

Veterans outreach programs reach populations in need

Legal Aid provides holistic services to veterans

With Memorial Day right around the corner, any organization that works with veterans looks to commemorate the work and sacrifice of veterans and service members.

But many of those who served now face hardships. According to the most recent census data available, nearly [1.5 million veterans live in poverty](#). And the rate of veteran poverty continues to rise.

This population is the target of Community Legal Aid's Veterans team, a group of dedicated attorneys and advocates who assist veterans and active service members in need.

"When we first started, we weren't reaching vets like we should," shared Kimberly Adams, Legal Aid advocate and a veteran herself. "Our service area has a high concentration of veterans. We're just another wrap-around agency that can provide help."

In 2016 alone, Legal Aid closed 660 veterans cases, assisting low-income individuals and families with civil legal matters – from housing issues, to veterans benefits, to wills and estate planning, even to gaining access to service records and awards.

"The people we see often have multiple issues they're struggling with," explained Kenneth Mirkin, attorney for Legal Aid's Veterans team. "They may come to us because they receive an eviction notice, but when we dig into their case, we see that they can't pay their rent because they haven't been receiving the benefits they're entitled to. So we aren't only able to help them maintain their housing – we also can help stabilize their financial situation for the future."

Taking help to them

One of the biggest challenges Legal Aid faces in working with veterans populations, Adams explained, is pride.

"Veterans don't like to admit that they need help, especially if they're struggling with physical or mental health issues," she shared. "That's why we work so hard to reach out to them. We're a lot more successful if we go to them, than if we sit around and wait for them to come to us."

These outreach programs include monthly clinics, held in Akron, Canton, and Youngstown. These clinics, held at veterans outreach or medical centers, provide veterans access to legal services at a place that's convenient for them, that they're likely already familiar with.

"It's really one-stop shopping for vets," Adams said. "They can get their medications, go to doctor's appointments, and then stop by for some legal advice or help."

Another program new to Legal Aid this year is a partnership with Congressman Jim Renacci's office, which sponsored Mobile Outreach pop-up clinics in various counties throughout the state.

“The mobile outreach events allow my office to reach veterans we don’t normally reach, and to introduce veterans to VA and other services they may not have been aware of or need assistance from,” Renacci said. “These service people have jumped through enough hoops for our country – bringing our services closer to them is the least we can do.”

Collaborations with the courts, Bar and social service organizations

In three of the counties where Legal Aid works – Summit, Canton, and Youngstown – there are special dockets designed to help veterans who find themselves facing legal troubles.

In these cases, the courts can refer these veterans to Legal Aid, which provides help in resolving the issues.

“We serve as a wrap-around agency, or a representative that works on their civil legal needs,” Adams said.

Because Legal Aid serves low-income populations, clients must meet income eligibility requirements before being assigned a case. If someone doesn’t qualify, Legal Aid still tries to help by referring them to the local Bar Association or other social services programs.

“We try to give them an avenue outside of us that can help them,” Adams shared. “It’s a big network of folks, and we all rely on each other.”

Especially in the cases of low-income of homeless veterans, she went on to explain, there frequently are multiple issues at play.

“If I meet with someone for a legal issue and pick up that there’s a mental health problem, or that someone needs financial coaching, we have partners I can refer them to,” she said. “Everybody helps everybody to benefit the client as best as we can.”

Upcoming events

Legal Aid’s standing clinics are offered regularly, twice a month in Akron, Canton, and Youngstown.

Over the summer, the group will also be offering special tax clinics to veterans through a partnership with local taxpayer advocate, Susan Morgenstern.

“The idea behind these tax clinics is to offer free information and assistance with federal income tax issues,” Morgenstern shared. “My team and I will be available to discuss issues with levies, tax collections, filing requirements, refunds, and identify theft.”

These special tax clinics will take place from June through September, and are by appointment only.

Details for all upcoming events, including the special tax clinics, can be found online at www.communitylegalaid.org/events.

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