Advocating for Homeless Veterans

Why provide legal services specifically for veterans who are homeless?

- Veterans who are homeless have unique problems that are typically not addressed by traditional providers of legal services.
- These unique problems may include:
  - general mistrust of the system
  - difficulty assessing mainstream services
  - transient, unstable living situations
  - mental health and substance abuse issues
  - lack of understanding of their legal rights
  - chief concern is survival
Legal Advocacy for Veterans Should be Holistic in Nature

- Veterans who are homeless often have interrelated issues and challenges in addition to legal problems
- Holistic advocacy examines both the legal and non-legal obstacles that impedes an individual’s ability to end their homeless situation
- With holistic advocacy, lawyers become partners with social service agencies to provide the veteran with the tools and resources to address all their needs

Typical Legal Issues Faced by Veterans who are Homeless

- Entitlements, including Social Security disability claims and veterans benefits claims
- Discharge upgrades
- Child support
- Landlord/tenant issues
- Expungements
- Driver’s licenses and other forms of identification
- Consumer issues
- Divorces
- Wills and powers of attorney
- Criminal matters
General Considerations When Interviewing Veterans who are Homeless

- Keep in mind the goals of the interview:
  - to gain information
    - explain the need for as much information as possible in order to provide effective legal services
  - to develop trust
    - respect is the most important aspect of building trust, often even more so than solving the legal issue
    - exhibit a willingness to listen
      - listening builds a trusting relationship
      - allows the veteran to have their agenda
      - demonstrates a willingness to take the client where he or she is

- Take the necessary steps to put the veteran at ease
- Be willing to explain the difference between legal remedies and “justice” as defined by the veteran
- Be patient and flexible
- Remain observant to both words and behaviors
- Do not patronize, preach, interrupt, or argue
- Ensure that the veteran has easy access out of the office or meeting room
Special Considerations When Interviewing Veterans who are Homeless

- There is often a lot of baggage attached to the term, “veteran;” never ask “are you a veteran?” instead ask “were you in the military?” or “when did you serve?”
  - many female veterans do not identify themselves as being veterans and frequently do not self-identify as veterans
  - when identified as a veteran, it is important to ask about discharge status, length of service, and rank at discharge
  - it is also important to ask about veteran’s eligibility for services at the local VA Medical Center and if the veteran is receiving any VA benefits

- Be sensitive to the military culture many veterans identify with and as a result veterans may have difficulty discussing traumatic events
  - some veterans have experienced not only trauma associated with tours of duty, but also sexual harassment, sexual assault, and other sexual trauma

- Many veterans suffer from PTSD and other mental health disorders, it is important to obtain information on:
  - has the veteran spoken to a counselor or currently in treatment?
  - has the veteran ever had a mental health diagnosis?
  - has a doctor or other medical personnel prescribed medication for you?
  - have you ever been admitted to a psychiatric hospital or facility?
Special Considerations When Interviewing Veterans who are Homeless

- Many veterans have a substance use problem, it is important to know:
  - what substances the veteran was using?
  - when did the veteran last use?
  - is the veteran currently in SATC (the VA’s substance abuse treatment program)

- Lack of insufficient or stable housing is a leading cause of homelessness among veterans
  - ask the veteran if they have been referred to the grant per diem program, the HUD/VASH program, or SSVF

The 3 “C’s” of Providing Legal Services to Homeless Veterans

- Commitment to the veteran and to resolving their legal issue
- Compassion, not sympathy, but empathy and an acknowledgment that the veterans are not homeless, they are human beings
- Comedy, take the work seriously, but not yourself so that you can come back the next day and start all over again
Homeless Veterans Justice Initiative

In support of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs’ Five Year Plan to End Homelessness among Veterans, the Commission is helping to develop Veterans Treatment Courts to address drug and mental health issues affecting former service members. The Commission is providing technical assistance to judges and lawyers across the country on the unique issues facing veterans, including child support arrears and other barriers to housing and employment. In addition, the Commission helps in the support and development of pro bono programs to aid veterans.