

## TRIAL LAWYERS CARE

# Swift Action to Help Fire Victims

BY MAUREEN LEDDY

**W**ildfires ignited Oregon in 2020, burning more than 1 million acres of land. With thousands of people displaced and more than 4,000 homes destroyed, the Oregon Trial Lawyers Association (OTLA) sprang into action—it set up pro bono legal clinics and distributed supplies to fire victims.

Attorney and AAJ member Marc Johnston, who lives in rural Clackamas County, came up with the idea for the pro bono clinics after seeing evacuees along roadways and at gas stations, cars packed with possessions and with nowhere to go. “I knew we had to move quickly,” said Johnston, who contacted OTLA leadership about helping fire victims with filing property insurance claims.

OTLA set up clinics around the state at community centers, hotels, and churches. Area attorneys paid the rental fees, brought their own supplies, and met with displaced Oregonians to provide free legal assistance. Clinic volunteers underwent training on fire loss claims, provided by trial lawyers with expertise in the field. And other state trial lawyer associations were quick to share materials they created for similar programs for hurricane, fire, and earthquake relief efforts. OTLA President-elect and AAJ member Lara Johnson, of Eugene, said, “We just wanted to help our neighbors—and while we can’t fight fires, we can help with their claims.”

OTLA and AAJ member Melissa Bobadilla, of Beaverton, said that evacuation notices had not been translated from English into other languages in many cases, leaving migrant workers with no chance to gather more than the shirts on their backs. Bobadilla reached out to trial lawyers and raised more than \$34,000 for supplies for these workers and their families including baby formula, diapers, food, and hygiene products. She also secured 6,000 KN95 masks to protect workers from the effects of toxic smoke—no minor feat considering masks were in short supply due to the pandemic. OTLA also gave cash donations to three organizations to benefit farmworkers.



**AAJ and OTLA member Travis Prestwich, of Salem, assists fire victims in Mill City.**

Bobadilla said she was “touched by the OTLA family who so quickly stepped up to help, without question.”

While the fires have subsided, the association maintains a hotline for fire victims—attorneys and legal staff conduct intake in both English and Spanish and refer callers to trial lawyers who are offering pro bono assistance. Members with experience in fire loss claims have created a series of free video resources for homeowners, businesses, and renters that are available on the association’s website. “We wanted to help as many people as possible,” said Johnston, “and this was a historic time for trial lawyers to act to help citizens in need.”

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**Marc Johnston** is the managing attorney at Johnston Law Firm in Portland, Ore., and can be reached at [marc@johnston-lawfirm.com](mailto:marc@johnston-lawfirm.com). **Lara Johnson** is a partner at Corson & Johnson Law in Eugene, Ore., and can be reached at [ljohnson@corsonjohnsonlaw.com](mailto:ljohnson@corsonjohnsonlaw.com). **Melissa Bobadilla** is the founder of Bobadilla Law in Beaverton, Ore., and can be reached at [melissa@bobadillamlaw.com](mailto:melissa@bobadillamlaw.com). **Maureen Leddy** is an associate editor for Trial.



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