

“ Having someone push on my behalf, someone to explain, who actually listened, was a life-changer. Help is an understatement when it comes to what CVLC did for me.

JOHN RIOS

CONNECTICUT
VETERANS
LEGAL
CENTER



10 YEAR
REPORT

2009-2019



LIAM'S LETTER

We invite you to join CVLC as we scale our impact in the decade to come.

The seeds of the Connecticut Veterans Legal Center (CVLC) were planted in 2007, at the Department of Veteran Affairs (VA)'s Errera Center when veterans learned that volunteer Howard Udell was an attorney. They started asking him for advice about their legal troubles. Soon, a line would form by the elevator on days that Howard volunteered.

When attorney Margaret Middleton met Howard and learned about his work, she saw the life-changing possibilities for legal services integrated with VA care. In 2009, they incorporated CVLC, creating the first medical-legal partnership (MLP)

at a VA facility. Margaret shared her infectious passion for bringing access to justice to low-income veterans with partners throughout the state and set the stage for a decade of growth.

Over the past ten years CVLC has expanded from a one-person operation to a team of thirteen employees and a network of more than 200 pro bono attorneys. Today, CVLC is a national leader in veteran legal services and veteran law. This rapid growth is a direct response to the needs of low-income veterans recovering from homelessness and mental illness.

As we look to the future, CVLC will continue to tackle the

barriers to housing, healthcare, and income for low-income veterans. We will increase the reach of legal services and fight the policy structures that result in unjust denials of VA benefits.

We invite you to join us as a volunteer, donor, or partner as we scale our trailblazing MLP model and expand access to justice.

Liam Brennan
Executive Director

CVLC THROUGH THE YEARS

2009

INCORPORATION



Howard Udell joins with attorney Margaret Middleton to incorporate CVLC with seed funding from the Yale Initiative for Public Interest Law.

2012

LEGISLATIVE SUCCESS



Drafted and successfully lobbied for state bill SB114 that gives veterans second chances to avoid jail and overcome mental health and substance abuse issues.

2014

EXPANSION



CVLC adds second site at VA's Newington Facility with the addition of the Howard Udell Fellowship in Veteran Justice.

2016

IMPACT RESEARCH



Research team led by Jack Tsai, Assoc. Professor of Psychiatry, Yale University School of Medicine, finds measurable health improvements for CVLC clients.

WHY VETERAN LEGAL SERVICES?

7

Seven of the top ten unmet needs for homeless veterans are legal in nature.

12%

Veterans make up 7% of the general population, but 12% of homeless. Black and Hispanic veterans are 3 times as likely to be homeless as veterans in general.

30%

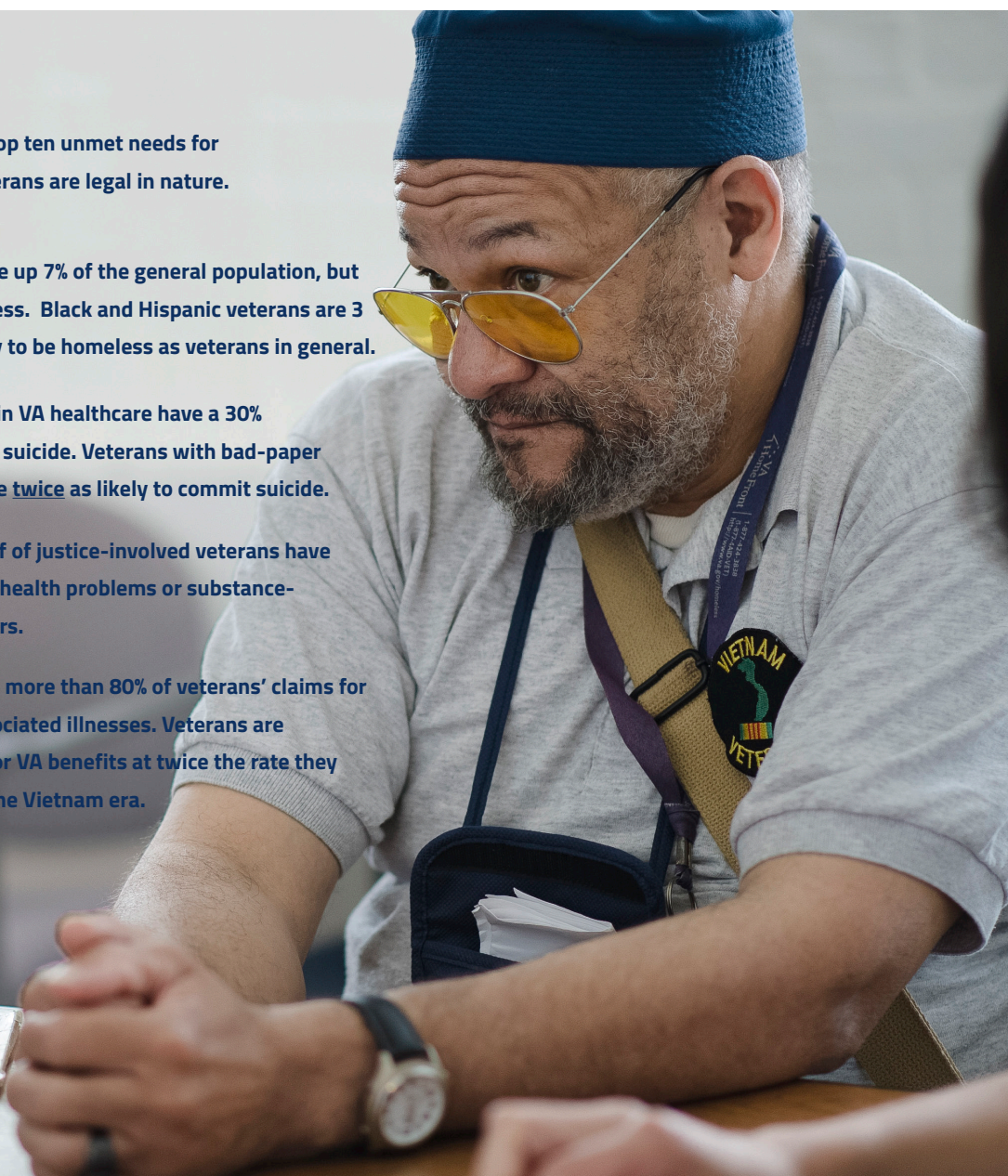
Veterans not in VA healthcare have a 30% higher rate of suicide. Veterans with bad-paper discharges are twice as likely to commit suicide.

50%

More than half of justice-involved veterans have either mental health problems or substance-abuse disorders.

80%

The VA denies more than 80% of veterans' claims for Gulf War-associated illnesses. Veterans are disqualified for VA benefits at twice the rate they were during the Vietnam era.



2017

EXPANSION



CVLC adds third site at CT Department of Veterans Affairs Rocky Hill location.

2019

NATIONAL PUBLICATION



National Discharge Upgrade Manual written with support from Bob Woodruff Foundation.

2020 - 2023

SCALING IMPACT

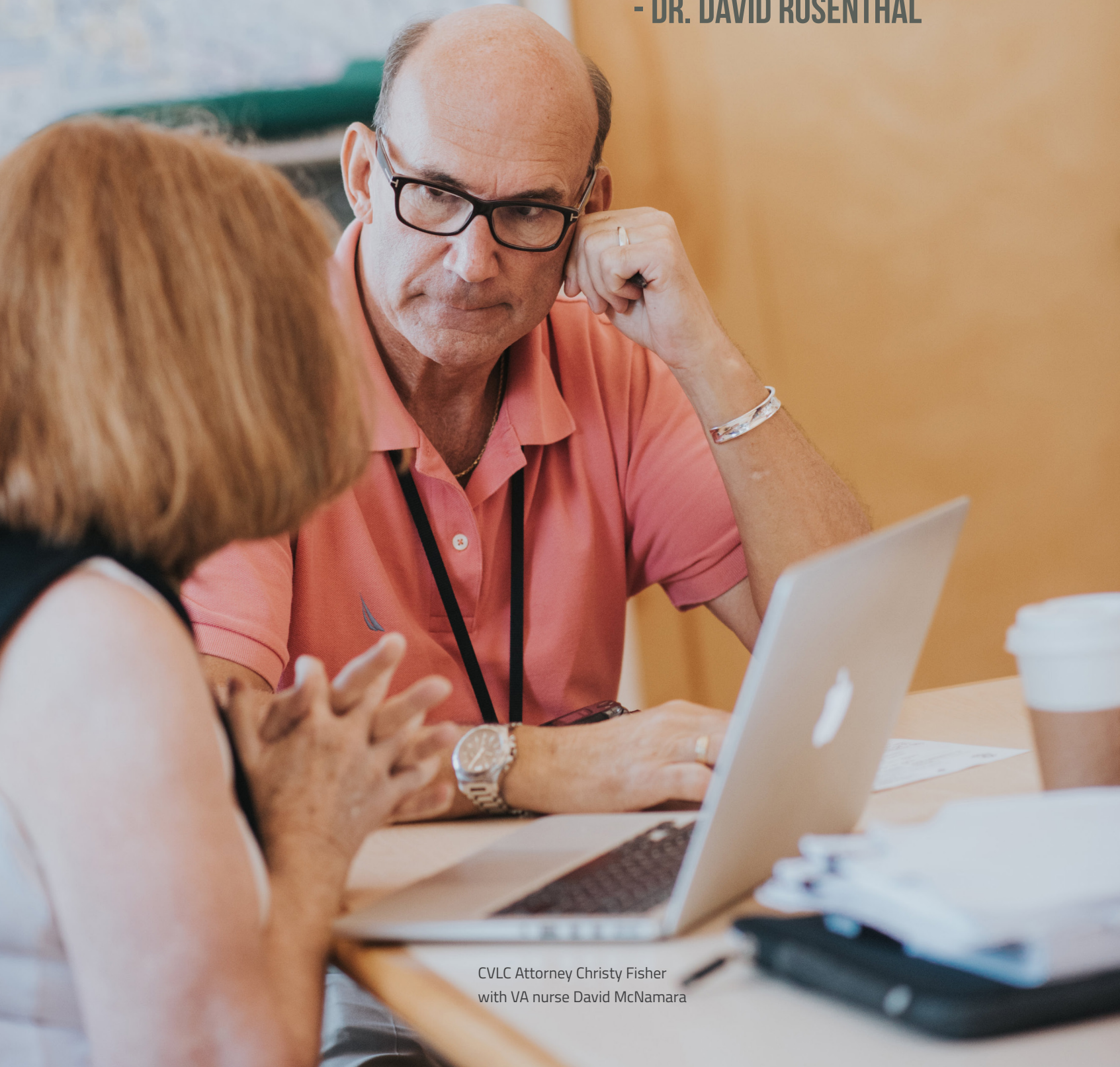


CVLC to launch Veterans Inclusion Project, Veteran Legal Centers Initiative, and #Already Honorable Campaign.

“

AS A PRIMARY CARE PHYSICIAN FOR PATIENTS EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS, I HAVE WITNESSED FIRSTHAND THE POWER OF LEGAL ASSISTANCE IN IMPROVING THE LIVES OF MY PATIENTS.

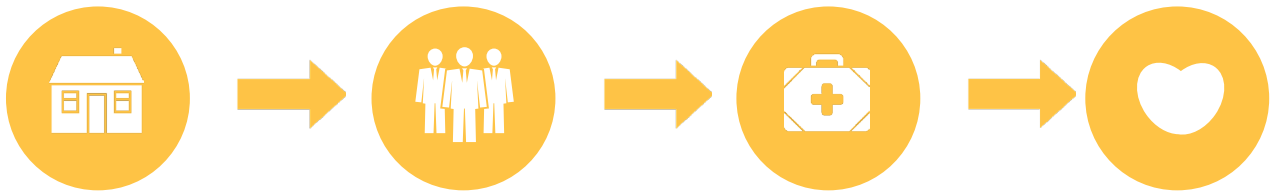
- DR. DAVID ROSENTHAL



CVLC Attorney Christy Fisher
with VA nurse David McNamara

WHY MEDICAL-LEGAL PARTNERSHIP?

Through its medical-legal partnership, CVLC provides civil legal aid to low-income veterans within the context of each veteran's treatment plan. CVLC's goal is to provide access to stable housing, healthcare, and income. We do this by assisting veterans with a variety of traditional legal issues, including family law, housing, pardons, criminal record expungement, bankruptcy, consumer law, Social Security, employment, and estate planning. Additionally, CVLC is the only legal aid organization in CT to address VA benefits and military record correction.



Veteran faces legal issues that threatens to destabilize their housing, income, or access to healthcare.

VA clinicians connect the veterans to CVLC – just down the hall. Other community partners send CVLC a referral and we connect to the veteran where they receive services.

Lawyers work with veterans and their health team to solve immediate problems such as pending eviction as well as root causes such as a need to apply for or adjust disability benefits.

Without legal barriers, veterans can focus on taking care of health, family, and career.



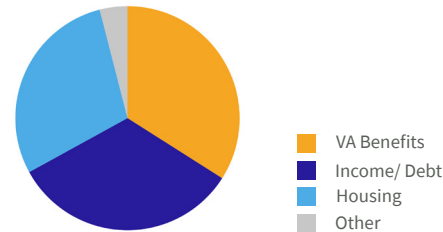
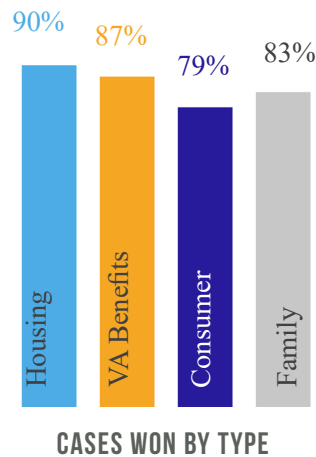
Legal Help is Good Medicine

When Mr. L reached out to CVLC, he was more than \$90,000 in debt and facing foreclosure. He suffers from schizophrenia that is connected to his time in service, but he was denied disability benefits from the VA.

Mr. L's team discovered that his financial problems stemmed from his inability to comprehend complex reporting instructions, resulting in payments from Social Security that made him ineligible for his VA pension. After more than a year of work, CVLC managed to get his debt waived and also appealed the VA denial of benefits for his illness. Eventually, the VA awarded him 100% service connection for his disability. During this time, Mr. L's VA clinicians were critical in keeping Mr. L connected with his legal team and helping Mr. L understand and engage in the process. His psychiatrist tirelessly advocated on his behalf in three separate debt collection actions.

Mr. L is now stable emotionally and financially. He is able to live independently on his increased disability pension and is able to keep his childhood home that means so much to him.

REMOVING LEGAL BARRIERS TO



3,753 VETERANS SERVED
3,858 LEGAL ISSUES ADDRESSED

Awards:

2015 U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs National Community Partnership Award
2017 CT Psychological Association's Community Partnership Award
2019 CT Hispanic Bar Association Community Services Award

LIFE-CHANGING IMPACTS



VA Benefits appeal moved a disabled veteran from poverty to sustainable income.



Negotiating debt repayment and accessing VA healthcare enabled a move to independent living.



Legal representation in housing court ensured that an unexpected car bill did not lead to eviction.



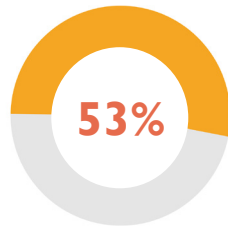
Return of security deposit plus housing support from the VA ensured housing continuity for a veteran and his children.



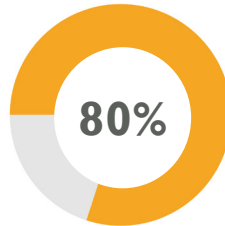
Overturning a bad paper discharge gave access to life-saving medical care for service-related illnesses.

HOUSING, HEALTHCARE, & INCOME

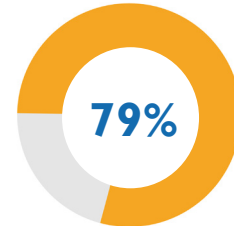
CVLC CLIENTS:



HAVE BEEN
HOMELESS



HAVE ONE OR
MORE DISABILITY



ARE LOW INCOME

1:15 RETURN ON INVESTMENT

For every \$1 invested in CVLC, approximately \$15 of tangible benefits are created for veterans.

\$7.5 Million Lump Sum Awards

Disabled veterans are more likely to live in poverty. Renegotiating debt, filing for retroactive payment of benefits, and ensuring return of security deposits are a few ways CVLC helps veterans secure a brighter future.

\$71 Million Lifetime Income

CVLC is the only legal aid organization in CT to help veterans assert their rights to the VA. An average annual income award of \$11,000 helped move more than 250 veterans from poverty to sustainability.

\$47 Million Healthcare Benefits

VA eligibility is a complex process with a growing number of veterans turned away unnecessarily. CVLC has an 87% success rate representing veterans in VA appeals.

INSPIRING CLIENTS



Two Term Veteran, Navy



Wartime Veteran, Army



OEF Veteran, Air Force



Vietnam Veteran, Marines

THE POWER OF PRO BONO PARTNERSHIPS



CVLC's Sharon Fialkovich with Attorney Robert C. Hinton, Pullman & Comley LLC

Ten years ago when CVLC was nothing more than two attorneys and a dedication to helping low-income veterans, our founders recognized that in order to deliver the best services possible, they needed to leverage their relationships with the private bar.



**600 Volunteer
Attorneys**



1,045 Cases



**\$3.9 Million in
Pro Bono Services**

PRO BONO AWARDS

**CORPORATE PRO BONO
LARGE LAW AWARD**

**CORPORATE PRO BONO
SMALL LAW AWARD**

**HARTFORD COUNTY BAR
ASSOCIATION PRO BONO AWARD**

**CT BAR ASSOCIATION HONORABLE
ANTHONY DEMAYO PRO BONO AWARD**

United Health Group and CVLC received CPBO's 2017 Partner Award for Review-A-Rama that engaged 100 legal staff across 26 states to review 50,000 pages of veteran files to help CVLC submit VA claims.

Sikorsky Aircraft Corporation, a Lockheed Martin Company and the Teamsters Local 1150 received the 2019 Pro Bono Award for providing legal assistance to CT veterans, and raising funds for CT veteran organizations.

In 2019, **Halloran and Sage LLP** was recognized for eight years of providing pro bono direct representation to CVLC's low-income veterans facing homelessness. They have never rejected a pro bono referral for anything other than a conflict.

Attorney Jane Milas was recognized in 2019 by the CT Bar Association for her tireless pro bono advocacy for veterans. Each case involved extensive review of medical and military records, military law, and writing briefs more than a hundred pages long.



“ VETERANS ARE VERY DESERVING PEOPLE OFTEN IN TRAGIC SITUATIONS. JUST HAVING A LAWYER CAN HELP THEM, EVEN IF YOU'RE NOT A MIRACLE WORKER, JUST HAVING SOMEONE TO ADVOCATE MAKES A BIG DIFFERENCE IN THE OUTCOMES.

VAUGHN FINN, PRO BONO COORDINATOR, SHIPMAN & GOODWIN, LLP

Veteran Marine Mr. R came to CVLC after receiving an eviction notice due to being behind on his rent. Mr. R is a disabled veteran with three children, who was living on \$14,000 annual disability income. His rent was 25% of his income, making it nearly impossible for him to pay unexpected bills. He fell behind during the holidays, hoping to make it up in January but was served with an eviction notice on January 3rd.

CVLC paired Mr. R with Attorney William Bohannon, a volunteer from the firm of Halloran and Sage, LLP. Attorney Bohannon negotiated with the veteran's landlord, resulting in an agreement that allowed Mr. R to stay in his apartment with a four-month payment plan for the back rent. Understanding that this additional bill will put Mr. R at risk of falling even further behind, Attorney Bohannon worked with CVLC to obtain financial support from Columbus House to pay off the arrears. Then, Attorney Bohannon went the extra mile—above and beyond what was asked or required of him—and had the case formally withdrawn, to ensure this situation did not make it difficult for Mr. R to secure housing in the future.

HOLDING GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABLE



Mr. F, a combat veteran from the Vietnam War, had been shut out of VA care for decades. CVLC represented Mr. F in achieving recognition of his honorable service and service-connected disabilities. He now has full access to comprehensive VA healthcare and life-changing monthly benefit payments.

CVLC's Unique Practice Areas: Discharge Upgrades and VA Benefits

Too many service women and men who volunteer to protect our country return to civilian life only to find they are denied veteran status and access to benefits. The VA often fails to recognize their injuries as an outcome of their service. Worse, a number of veterans suffering from PTSD and other mental health illnesses were given "bad paper" discharges, which bars them from medical care, disability benefits, and educational benefits because their mental illness resulted in other than honorable (OTH) discharges from the military.

CVLC is proud to be a national leader in fighting for re-characterization of discharges, discharge upgrades, and appealing denials of VA benefits. These cases achieve transformative outcomes for low-income veterans, including lifetime access to healthcare, disability income, and housing. These results carry a profound impact on veterans' lives, significantly improving their long-term physical health, mental health, financial stability, and self-esteem.

CVLC OUTCOMES

680 VA benefits and DU cases reviewed.

83% success rate, 179 cases closed since 2015.

77% resulted in improved income or employability.

153 veterans received lifetime healthcare benefits.

EMERGING CRISIS

12,000 veterans
file for sexual trauma-related PTSD benefits each year.

300,000 post-9/11 veterans
suffer from PTSD or major depression.

2x's as many post 9/11 veterans
were given an OTH than those serving in the Vietnam era.

30% of veteran suicides
are by veterans with an OTH.

“ WE WILL INCREASE THE REACH OF LEGAL SERVICES AND FIGHT THE POLICY STRUCTURES THAT RESULT IN UNJUST DENIALS OF VETERAN BENEFITS.

LIAM BRENNAN, CVLC EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

STRATEGIC DIRECTION 2020-2023

Over the next three years, CVLC intends to engage in a focused expansion of its work to address the recurring legal needs facing low-income veterans as well as to address systemic issues that create barriers to accessing the benefits veterans earned by serving our country.

Meet Growing Needs in CT

We will maintain CVLC's high standards of legal care while increasing our capacity to meet a growing need for legal representation. We will do this by making key infrastructure investments to improve efficiency, thus enabling CVLC to expand legal representation.

Veteran Legal Centers Initiative

CVLC's successful model has greatly influenced legal services for veterans nationwide and we are often called on to assist and train other veteran legal services, particularly in VA benefits and discharge upgrades. With CVLC's DU manual and training as a core resource, we will answer the call to strengthen the institutional capacity of veteran legal centers nationwide.

Veteran Inclusion Project

CVLC's expertise in veteran's law provides us with a unique and robust



NATIONAL LEADER IN DISCHARGE UPGRADES CVLC is proud to be a leader in representing veterans in discharge upgrades and recharacterization of discharge cases. With the help of the Legal Services Center at Harvard Law School and the support of the Bob Woodruff Foundation, CVLC's Director of Discharge Upgrades, Margaret Kuzma, authored a manual on discharge upgrade practices. This groundbreaking work sets the stage for expanding CVLC's impact on veterans, bringing the legal tools that can change a veteran's life to practitioners throughout the country.

insight into the public policy issues that affect veterans' access to VA benefits. CVLC will leverage this insight to lead a national effort to change the policies and practices that are causing an unprecedented increase in VA benefit denials since 9/11. CVLC will collaborate with veteran justice organizations nationally to create and disseminate policy reports and conduct impact litigation.

#AlreadyHonorable Campaign

An OTH discharge can change the trajectory of a young service member's life. Working with our clients to share their stories, CVLC will shed light on the OTH problem, reduce the stigma and shame of our nation's exclusionary practices, and build a national consensus on correcting veteran injustices.



CVLC CORRECTS A 20 YEAR INJUSTICE FOR LOCAL VETERAN

John Rios was 18 when he joined the Navy and was dispatched to the Bosnian conflict. Initially, his dependability and hard work earned him commendations from his superiors. But 2 years of grueling shifts supporting bombing missions began to take a toll. After witnessing horrific injuries and a death at sea, John developed symptoms of PTSD, which eventually manifested in misconduct. Six months shy of his active service end-date, John was given an Other Than Honorable discharge (OTH).

For 12 years, John struggled with his invisible wounds of war. Intrusive thoughts, nightmares, hypervigilance, and feelings of despair caused him to grow apart from his family. He survived on sporadic and meager employment and experienced bouts of homelessness.

In 2010, John committed himself to mental health treatment. Barred from the VA by his OTH discharge, gaining access to long-term VA mental health care through a discharge upgrade became an important part of his recovery plan. Over the next decade, John repeatedly sought to correct his records. “Nothing was moving or happening when I was doing the paperwork on my own,” explained John.

“NOTHING WAS MOVING OR HAPPENING WHEN I WAS DOING THE PAPERWORK ON MY OWN.”

With CVLC in his corner, John finally saw his dream become a reality. On December 22, 2018, John was notified that the board granted CVLC’s petition and upgraded him to fully honorable. Freed from the burden and stigma of an OTH, he can now access VA healthcare and disability benefits.

John credits his attorney’s diligence and knowledge of the system. “Having someone push on my behalf was a life-changer. I’ve been working on this for 18 years, and it wouldn’t have been possible without the support of CVLC. If it weren’t for them, none of the paperwork would have been in and no one would have taken it seriously.”

Although the military better understands PTSD and officially recognizes that many discharges were unjust, the obstacles that had prevented John from accomplishing his goals are not unique. Very few veterans who independently petition for discharge upgrades are successful. “It’s unfortunate that not everyone has the help of CVLC,” said John. He wishes for other veterans to find hope—and help—through his success story. “Hope is necessary – we need to shed light and bring hope to the veteran community. I am very pleased with the results and the help I received—help is an understatement when it comes to what CVLC did for me.”



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