September 21, 2016

The Honorable Joyce Beatty  
United States House of Representatives  
Washington, D.C.  20515

Dear Representative Beatty:

I write to express the deep appreciation of the more than 400,000 members of the American Bar Association for your leadership in helping to ensure that homeless and at-risk veterans are better able to overcome legal barriers to housing, employment, and life-sustaining benefits and services. Specifically, we applaud your bipartisan introduction of H.R. 6046, the Homeless Veterans Legal Services Act and the improvements it would make possible for veterans in crisis. We stand ready to assist you in moving this important bill forward.

The Homeless Veterans Legal Services Act would authorize the Department of Veterans Affairs to enter into partnerships to deliver desperately needed legal services for homeless veterans. Since 1994, the VA has conducted the annual Community Homeless Assessment, Local Education, and Networking Groups (CHALENG) survey to determine the greatest unmet needs of homeless veterans. The survey reveals that while the number of veterans experiencing homelessness on a given night has been reduced from 76,329 in 2010 to just over 49,000 last year, the needs of homeless veterans have remained fairly constant. For the past five years, four of the top 10 reported unmet needs of these men and women require the assistance of a lawyer. These needs include issues relating to (1) child support, (2) restoring a driver’s license, (3) outstanding warrants and fines, and (4) foreclosure and evictions. Additionally, several other unmet needs identified in the CHALENG report, such as credit problems, discharge status upgrades, and guardianship matters, can also benefit from a lawyer’s help.

Resolving these issues is critical to ending homelessness because they operate as total barriers to housing, employment, benefits, and services. For example, it is common for homeless persons to sleep in the wrong spot, leading to a trespass citation that they cannot pay. Without a way to receive mail, the homeless veteran will likely miss his court date, resulting in the issuance of a warrant. These warrants, regardless of how minor the underlying offense might be, make the veteran ineligible for employment and other programs. Losing one’s driver’s license means the veteran is without the primary form of photo identification – a requirement of access to VA services. Or, consider the not uncommon situation in which a veteran is ready to be housed, a permanent home has
been identified, and a HUD-VASH housing voucher has been secured to pay for the unit, but the discovery of past credit issues, child support arrearages, warrants or other matters disqualify the veteran from the program.

For all of their resources, neither the VA nor the Department of Housing and Urban Development can remove these barriers faced by homeless veterans. A lawyer can. Most of the work in the legal community, however, has been borne by volunteer lawyers, specialized nonprofits, and cash-strapped civil legal aid offices already struggling to meet the existing public demand. It will take both the VA and the legal community working together in an even more concerted way to meet the needs of veterans if we are to move closer to ending the scourge of veteran homelessness. Your bill would provide a powerful tool to make this collaboration real.

Thank you, again, for your leadership on this matter. We stand ready to assist and have greatly appreciated the exceptional work of your Legislative Director, Jennifer Storipan, on this legislation. If you or your staff have any questions, you can contact me or Ken Goldsmith in the ABA Governmental Affairs Office at kenneth.goldsmith@americanbar.org or (202) 662-1789.

Sincerely,

Linda Klein