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State bar helps police, firefighters with wills

By Nick Cenegy

Staff Writer

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Those who regularly step into harm's way for others were offered some peace of mind this week.

The Calhoun County and Alabama bar associations provided free basic wills, living wills, and powers of attorney for local firefighters and police officers Tuesday through Thursday at The Bridge inside Anniston First United Methodist Church in Anniston. "It is the state bar's way of taking care of the people who take care of us," said Gary Stanko, Anniston-based attorney and local coordinator of the "Wills for Heroes" program.

About a dozen local lawyers volunteered their time to meet with the first responders. They used six dedicated computers and specialized software to provide the legal documents for as many as possible, said Stanko.

The program is a response to the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks and was modeled after a program in South Carolina. The state bar association began the program in Alabama during the summer of 2007.

The program was well-received among Anniston firefighters, said Assistant Chief David Collins. "We're the recipients of a very valuable gift," said Collins. Over the three days, several shifts of firefighters were taken en masse to get benefit from the service, he said.

Collins said it would normally cost "a good bit of money" to have a will drafted.

According to Stanko, the group contacted police and fire departments in Anniston and Oxford as well as the Calhoun County Sheriff's Office. Between 50 and 60 first responders took them up on the offer.

"Most people in the back of their mind know they need a will, a living will, or power of attorney, but a good portion of us don't go forth and seek it out," said Collins.

He said a few of the younger firefighters don't yet realize the need for a will, and some of the older ones may already have one. However, he said, there are many who have benefited from the accessibility of the free service.

"As you get older, life experience makes you realize that you need one so that your loved ones will be taken care of," he said.

"It is certainly the most valuable gift that has been offered to us," said Collins