

What We Know

ARTICLES & INSIGHTS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



[Bettie Kelley Sousa](#) has been practicing law with Smith Debnam since becoming licensed in 1981. She has a wealth of experience in state and federal courts, including bankruptcy courts, at both trial and appellate levels. She represents mostly business owners and businesses --- large and small --- in a variety of matters, including contract review, drafting and disputes.

A Higher Calling: Hurricane Florence Relief From Above

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The Wednesday after Hurricane Florence left the state, Smith Debnam partners gathered for their monthly lunch meeting, normally chaired by the law firm's managing partner, [Jerry Myers](#). Many learned then that Myers' absence resulted from his accepting a higher calling — delivering supplies in his small airplane to Eastern North Carolina charities.

In this day of drones and helicopters, small planes landing on short runways provided a much-needed service to the hurricane survivors. With hundreds of roads, including I-40 and I-95, flooded and closed to delivery trucks, the federal, state and local governments set up shelters, conducted rescues, and assessed damage on a larger scale. But, for the day-to-day lives of most of the population, thankfulness for survival melted into desperation to return to normalcy. Cash does no good when there are no stores open, or no stock on the shelves.

Yet there were able-bodied locals who could help deliver bottled water and supplies to people in need. Help with the "who-needs-what." Recognizing the missing link, [Operation Airdrop](#) flew into action after Florence. Connecting the donors, and the donated goods, to charities with volunteers to deliver the donations had been done before in Houston, after the similar disaster from Hurricane Harvey in 2017. A Texas non-profit, volunteer-led group, [Operation Airdrop](#) is a loose organization of pilots and small airplanes which sought and coordinated volunteers through the internet. Call it a "pop up," with no true existence until the need arises, Operation Airdrop denotes itself as a "week one disaster response organization." And, after Florence, the need arose in North Carolina.

Myers' airplane has a cabin about the size of a VW bug. But, it was packed full of donated supplies which were placed into the welcoming arms of local volunteers. He took four trips over two days — to small NC airports in Laurinburg, Elizabethtown, and Lumberton, and to a larger airport in Jacksonville. Like the other pilots, he neither was paid for his time nor reimbursed for the fuel. But, in recounting the trips, his broad smile reflected the true gifts he received.

"It was *incredibly* well-organized!" marveled Myers, ever the manager. The General Aviation terminal at RDU, nearing the end of its reconstruction, provided the perfect storage facility for the donations. Volunteers (including lawyer and pilot Keith Burns, who intended to fly but whose shared plane already was in service) sorted, stacked, and weighed donations, putting together loads to fit within the weight limit of each airplane. They then loaded the donations onto the awaiting planes — each coordinated to supply the donations needed or requested by the volunteers waiting at the other airports.

The "true heroes" says Myers were the air traffic controllers, who coordinated the small planes' departures and arrivals around commercial flights, and who carefully spread the airplanes across varying altitudes as the pilots flew very similar flight paths between RDU and Southeastern North Carolina. The Operation Airdrop pilots were instructed to modify their call signs to begin with "compassion flight" to obtain priority handling. No near misses despite four times the normal flight volume at RDU.

At the end of [Operation Airdrop's Florence](#) run, it had used 468 volunteer pilots to deliver 280,000 pounds of cargo over 517 flights. Like others, Myers believes he would do it again. But, having grown up on a farm and seen Florence-flooded farms from the air — one with a portion of a silo and a barn "sitting in a lake" — he hopes Operation Airdrop is not needed anytime soon.

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