

Wills for Heroes to help officers

By Paul Huggins
phuggins@decaturdaily.com
340-2395

Officer Ken Hamilton removed some legal burdens from his life Thursday and didn't have to remove anything from his wallet to pay for it.

He was one of 66 local police officers, firefighters and other emergency officials who took advantage of the inaugural Wills for Heroes program administered for free by local attorneys.

The program provides essential legal documents free to first responders, including wills, living wills and powers of attorney. By helping them plan now, the program ensures first responders' families' legal affairs are in order before a tragedy hits.

Hamilton already had a will, but he said he needed to set up his living will and power of attorney. He said he doesn't want to become a burden on his family in case he's injured in a way that leaves him completely dependent upon medical devices to live.

"The No. 1 thing is I don't want my wife to have to make these difficult decisions during a stressful time," he said. "We talked and prayed about it when we weren't under any stress, and now we don't have to worry about it."

Considering the tight financial budgets constraining most police officers, Hamilton also said it was a big relief to save his family the \$500 these types of legal services generally cost.

The American Bar Associa-

tion started the Wills for Heroes program after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks in 2001. The Alabama Bar Association adopted the program last year and paid for the computers, printers, software and all the other costs associated with the program. About 350 Alabama lawyers have helped more than 1,200 first responders since then.

Twenty-eight Morgan County attorneys and some local secretaries and paralegals donated their time to prepare the legal documents Thursday and Friday.

Decatur attorney Phil Mitchell said it was an easy decision to volunteer because it repays the men and women who put their lives on the line every day.

The first responders represented 10 different police and

fire departments in Morgan County.

Julia Smeds Roth, a Decatur attorney who helped coordinate the effort, said once word spreads of how convenient and helpful Wills for Heroes is, she expects she will have to organize another session.

"After Huntsville did it last year, they added another five-day session," she said.

Participants had to fill out a questionnaire about what their needs were and then talked with a lawyer, who prepared the documents. After reviewing the material on their own, the participants reviewed it with another attorney and then signed the documents in front of two witnesses.

The entire process takes about an hour, Roth said.