



SERVING OUR VETERANS THROUGH LEGAL JUSTICE

BY: LANA C. BLUEGE

Most of us need the help of a lawyer at some point in our lives. Whether one is purchasing a home, getting married or dealing with the hassle of a motor vehicle accident, lawyers and paralegals are necessary. However, to millions of Americans, legal help is an unattainable luxury.

What if you served your country, came home with a traumatic brain injury, and found yourself and your family facing eviction? What if you were in treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder, but couldn't escape the stressful calls of debt collectors? Neither the Department of Defense nor the Department of Veterans Affairs provides legal services for veterans. So where can veterans turn for help with overcoming legal barriers to their recovery?

HELPING VETERANS FIND HELP

This is the question Margaret Middleton and Howard Udell asked in 2009. These two passionate lawyers, believing that no veteran should be prevented from rebuilding a meaningful civilian life because of a legal issue, established Connecticut Veterans Legal Center (CVLC), a nonprofit legal center that is dedicated to helping veterans recovering from homelessness and mental illness overcome legal barriers to housing, healthcare and income. To date, CVLC has assisted on over 1,000 unique legal issues in a variety of areas, including housing, family, access to VA health care and benefits, pardons, employment, and discharge upgrades.

Every member's service is characterized upon discharge from the military. Most service members receive honorable discharges, but sometimes veterans receive other than honorable or even dishonorable discharges, which can be a bar to health care and compensation from the VA. In some instances, veterans receive these undesirable discharges because of oppositional or self-medicating behaviors that are symptomatic of untreated mental health issues. Discharge upgrades are a particularly important part of the services CVLC offers because, while the need is overwhelming, there are few organizations and firms that provide assistance in this area. CVLC helps these veterans get the care they need by training volunteer attorneys and organizations around the nation to help veterans seeking to upgrade their discharge characterizations.

CVLC could not help over 300 veterans every year with its small staff of five without our partnerships which are essential to our ability to serve veterans. CVLC is located at the VA's Errera Community Care Center in West Haven, Connecticut. Here, lawyers are able to work directly with veterans and their clinicians. CVLC was the first legal services organization in the country to be co-located, and staffed on a daily

basis, within a VA community mental health facility. This allows veterans to have their appointments with VA primary care providers and to easily access free legal assistance. Although CVLC is not funded by — or a part of — the VA, this relationship allows the veterans to have all of their needs met at one convenient location. Many veterans do not have access to transportation or law offices; CVLC solves this problem by offering access to legal services at a VA site.

PARTNERSHIPS WITH VOLUNTEERS

With easy access to legal services, veterans confront the legal questions that have been ignored for years. These issues can quickly accumulate! CVLC is incredibly lucky to partner with so many volunteer attorneys and paralegals in private and public organizations. CVLC has 500 attorneys and paralegals signed on to

provide free legal assistance to veterans throughout the state of Connecticut. Our organization has long standing relationships with several firms, companies and

universities that volunteer their time and financial resources in support of CVLC's mission.

In the upcoming months, CVLC will be hosting its 4th Annual Wine Tasting. The event is a special night on which volunteers and organizations are recognized and awarded for their hard work. This year, Sikorsky Aircraft Corp. will receive the Justice Award for its effort and continued support. Additionally, a veteran will tell his or her story of how CVLC's legal assistance helped to overcome legal barriers to recovery. Numbers and statistics are often used to evidence success, but the most powerful demonstration of success is conveyed through a personal testament by someone whose life has been transformed with the assistance of free legal services.

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At last year's event, a veteran I'll call Mr. D., shared his story. The story about how legal help contributed to his recovery and many others can be found at www.CTveteranslegal.org.

MR. D'S STORY

Mr. D. became a client of CVLC after attending a workshop CVLC coordinated to help veterans expunge their criminal records. Mr. D had multiple legal problems dating back over 30 years ago, stemming from arrests due to drug possession, weapons possession, and "doctor shopping." In the months following the workshop, both CVLC and staff from Statewide Legal Services (SLS), an organization that provides free legal services for non-criminal legal problems to low-income state residents, worked with him on gathering documentation about his criminal offenses, organizing them, and writing a narrative for the circumstances of each incident. CVLC attorneys helped the veteran's references write appropriate letters in support, and reviewed the full application before Mr. D. sent it to SLS, who submitted it to the state Board of Pardons and Paroles on Mr. D.'s behalf. It took a year for the state to set a hearing with the Board of Pardons and Paroles. Attorneys from CVLC and SLS attended the hearing with Mr. D., and the board granted Mr. D. a pardon without further questioning. In Mr. D.'s own words, "Their support, encouragement and technical



assistance made the difference. I now have peace of mind. Within a year all my criminal offenses will be banished from my record. It's incredible. I never thought it would happen and didn't think it was even possible. All it took was knowledge, persistence, determination, and support. All veterans need these legal services."

"THEIR SUPPORT, ENCOURAGEMENT AND TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE MADE THE DIFFERENCE...."

Mr. D. is just one of hundreds of veterans in need of legal support. A legal issue may seem small, but could mean the difference between thriving and struggling.

Every day that I come into work is a day that I get to transform lives and see the change one person, one organization, or one more chance can make.

VOLUNTEERING IS REWARDING

I remember the first time I walked into the doors of the Errera Community Care Center and Connecticut Veterans Legal Center; the energy and the hope were contagious. It makes you smile and inspires you to help these individuals who have given so much of themselves.



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Working for a non-profit organization is rewarding, but there are always new obstacles to tackle. As an employee with two job titles (paralegal and development director), I have a full load with deadlines and a never ending to-do list. One of my favorite responsibilities though, is being the point of first contact for veterans because I get to hear their stories. I have cried, laughed and been utterly frustrated by the situations that they are in. The job is hard, but in time I came to see myself as a soldier of justice who is fighting for these veterans. It is now my job to help serve them, and as a team of five, we fight for veterans' rights every day.

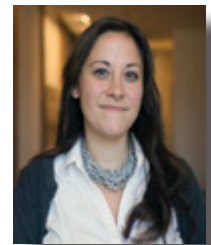
This year CVLC provided free legal assistance to over 300 veterans in need. In the past year we have had representatives travel all over the nation to develop our vision, from the Philanthropy Round Table in Washington, D.C. to the New Mexico Bar Association. Our executive director, Margaret Middleton, has spoken to local media sources like NPR and Connecticut Law Tribune. Last year, CVLC helped the Connecticut legislature pass a bill that expands veteran access to Connecticut's jail diversion programs.

As a paralegal I never thought I could have as much passion for the law as I do now, working with Connecticut Veterans Legal Center. Every day I make a difference in the lives of veterans in need – and so can you.

To learn more about our services and the ways in which you can help a veteran, please visit our website

(<http://ctveteranslegal.org/>) and other social media platforms.

Lana C. Bluege is currently the paralegal and Development Director of Connecticut Veterans Legal Center (CVLC), a nonprofit organization that assists veterans recovering from mental illness and homelessness. To learn more about Lana C. Bluege connect with her at: www.linkedin.com/pub/lana-bluege/65/399/1b6 or Blog at: <http://insidelc.wordpress.com>.



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