

PROVIDING SERVICES FOR THOSE WHO HAVE SERVED US

The Legal Aid of West Virginia Veterans Legal Support Project is West Virginia's first legal assistance initiative specifically designed to serve veterans and military families.



Thanks to Gov. Joe Manchin III, The West Virginia State Bar, area attorneys and other "Friends of Legal Aid," enough funds were raised to turn the Veterans Legal Support Project into a reality. From left: Gene Bailey, Andy Clark, Charles Baisden, Adrienne Worthy, Gov. Joe Manchin III, Anita Casey, Patrick Brooks, Keith Gwynn, John Lukens, Elizabeth Wehner.

According to the US Office of Veterans Affairs (VA), West Virginia has more than 200,000 veterans. This number is on the rise, as veterans returning from combat in Iraq and Afghanistan come home to a state that already has the distinction of having more citizens, per capita, who have served in the United States Armed Forces than any other state in the country. Many of these West Virginia veterans are disabled, and a sizable group of them lack financial resources. An unconscionable number of them are homeless or at risk of homelessness. Although the recognition of West Virginia's service tradition led Congress to locate five VA hospitals, seven VA clinics and a veterans' nursing home in our state, to date there have been no specialized legal projects available for low-income veterans in West Virginia.

By Jennifer Jordan • Photography by Jennifer Jordan

The staff at Legal Aid was certain of one thing: West Virginia supports its veterans, and the help would be forthcoming. And it was.

In June 2010, Legal Aid of West Virginia (LAWV) was awarded competitive, national funding from Equal Justice Works/AmeriCorps for two attorney fellowship positions for the "Veterans Legal Support Project." However, the award came with a challenge. In order to receive the grant funds, Legal Aid would need to raise about \$70,000 in "matching funds" to support the two attorney fellowships – in a very short time frame.

In taking on the challenge of raising the money, the staff at Legal Aid was certain of one thing: West Virginia appreciates and supports its veterans, and in this state, for this purpose, the help would be forthcoming. And it was.

With generous sustaining funds from the Governor's Contingency Fund, as well as assistance from The West Virginia State Bar, area attorneys and other "Friends of Legal Aid," the matching funds for the Veterans Legal Project were successfully raised. Gov. Joe Manchin provided \$35,000 – or full match money for one project attorney.

Other supporters of the Veterans Legal Support Project include LAWV Board President Andy Nason, the Law Firm of Jackson Kelly, the Law Firm of Pullin, Fowler, Flanagan, Brown & Poe PLLC, the Segal Law Firm, the Law Firm of Spilman, Thomas & Battle, the Law Firm of Steptoe & Johnson, Richard C. Sinclair and Steven Walker.

Two terrific young attorneys have now been selected to serve the project. The attorneys are housed in the LAWV Clarksburg and Martinsburg offices, near two of our state's Veterans Centers. The attorneys are expected to begin accepting clients by Veterans Day 2010. In the Clarksburg area is Patrick Brooks, a 2010 WVU College of Law graduate; in the Martinsburg area is Jordan Ballard, a 2009 Fordham Law graduate.

Projected Project Services in 2011:

- Provide direct representation to veterans who are homeless or who are at risk of becoming homeless as a result of a variety of legal problems that can impact housing stability, including but not limited to landlord-tenant matters, home foreclosures, problems with veterans' or disability benefits, child support, consumer and medical debt, driver's license reinstatement and expungement of criminal records.
 - Develop materials to publicize the project to community partner agencies and veterans, including "issue spotting" legal educational materials which will facilitate a wide range of referrals.
 - Participate in meetings with community partner agencies, including case management staff at the VA hospitals, VA clinics and VA centers in the northern and southern regions of the state.
 - Deliver "Ask-A-Lawyer" presentations onsite at VA centers on legal topics of broad appeal, and create community educational materials on legal topics of interest to veterans which can be shared with Legal Aid staff statewide.
 - Coordinate with Legal Aid's Pro Bono Referral Program and The West Virginia State Bar's Veterans and Military Affairs Committee to refer appropriate cases to private attorneys who have expressed an interest in providing *pro bono* assistance to veterans.
 - In cooperation with the West Virginia University College of Law's legal clinical staff, refer appropriate cases to the clinical faculty at the College of Law for clinic assignment.
 - Create a "West Virginia Veterans' Legal Resource Guide" which will be available to Legal Aid staff, *pro bono* attorneys and The State Bar.
- The LAWV Veterans Support Project will target services to low-income veterans on issues such as veterans' and disability benefits, housing, child support and problems with consumer and medical debt. The attorneys will also collaborate closely with community partners at West Virginia's VA hospitals and centers and with The West Virginia State Bar and WVU College of Law to secure *pro bono* representation of veterans and military families. They served for us. Now it's time for us to provide services for them. **WVU**

Jennifer R. Jordan works as the director of development for Legal Aid of West Virginia.