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Coronavirus could overwhelm legal help for America's poor

Already short on resources, civil legal aid groups now face unprecedented crunch

By Todd Ruger

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Attorneys at the Southeast Louisiana Legal Services Corp. helped the state's poorest residents in the aftermath of two major hurricanes, the Gulf oil spill and the Great Recession — but the COVID-19 outbreak threatens to strain work there and at similar agencies across the country like never before.

Laura Tuggle worked on housing issues amid Hurricane Katrina's widespread devastation of property in New Orleans as a staff attorney 15 years ago. Now, she is the group's executive director as Louisiana emerges as a hot spot for coronavirus cases and the governor has shuttered nonessential businesses.

"We have gone through a lot of big disasters, and this will be the biggest yet," Tuggle said. "The biggest civil legal aid crisis, the biggest economic crisis, the biggest public health crisis, sort of all rolled into one."

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