

Support the Homeless Veterans Legal Services Act Authorizing Public-Private Partnerships to Resolve Homeless Veterans' Legal Needs

Providing legal assistance to low-income and homeless veterans with unresolved legal problems is a core component of efforts to end homelessness among veterans. The reason for this is simple: legal problems in areas such as housing and family law, the loss of a driver's license, or overdue civil fines often disqualify or prevent veterans from accessing federal, state, and private-sector programs that provide housing, employment, benefits, treatment, and services. Without resolution of their underlying legal problems, low-income veterans are at increased risk of becoming homeless, and those already living on the street are likely to remain there.

In 2010, ending veteran homelessness became a national priority. As a result of concerted efforts by the public and private sectors, veteran homelessness has been reduced by nearly 50%, but much remains to be done. According to the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), of the 1.5 million veterans currently living in poverty, approximately 39,000 are homeless on any given night, with thousands more teetering on the brink of homelessness. Over 50% of homeless veterans suffer from a disability; a disproportionate 40% are African-American or Hispanic; and 9% are women, many with children.

Veterans themselves have suggested that the inability to access free legal assistance continues to present a barrier to progress. An annual survey of the needs of homeless veterans conducted for the VA has consistently found that veterans consider legal assistance to be one of their most urgent unmet needs. Veterans want legal assistance with a host of life-altering issues.

The VA currently does not have statutory authority to directly fund any legal services, but a number of VA facilities host non-VA legal services providers, such as law school clinics, private pro bono lawyers, and legal aid clinics to assist veterans who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. In addition, some VA programs authorize, but do not require, grantees to partner with legal services providers to address unmet needs. Despite these initiatives, the VA survey makes clear that there is still much to be done to meet the legal assistance needs of veterans.

- **The ABA urges Congress to enact the Homeless Veterans Legal Services Act.** This legislation will expand access to legal services for homeless veterans and veterans at risk of homelessness by authorizing the VA to partner with public and private entities and fund a portion of the cost of legal services. These partnerships are intended to promote the development of innovative strategies and modes of delivery to enhance the availability and accessibility of legal assistance for veterans in a cost-effective manner.

Contact: Kenneth Goldsmith • kenneth.goldsmith@americanbar.org • (202) 662-1789