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**Connecticut Veterans Legal Center Advances Veteran Law
with Discharge Upgrade Practice Manual**

Hartford (January 30, 2019) – Connecticut Veterans Legal Center (CVLC) announces a new partnership with the Veterans Legal Clinic of the Legal Services Center of Harvard Law School (LSC) to significantly expand the field of veteran law by creating a comprehensive Discharge Upgrade Practice Manual for veteran advocates and an online, searchable Department of Defense decision interface. This national initiative is funded by the Bob Woodruff Foundation.

This project will impact hundreds of veterans each year. Veterans like “Tony,” a decorated veteran who served nearly ten years of exemplary service, then began to suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Tony was discharged due to two instances of misconduct related to his PTSD symptoms. After discharge, Tony received treatment for his PTSD at the VA until he was told that his discharge status prevented him from access to benefits, causing him to seek help from non-VA sources, putting him in debt. “Since my PTSD diagnosis, I have worked hard to get my life back on track but still experience symptoms that will probably be with me forever,” says Tony. “My only regret in life is my discharge from the Army. I would like my discharge status to reflect the fact that I faithfully and honorably served my Country. The requested upgrade will make me eligible for the same benefits that other military veterans who honorably served our Country are eligible for.”

“Being in the midst of the longest period of war in our nation’s history, addressing the wide-spread effects of unjust discharges has become even more crucial,” says CVLC Discharge Upgrade Director, Margaret Kuzma. More than 270,000 post-9/11 veterans, many of whom served in combat, have received less than honorable discharges. Nearly half of these former service members are not considered “veterans” by the VA and are often barred from access to VA benefits. Many of these veterans suffer from PTSD or other service-related trauma that impacts their ability to heal, maintain employment, and re-integrate into civilian life. They are 1.5 times as likely to commit suicide as non-veterans.

Over the last ten years, CVLC has served more than 250 veterans seeking to change their status with the VA and the Department of Defense. To remedy unjust discharge status, veterans must appeal to the Department of Defense for a Discharge Upgrade (DU) and navigate the complex process, or go through the equally complicated Veterans Affairs Characterization of Discharge (COD) process. Few veterans are represented in either process, and the vast majority of applications are unsuccessful. There is a growing interest among law firms to provide pro bono representation for veterans; however, the lack of up to date guidance and access to case law precludes many willing pro bono attorneys from taking DU and COD cases. “CVLC is honored to be chosen, along with our partners at Harvard’s Legal Services Center, to lead this important effort. This project will provide the tools and training needed to create a national network of pro bono lawyers who can help address injustices that have life-long impacts,” says Cynthia Johnson, CVLC Interim Director.

The discharge upgrade manual project is made possible with significant investments from the Bob Woodruff Foundation (BWF). “We’ve focused our investments on programs that meet the urgent and emerging needs of our post 9/11 veterans,” says Anne Marie Dougherty, CEO of the Bob Woodruff Foundation. “We are proud to support CVLC and their partners as they address this important issue impacting the military-veteran community.” BWF leverages its expertise and collaborative network to find, fund, and shape innovative programs that help our impacted veterans, service members, and their families to thrive. “Receiving a grant from the Bob Woodruff Foundation is an honor that recognizes the dedication, focus, and effectiveness of our staff, volunteers, and supporters”, says Kevin Lenehan, CVLC Board Chair.

This project is timely. There is a growing understanding among organizations that the definition of veteran and access to supportive services needs to expand. The federal government recently extended mental health care to veterans with Other Than Honorable (OTH) discharges to address the troubling suicide rate. Connecticut has recently extended state and municipal benefits to veterans with OTH discharges as a result of PTSD, traumatic brain injury or military sexual trauma. Although these are steps forward, many less than honorable veterans are still not eligible for all benefits and have to live with the stigma of “bad paper” discharges. CT Department of Veterans Affairs Commissioner Thomas J. Saadi agrees, “It is my hope that those men and women who otherwise served our Nation honorably but who received an Other Than Honorable discharge due to mental health injuries related to their service will have their needs addressed.”

About Connecticut Veterans Legal Center: Formed in 2009, CVLC was the first medical-legal partnership in the United States to integrate legal services on-site at VA mental health facilities. CVLC helps veterans recovering from homelessness, addiction, and mental illness overcome legal barriers to stable housing, healthcare, and income. Through CVLC, hundreds of volunteer attorneys across Connecticut have donated millions of dollars’ worth of pro bono assistance, and helped their veteran clients achieve stability and rebuild their lives. For more information, please visit cvtveteranslegal.org.

About the Legal Services Center of Harvard Law School: Founded in 1979, LSC is a public interest law firm and Harvard Law School clinical teaching site located in Boston’s Jamaica Plain area. Its mission is to respond to the community’s unmet legal needs, train new generations of lawyers, and create positive change. LSC is composed of five legal clinics: the Family Law/Domestic Violence Clinic, the Housing Law Clinic, the Predatory Lending/Consumer Protection Clinic, the Federal Tax Clinic, and the Veterans Legal Clinic. The Veterans Legal Clinic was launched in 2012 to address the unique legal problems of the veteran community. In addition to representing individual clients, the Center also pursues broad efforts to improve systems that serve the veterans community. For more information, please visit legalservicescenter.org.

About the Bob Woodruff Foundation: The Bob Woodruff Foundation was founded in 2006 after reporter Bob Woodruff was hit by a roadside bomb while covering the war in Iraq. Since then, the Bob Woodruff Foundation has led an enduring call to action for people to stand up for heroes and meet the emerging and long-term needs of today’s veterans. As a nonpartisan leader in the military-veteran community, the BWF brings transparency and credibility to its partners and complements their efforts. For more information, please visit bobwoodrufffoundation.org or follow us on Twitter at [@Stand4Heroes](https://twitter.com/Stand4Heroes).