

## **HELPING HOMELESS VETERANS COMPLY WITH CHILD SUPPORT OBLIGATIONS**

**ISSUE:** Currently, many homeless veterans find that their ability to move into permanent housing is compromised by old fines, debts and other legal judgments. Many of these obligations were incurred while the veteran was homeless, in a phase of active addiction, or otherwise untreated for a serious mental illness. For incarcerated veterans, the growing arrears from unpaid child support can be particularly damaging to their ability to reintegrate into the community. Assistance with child support issues was also identified as a top unmet need by homeless veterans in the annual VA CHALENG survey.

**ACTION:** The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), and the American Bar Association (ABA) have jointly developed a project to work with homeless veterans and their families to address unresolved child support issues. As additional national and local partners are identified to help in this effort, assistance will also be provided to those at-risk of homelessness as part of a prevention effort and to assist with related family issues that may arise. Models for collaboration will initially be developed at pilot sites.

**Site Selection:** Urban locations were identified where existing resources, local interest, and current state child support laws offer a reasonable prospect for successful collaboration without the requirement for additional financial support. While the general framework is the same for all sites, each site has developed activities that fit the mix of services and volunteer resources available at that site. **The nine pilot sites are: Atlanta, Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, San Diego, Seattle, and Washington, D.C.**

**Site Leadership:** Leadership varies locally depending on area resources and interests. In most sites the child support enforcement office is taking the lead as the convener, partnering with a state or local bar association or other organization that provides legal services to homeless veterans and staff from various VA residential programs. Leadership responsibilities include convening regular meetings that include collaborating agencies and stakeholders and facilitating the development of a process to assess and assist homeless veterans who need help renegotiating, as appropriate, child support obligations.

**Client Eligibility:** Veterans currently enrolled with VA specialized homeless services will be eligible for services. Initially, referrals are being generated by VA residential homeless programs, the VA's Health Care for Reentry Veterans, or the VA's soon to be established Supportive Services for Veterans Families. Drawing from this relatively stable population of homeless and at-risk veterans, who are connected to ongoing rehabilitation and support services, offers the continuity and motivation necessary for a successful resolution of child support issues. As this project develops and capacity increases, a local determination may be made to expand the target population to include additional groups of homeless and at-risk veterans from other referral sources.

## **Project Activities:**

- Referral: Each VA participating facility has a designated liaison that is responsible for screening homeless and at-risk veterans for eligibility and referral. This liaison will monitor the veteran's ongoing involvement with the child support renegotiation process. The liaison is the VA's point of contact for this program.
- Assessment: Working with the local child support agencies, some combination of VA staff or trained volunteers conduct initial assessments. This assessment determines whether the veteran meets criteria for renegotiation of child support payments and what level of assistance would be required.
- Services to be Offered: Homeless and at-risk veterans are able to receive no-cost guidance on their child support cases. This guidance will come from the child support program directly, trained volunteers, attorney supervised legal clinics, or pro bono attorneys identified with the assistance of ABA. The complexity of the case will determine the type of assistance.
- Staffing and Training: Training and ongoing supervision is largely provided by local attorneys (identified with the assistance of the ABA) and HHS child support enforcement agencies. Their expertise enables them to describe local laws and procedures for renegotiating child support. VA is responsible for working with the veteran involved in these proceedings so that he/she continues to pursue their treatment and rehabilitation goals.
- Coordination with other service providers: Site specific needs will be identified through in-depth discussion with site partners. Examples of site specific needs are addressing domestic violence, including ensuring custodial parent safety, and coordination with local homelessness coalitions.

## **PROJECT OUTCOMES:**

Outcomes to assess the effectiveness of this collaborative effort have been identified and sites are being asked to report on a variety of outcomes such as:

- Changes to the child support order.
- Compliance with the child support order.
- Arrearages modified or reduced.
- Visitation agreement for contact with children established or modified.

## **PRO BONO ATTORNEYS ARE NEEDED!**

Pro bono attorneys are needed not only at the pilot sites, but also across the country to take referrals from the pilot sites when clients have child support arrearages arising from jurisdictions other than those covered by the pilot sites.

For more information, please contact Amy Horton-Newell at the American Bar Association Commission on Homelessness & Poverty at (202) 662-1693 or [amy.hortonnewell@americanbar.org](mailto:amy.hortonnewell@americanbar.org).