Lawyers Helping Warriors

Resources for Assisting Service Members, Veterans

Virginia is home to 122,000 active-duty service members and 790,000 veterans.

Some return from one battlefield to find themselves on another: Struggles with bureaucracies to have applications for benefits fairly considered. Difficulties getting their old jobs back. Arguments over consumer contracts. Landlord-tenant disputes. Domestic strife exacerbated by separation and stress.

Some face broken marriages and unemployment. Some have injuries that make their struggles tougher. Some veterans face poverty and homelessness.

Some active-duty service members and veterans, poor though they may be, have incomes too high to qualitfy for legal aid services.

Military bases have legal assistance offices that provide low-income active-duty service members with wills, powers of attorney, and other law-office services. The judge advocate general officers who provide that assistance often are not allowed to practice in civilian courts. Those service members turn to the local civilian bar for help.

"There are a lot of lawyers who want to help," said Kyndra K. Rotunda, an Arlington lawyer who devotes much of her practice to helping wounded warriors receive military benefits. "But a lot of lawyers don't have any experience in this particular area of law."

For example, the military's disability compensation procedures are similar to workers' compensation. But each branch of the military has its own rules and regulations, so it is important for private practitioners to receive some instruction in military law before representing wounded troops, Rotunda said.

Fortunately, several groups in Virginia work to assist service members and veterans. Some of these groups can advise or train lawyers who want to assist a client themselves. The groups take referrals. And some welcome pro bono volunteers.

These groups include:

Virginia Department of Veterans Services

The department operates more than twenty field offices to provide information, assistance, and advocacy for military veterans who live in Virginia. Areas the department can help with include pensions and benefits, homelessness, spousal conflict resolution, education, and home loans. Services are described at **www.dvs.virginia.gov/statebenefits.htm**. Veterans can walk into the field offices and receive same-day service, or they can make an appointment.

To Help: The department currently has no structured program for pro bono volunteers. However, the department will, with a client's permission, work with lawyers to help provide services. The department welcomes organized groups that are willing to take on specific projects.

Contact: Addresses and contact information for field offices can be accessed through a map at **www.dvs.virginia.gov/Veterans_Service_Field_Offices_Click_Map.html**. For other information, call (804) 786-0294.

Virginia Committee for the Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve

The thirty volunteer lawyers and nonlawyers who make up this group serve as neutral ombudsmen in employment disputes governed by the Uniform Service Employment and Reemployment Rights Act, which George R. Aldhizer Jr., a twenty-five-year committee volunteer, says might be "the toughest labor statute in the country." Ombudsmen intervene in disputes in response to reservists who return from duty to find that their employer won't take them back or restore them to an equivalent job. And they intervene at the request of an employer who feels the reservist did not meet his or her responsibilities to qualify for reemployment under USERRA. Much of the work is by telephone. Ombudsmen also provide training to inform employers of their rights and responsibilities under USERRA. In 93 percent of cases referred to the committee, the dispute is resolved with the help of the ombudsman.

To Help: The committee accepts two or three new volunteers a year. Currently, they must attend a national training program, although plans are underway to provide self-teaching materials.

Contact: To be put in touch with an ombudsman, call (800) 336-4590. For questions about the program and volunteering, contact Thomas Stephen, executive director of the Virginia program, at (804) 236-6443 or **Thomas.Stephen.ctr@varich.ang.af.mil**.

Clinic for Legal Assistance to Service Members

CLASM is a George Mason University program through which attorney-supervised law students help active-duty service members with a range of civil issues—contracts, landlord-tenant, uncontested divorces, and administrative matters, for example. Clients are persons who would suffer undue financial hardship if they were to hire a lawyer. Cases are selected that are manageable by students.

To Help: The clinic needs lawyers to act as mentors to the students. It also welcomes lawyers who are willing to accept pro bono referrals of cases the clinic can't accept.

Contact: To refer a client, contact (703) 993-8214. To volunteer or ask questions, contact Joseph C. Zengerle, executive director of CLASM, at **jzengerl@gmu.edu**.

Joint Leadership Council of Veterans Service Organiations (JLC)

This group offers lawyers an opportunity to provide pro bono legislative advocacy on issues that affect veterans. The council includes representatives of twenty-five veterans organizations.

To Help: The council has adopted seven

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top legislative objectives for the current General Assembly session. Projects encompass, among other things, tax relief, mental health care, custodial rights of mobilized reservists, and a grant to deploy TurboVet System Web tool for filing veterans disability claims. The objectives and position papers on each are posted at **www.dvs.virginia.gov/jlc.htm**.

Contact: Sam Wilder, chair of the Joint Leadership Council, can be reached at (804) 530-1682 or **sdwilder1@comcast.net**.

Community Mediation Center

This Norfolk-based center offers mediation programs for military members and their families in the Hampton Roads area. The mediators work with issues that affect military families, including child custody and visitation, landlord-tenant matters, and contractual disputes. The mediators are knowledgeable about the stresses that affect service families—long and sporadic work hours for the service member, dangerous and intense assignments, deployment and redeployment, moving around, and child discipline and spousal relationship difficulties that develop under these circumstances. Clients are charged on a sliding scale. Mediators include attorneys and nonattorneys. They must be certified by the Supreme Court of Virginia. For more information, see **www.conflictcrushers.org**.

To Help: The program welcomes attorneys who are certified mediators. It also offers mediation training—up to six courses per year—that applies toward Supreme Court certification. The program charges for mediation training, but offers recertification training free to volunteers.

Contact: Amanda Burbage, community relations director, at (757) 480-2777 or **amandab@conflictcrushers.org**.

Virginia Lawyer Referrral Service

The Virginia State Bar operates this service to match people with lawyers in their communities. Some lawyers have indicated an interest in assisting with issues that affect military members or veterans. For a $35 fee, the lawyer will provide a half-hour consultation; any fee for additional legal service is negotiated between the client and lawyer. For more details, see **www.vsb.org/site/public/lawyer-referral-service**.

To Help: A downloadable application form is available at the Web site.

Contact: Persons seeking a lawyer may call (800) 552-7977.

This sampling captures only a few Virginia programs that help meet legal needs of service members and veterans. If you know of others, please contact Dawn Chase at (804) 775-0586 or **chase@vsb.org**.

—Dawn Chase