

# CIVIL LEGAL AID SUPPORTS FEDERAL EFFORTS TO HELP VETERANS AND SERVICEMEMBERS

## THE NEED

Many of the more than 22 million U.S. veterans and another 1.4 million servicemembers face serious challenges, including unemployment, chronic health problems, and homelessness. According to a count on a single night in January, 2013, more than 57,000 veterans were experiencing homelessness. Veterans face a housing crisis for many reasons, such as poverty, lack of support from family or friends, substance abuse, or mental health challenges that may develop or worsen as a result of trauma they experienced while serving. Many of our servicemembers and returning veterans need access to physical and mental health services, critical income supports, and, especially, job opportunities when they return to civilian life.

## EXAMPLES OF THE FEDERAL RESPONSE

In 2009, President Barack Obama and U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Secretary Eric Shinseki announced the goal of ending veteran homelessness by the end of 2015. Together with partners — including the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness and its participating agencies — and supporters nationwide, the VA is determined to meet that goal through the Homeless Veterans Outreach Initiative, an unprecedented commitment to those who served our nation but lack safe, secure housing. Increased programs and funding have so far contributed to a 24 percent decrease in the number of veterans experiencing homelessness between 2010 and 2013. Central to those efforts are the VA's Grant & Per Diem Program, which provides transitional housing and rehabilitation to thousands of veterans, and [Supportive Services for Veteran Families](#) (SSVF) program, which provides supportive services designed to promote housing stability.

Beyond addressing homelessness, the Federal Government works to meet a wide array of veteran and servicemember needs. The VA's "[Stand Downs](#)" — typically one to three day events for homeless veterans — offer services such as health care, housing, substance abuse, employment and legal assistance. The VA's Veterans Benefits Administration provides disability benefits, education benefits, vocational rehabilitation and employment services, and home loan guarantees. The Veterans Health Administration, the largest integrated health care system in America, provides care to 8.76 million veterans each year at over 1,700 sites. The VA's Veterans Justice Programs Specialists assist veterans involved in the criminal justice system through outreach, assessment and case management, and liaise with local courts and jails, prisons, and other justice system partners.

Other Federal agencies also help ensure veterans have access to the resources and support they've earned. The U.S. Department of Justice, along with federal and state partners in the Consumer Protection Working Group of the Financial Fraud Enforcement Task Force, seeks to combat financial fraud schemes targeting servicemembers and veterans. The U.S. Department of Labor's Veterans' Employment and Training Service serves transitioning servicemembers, veterans and their families by preparing them for meaningful careers, maximizing their employment opportunities, and protecting their employment rights. In 2013 the Federal Trade Commission and key partners U.S. Department of Defense, Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB), and Military Saves launched the first nationwide "military consumer protection day." The CFPB has a special office dedicated to providing servicemembers, military families and veterans with the information and tools to make the right financial decisions for them and to avoid unfair financial business practices.

**4 of the top 10 unmet needs of homeless veterans involve legal assistance for: eviction/foreclosure prevention; child support issues; outstanding warrants/fines; and restoring a driver's license. Other top 10 unmet needs often have a legal component: family reconciliation assistance; credit counseling; and government benefits.**

**-Findings from the VA's 2012 Project CHALENG for Veterans survey**



“ ” The Department of Veterans Affairs has long recognized the valuable role *legal aid* plays in contributing to the well-being of our Veterans. Unmet legal needs are a major reason that some Veterans become and remain homeless.

~ Secretary Eric K. Shinseki, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

## Legal Aid Helps

- **Prevent avoidable eviction and foreclosure** by assisting veterans in their legal proceedings—even if an eviction is only delayed, veterans can use the time to apply for benefits or find housing.
- **Negotiate fair child support orders**, increasing the reliability of payments, and supporting healthy co-parenting relationships and responsible fatherhood.
- **Navigate outstanding warrants, fines, fees for court costs**, and subsequent penalties for failure to pay those fees and fines, in order to resolve conflicting obligations, improve manageability of collections, and where possible, to prioritize child support and restitution.
- **Restore a revoked or suspended driver's license** by helping navigate a relicensing hearing, making it possible to secure and maintain a job.
- **Provide family reconciliation assistance** for veterans who need legal help concerning divorce, separation or child custody arrangements.
- **Resolve credit report problems** that prevent a veteran from renting an apartment or getting a job.
- **Secure a wide array of government benefits** for which veterans may be eligible, ensuring applications are filled out correctly and records of service are compiled accurately, and if a veteran's benefits are erroneously cut off, helping reinstate the benefits by working with the agency or representing the veteran in administrative proceedings.

### Hospital's legal triage keeps roof over veteran's head

When "Clyde" sought medical help from the Philadelphia VA Medical Center, a social worker learned he had fallen behind on his rent and faced eviction from his apartment. The social worker and the SSVF caseworker recognized Clyde's need for legal help, and assisted Clyde in getting an appointment with an attorney at the SSVF program's legal aid partner, Homeless Advocacy Project. With the SSVF program providing some of Clyde's back rent, the attorney negotiated an agreement to stop the eviction in exchange for a lump sum payment for most of the unpaid rent, plus a payment plan to cover the remainder. With his housing stabilized, Clyde was able to focus on his health needs.

### Veteran finds home and family with lawyer's help

Thanks to SSVF grant program funding, the LSC-supported Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles helped "Jake," a veteran experiencing homelessness who had spent many months moving from shelter to shelter, apply for VA benefits. The VA granted his request for a pension, and provided medical care and a housing subsidy. Now, Jake lives in a duplex and has reunited with his son.



The Legal Services Corporation and Pine Tree Legal Assistance launched [www.statesidelegal.org](http://www.statesidelegal.org), to provide legal help for military members, veterans, their families, and their advocates who, Vice President Joe Biden said, will find "information about everything from estate planning to the GI Bill."

- November 19, 2010 White House Middle Class Task Force – U.S. Department of Justice Access to Justice Initiative Event announcing new steps the Administration is taking in partnership with the legal community

