



USING OUR LEGAL SKILLS TO HELP THOSE WHO SERVED

BY RENE L. VALLADARES, ESQ.

According to the Nevada Office of Veterans Services, Nevada is home to more than 339,000 veterans. Many of these veterans are among the most vulnerable members of our society, battling problems such as homelessness, difficulties with mental health and substance abuse. Additionally, many veterans lack the money and experience necessary to navigate Nevada's court system and resolve outstanding legal issues. For these individuals, one way we as lawyers can give back to the people who served our country is by providing pro bono legal services.

For the past five years, the Federal Public Defender of Nevada has been doing just that. Since August 2006, the Federal Public Defender has partnered with the United States Veterans Initiative (U.S. VETS) to create the Legal Advocacy Project, an advocacy clinic where veterans obtain assistance in the resolution of legal matters.

U.S. VETS, a nonprofit organization with locations across the country, assists veterans in achieving self-sufficiency by providing affordable housing, vocational training, job preparation, education and employment assistance. U.S. VETS also assists veterans and their families who are facing difficult circumstances due to addictive behaviors, mental health problems and abuse, and connects them to recovery and counseling services.

Led by Assistant Federal Public Defender Heather Fraley and research and writing attorney, Jennifer Yim, the Legal Advocacy Project sends lawyer volunteers to the U.S. VETS's Las Vegas facility twice a month, on average servicing between five and 10 veterans each visit. During these visits, volunteer attorneys from the Federal Public Defender talk to veterans about their legal issues and assist them in connecting with pro bono attorneys or appropriate organizations that can represent them.

Additionally, the project assists needy veterans by providing self-help packets, legal aid pamphlets, follow-up services and contact information for pro bono legal organizations outside Nevada to assist with out of state legal issues. For example, the Legal Advocacy Project was able to locate a pro bono attorney in Indiana who assisted a veteran in modifying a child support order. Thanks to the pro bono attorney's assistance, the veteran was able to afford the treatment he needed for a rare blood disorder. Here at home, pro bono attorneys procured by the Legal Advocacy Project have assisted veterans in resolving dozens of tickets and quashing dozens of warrants. The veterans at U.S.

VETS value the project's services so much that they nominated the Federal Public Defender's Office as their favorite volunteer organization this past July.

Thanks to the Legal Aid Center of Southern Nevada and its Pro Bono Project, the Legal Advocacy Project is also expanding the services it provides veterans. Starting this fall, the Pro Bono Project will conduct self-help classes at the U.S. VETS facility on a quarterly basis. The self-help classes will cover issues such as bankruptcy, divorce and child custody.

Additionally, our office has expanded the Legal Advocacy Project to provide volunteer opportunities on our support staff. Volunteers provide job mentoring assistance such as updating resumes, online job searches and assistance with job applications at the U.S. VETS facility twice a month.

For those of us who never had the honor of serving in the military, providing pro bono legal services is one way of giving back to the people who fought to defend our country. Programs like the Legal Advocacy Project are critical to helping veterans reintegrate into society, as legal problems can often become a huge hurdle to successful reintegration into society. The Federal Public Defender is proud to give back to our veterans by providing them with this critical service; we challenge our fellow attorneys to do the same.

Of course, several members of our bar have honorably served our country in the armed forces at home and abroad. Here are just a few of the former service members in our ranks.... ■



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