

Five Best Practices for SSVF legal services

1. SSVF grantees should learn about the ways legal needs impact a low-income veteran family's ability to retain or attain permanent housing.

Virtually all of the “top ten” unmet needs identified by homeless veterans are either directly legal in nature (legal assistance for child support, outstanding warrants, drivers licenses) or are issues that legal interventions can address (access to housing, welfare benefits, financial guardianships, re-entry services, SSI/SSDI benefits, dental care, family reconciliation, job training). However, many veteran agencies are unaccustomed to working with lawyers and unlikely to recognize these needs on their own. (e.g., (<http://statesidelegal.org/veterans-legal-needs-study>)). Active ongoing outreach and education by legal aid providers are essential to connect SSVF clients with legal services that can address homelessness. This [resource](#) entitled “Civil Legal Aid Supports Federal Efforts to Help Veterans and Servicemembers” provides an overview of how legal aid helps advance SSVF goals: <http://www.justice.gov/atj/legalaid/veterans-and-servicemembers-case-study.pdf>

2. SSVF grantees should learn how to identify and address veterans' legal needs early and quickly.

SSVF caseworkers should use ‘legal aid check-up’ lists such as <http://statesidelegal.org/legal-needs-check-tool-interactive-interview> to help all clients identify legal issues requiring attention and make referrals based on client responses. Because the specific laws and legal proceedings tied to those issues vary from state to state, local SSVF referral protocols must be designed in connection with those factors clearly in mind in order to ensure that the needed legal intervention will be timely and effective.

3. SSVF grantees should allocate and utilize at least some portion of their grant award for legal services, when pro bono or law school supports are not available.

100 million Americans face civil justice problems that can impact housing, jobs, income, and children. However, funding for free legal aid services is extremely limited: many programs can only provide legal representation to 20% of eligible individuals. The practical reality for local SSVF grantees is that, without funds specifically budgeted for legal services, their vets may not get the help they need with just a referral. In addition, clear protocols between the grantee (both its administrative office and local caseworkers) AND the legal aid provider are important to assure that a veterans referred by SSVF will be accepted by the legal aid program and that resources are available for payment under the grant.

4. SSVF grantees should include funding support for caseworker trainings and case consultations related to legal needs of SSVF clients.

Because SSVF grantees are crisis providers, their staff could benefit from ongoing training and support when working with veterans that need legal interventions. Allocating some SSVF funds for agency trainings on common legal issues and for caseworker consultation time with local legal aid providers is a cost-effective way to ensure appropriate referrals for legal services.

5. To minimize administrative burdens and ensure compliance with SSVF requirements, legal referrals should be compensated on a flat fee basis at the time of acceptance by the provider.

SSVF requirements at 38 CFR Part 62 contemplate that all services be coordinated with the provision of time-limited case management services. Because many legal matters require more than 90 – 180 days to complete, this requirement can complicate both reporting and payment for legal services. One effective strategy is to base compensation on a flat fee payment when the legal aid provider accepts a case, with the understanding that the provider will then do what is needed to address the veteran's legal issue.