heroes Foundation. “Anthony's first inclination was to get in his car and drive up there from his home in South Carolina to help, but he realized that wasn't such a good idea. Instead he drove to a fire station in Columbia and said, ‘I'm a lawyer. How can I help?’ He kept talking to them, and found out none of those guys had a will.”

Hayes drew up wills for first responders for a few years before contacting Jacobson to start doing the same thing in Arizona. When they started hearing about other attorneys around the country drawing up wills for first responders, they realized they had better set up a formal program. Jacobson explains, “We realized we had to keep the essence of what we were doing intact, and set some rules, like all services are completely free, and no one would be pitched for other legal business.”

In 2007, the Wills for Heroes Foundation was officially formed. Today, attorneys from around the country volunteer to participate, often through their state bar associations. “We get requests from both first responders and attorneys looking for a program in their area,” Jacobson says.

LOCAL HEROES

Here's how Wills for Heroes works: A fire department or organization works with local volunteer attorneys to schedule a date for its program. On that date, volunteer attorneys, notaries and witnesses set up at a department station or other location. The department's only responsibilities are to provide the space and let members know about it.

In September, there were multiple Wills for Heroes events in Bucks County, Pa., home to 62 fire companies. “They're holding a number of events at fire departments throughout the county,” says Greg Jakubowski, chief of the Lingohocken (Pa.) Fire Company and a technical editor for *FireRescue*. “I went to one on Sept. 11 that had 150 people scheduled.” Every event held in Bucks County was open to all public safety employees and their spouses or significant others.



Jakubowski says he signed up for Wills for Heroes because his “current” will was at least 20 years old. “It was certainly well out of date, and it was one of those things I was thinking about, but it was always at the bottom of the list,” he says. “This was a perfect opportunity to take care of it.” He was reminded of the importance of having estate-planning documents in order by an ironically timed tragedy: “That same day, my deputy chief was killed in an accident at his work. You look at that and say, I'm glad I took care of my will,” Jakubowski says.

Before the event, each participant downloads and fills out an estate planning questionnaire (which is different in each state.) This allows them to think through some important decisions, talk with their spouse or partner, and basically plan their estate with as much time as they need.

On the day of the Wills for Heroes event, the first responder is assigned to one or two attorneys, who review the questionnaire and enter the information into laptops. A more senior attorney reviews the draft documents with the participant to ensure that they understand and agree to what they are executing. Once finalized, the documents are signed, witnessed and notarized in a formal signing ceremony.

“There was a lot of enthusiasm and interest from both sides—the first responders and the lawyers,” Jakubowski says. “The whole process took no more than an hour, and I walked out of there with a complete document.”

WANT A WILL?

To date, Wills for Heroes programs in 23 states and the Virgin Islands have provided more than 25,000 free estate-planning documents for firefighters, police officers, paramedics and other qualified public safety professionals.

Wills for Heroes will work with departments in any area where volunteer attorneys are available. If you'd like to sign up your fire department, check with your chain of command, and have them complete the online form at www.willsforheroes.org/interested.htm. ☺

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