



Courts Back in Service Following Hurricane Georges

Hurricane Georges cut a wide and wet swath from the Caribbean across to the Gulf states leaving several federal court facilities damaged in its path. Fortunately, in a hurricane that claimed well over 100 lives, no deaths or injuries of judicial officers or court employees were reported. Anticipating the worst from Hurricane Georges, the Administrative Office Disaster Response Team, headed by William Lehman, coordinated assistance to the affected courts, including special procurement authority to replace damaged equipment and restore function. They also assessed the need for special payroll transfers where banks might be closed by the storm.

The federal buildings in the district of the Virgin Islands generally weathered Georges with minor damages. In St. Croix, there was water in two courtrooms, jury rooms, and the library of the Almeric L. Christian Federal Building, but the building reopened for business shortly after the storm passed. The exception was the court facilities in the St. Thomas federal building, where a leaking roof damaged the main courtroom and the new library. Although the court was quickly up and running, the courtroom will be out of service for some time. "We've been hit so many times by hurricanes, we're used to it," said Chief Judge Thomas K. Moore (D. V.I.). "The Islands have been rebuilt to new code and some power and many phone lines are now underground. Still, we consider ourselves blessed. Georges was a borderline Category 5 hurricane, and miraculously dropped to a Category 2 before it hit us. So we came through fairly well."

The federal buildings in the district of Puerto Rico also generally came through Georges with minor damages. Eighty percent of Puerto Rico was without electricity and water for days after the hurricane, with sections of San Juan slowly regaining power and water. The historic Post Office and Courthouse in San Juan, which was under construction and renovation, was damaged slightly. The Clemente Ruiz Nazario U.S. Courthouse and the Frederico Degetau Federal Building in Hato Rey were initially closed, not because of damage, but because they were without power. The facilities reopened using emergency electrical generators.

By the time the hurricane had moved across the Florida Keys and into the Gulf States, Georges had been downgraded to a tropical storm, but was still capable of 100 mph winds extending up to 145 miles from the storm center, and of dumping as much as 30 inches of rain from Louisiana to the Florida panhandle. President Clinton declared major disasters or emergencies in Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana and ordered federal aid to supplement state and local recovery efforts in the area struck by Hurricane Georges.

There was substantial water damage on every floor of the new Pensacola, Florida, courthouse in the Northern District of Florida, from water in the fifth floor courtroom ceiling, to a flooded first floor lobby and a collapsed ceiling in the U.S. Marshals Service conference room. Despite this, the court was open almost immediately for business. "We're trying to dry out," said Clerk of Court Robert Mossing, "but we have to take care of our public." The Middle District of Florida had no significant damage. The hurricane closed the Tampa and Fort Myers courthouses briefly in anticipation of severe weather. "We were fortunate," said Clerk of Court Richard Sletten. "We had an October 1 move-in date for the new Tampa courthouse, and I was

just hoping we'd come through without any damage." The Southern District of Florida reported no power or water at its Key West office, but otherwise few leaks or damage.

Chief Judge Morey L. Sear (E. D. La.) spent Sunday night before the storm at the New Orleans courthouse, along with several judges, the clerk of court, and other court employees who lived in low-lying areas or in the path of the winds. At 4:00 a.m. Monday morning as he was walking the family dog, Sear was surprised to hear the storm had come and gone. "We had rain three weeks before the hurricane that was far more damaging," said Sear. "We closed the courthouse Monday because that was the day the storm was due to come ashore. And we remained closed Tuesday only because so many people working at the court had evacuated the area."

While televised stories showed knee-high water in the streets of Mobile, Alabama, the water never lapped the U.S. courthouse there. "We had some rain damage in a few of the offices," said Deborah S. Hunt, clerk of court for the Southern District of Alabama. "We were braced for something hideous, but we were very lucky." Not so lucky was the federal defenders' office on the appropriately named Water Street, where first-floor flooding cut off power and telephone service to offices on the upper floors.

In the Southern District of Mississippi, Clerk of Court J.T. Noblin said the advance warning on Georges gave them time to back-up electronic files and secure computer equipment before the storm hit. Even at less than hurricane strength, Georges's winds were strong enough to move the roof-top air conditioner units at the Biloxi office, and some water damage occurred. Cell phones kept key people in touch until power was restored several days after Georges passed. "It could have been a lot worse," said Noblin. "As it is, when we design our new courthouse, we'll take a good look at storm protection."

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