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LAMP Feature

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ABA Military
Pro Bono
Project

From the Chair

The ABA Military Pro Bono Project: Four Years of Delivering Access to Justice to Servicemembers and their Families

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Throughout the course of the past decade, the ABA Standing Committee on Legal Assistance for Military Personnel (LAMP) became increasingly aware that ongoing military conflicts overseas, with their associated, frequent deployments of servicemembers, were resulting in an increasing level of legal needs by military families. The LAMP Committee observed that this escalation in demand for legal services placed an ever-heavier burden on the military services' civil legal assistance programs. And since military legal assistance attorneys are constrained from delivering a full range of legal services for many civil matters—most notably, a general prohibition on in-court representation—these lawyers are today faced with more servicemember clients in need of legal services beyond what the lawyers can provide.

Compounding this problem is the fact that junior-enlisted servicemembers and their families, many of whom constitute low- to moderate-income households, are frequently unable to afford full-cost representation from civilian counsel. Beyond the issue of cost, frequent relocations and deployments leave many servicemembers to grapple with legal issues arising in jurisdictions distant from where they are stationed or deployed, making it difficult to effectively secure counsel in the location where representation is needed. The inability to address legal problems can have a detrimental effect on combat-readiness and can pose a genuine threat to both the servicemember's troop and unit.

Perceiving a growing crisis in the ability of servicemembers to secure access to justice for their civil legal problems, in September 2008 the LAMP Committee launched an initiative to deliver a full continuum of free legal care for servicemembers and their families, beginning in the military legal office and ending with civilian legal representation. This initiative, the ABA Military Pro Bono Project, is an online platform that effectively and efficiently moves civil case referrals for servicemembers and their families from military legal assistance attorneys to civilian pro bono attorney volunteers wherever the representation is needed. The LAMP Committee partnered with the ABA Section of Litigation to fund the creation of the web-based system, at www.militaryprobono.org, and to staff the Project with a part-time attorney director.

Since its launch, the Project has been an unequivocal success: Participation by military and civilian attorneys continues to increase, connections between servicemembers and civilian attorneys and legal resources is expanding, and a significant level of recognition and support provided from both the military and civilian bars has been growing. The Project has become a model public-private partnership, though it continues to face challenges as it meets its mission to deliver access to justice for military families.

An Efficient System for Moving Cases from Military Legal Offices to Pro Bono Volunteers for Serious Civil Legal Problems

The Project's processes and functions were designed in close collaboration with the leadership of all five military branches' legal assistance programs, and the Project continues to solicit and receive guidance and feedback from its military partners and users as it evolves. At its core, the Project is designed to accept case referrals from military legal assistance attorneys, stationed across the country and around the world, from all active-duty military branches, the Reserves, and National Guard. After the referrals are screened by intermediate-level military supervising attorneys to ensure that the Project assists the most deserving cases, the Project Director places these cases with volunteer attorneys anywhere in the United States where the legal assistance is needed.

From the Project's launch to date, it has secured pro bono assistance for over 600 servicemembers in 45 states, averaging about 150 case placements per year. Many of these cases are referred to the Project while the servicemembers are deployed in combat zones. Based on closing data provided by the volunteer attorneys, the aggregate value of these referred cases represents about \$3 million in donated billable hours. The total value of donated billable hours represents a return of over eight times the actual cost of the Project's operation.

Every week, the Project posts real-life example cases in an ongoing blog linked through its website. These stories illustrate the wide range of case types referred to the Project—including family, consumer, guardianship, housing, and trust and estate law—and how these matters are successfully resolved through the dedicated efforts of the Project volunteers.

ABA Home Front Expands the Continuum of Legal Care Built by the Project

While pro bono representation is an essential component in the continuum of legal care, the Project is designed first and foremost as a resource for military legal assistance attorneys to find private pro bono counsel for their cases—the Project cannot be accessed directly by individual servicemembers without a military attorney's referral. Recognizing that military families may also need a place to turn where they can find easily understandable legal information and referral resources focused on their unique needs, the ABA launched a new web-based legal center for military families at www.ABAHomeFront.org. The LAMP Committee, in partnership with the ABA Division for Public Education, ABA Division for Bar Services, ABA Section of Family Law, and ABA Young Lawyers Division, established the ABA Home Front website utilizing existing funding and staffing resources, and with responsibility for the site's ongoing maintenance and operation shared by the LAMP Committee and Public Education.

ABA Home Front has three primary components: (1) *Information Center*, which includes articles and FAQs written for nonlawyers on a variety of civil legal topics especially geared toward military families, covering their available special rights and protections; (2) *Directory of Programs*, which includes contact information and descriptions for programs and services, organized by state, that can provide assistance to military families, including military legal assistance offices; and (3) *Military Pro Bono Center*, where attorneys can volunteer to provide pro bono representation to military families through the Project, and attorneys can join the new Operation Stand-By, through which they may provide attorney-to-attorney consultations to military attorneys.

By ensuring that military families are able to easily find military-specific legal information and resources, ABA Home Front expands the legal continuum of care so that a servicemember can (1) determine if he or she has a legal issue; (2) locate appropriate, free in-person legal help from a military legal assistance attorney; and (3) receive further counsel and representation, when necessary, from a civilian attorney through the Project or another resource in the Directory of Programs.

Operation Stand-By has existed for years as a Section of Family Law Military Law Committee program, but it was adopted by the Project as a part of the ABA Home Front initiative and expanded beyond the sole focus on family law. Attorneys who register to join Operation Stand-By agree to make themselves available by phone or email to military attorneys in need

of attorney-to-attorney consultations, giving military attorneys a place to turn when seeking jurisdiction-specific substantive and procedural information which, in turn, aids their servicemember clients. Military attorneys registered with the Project can find the attorneys' contact information and areas of expertise on a password-secured list on the Project's website. Participation gives civilian attorneys an opportunity to help our servicemembers with a very small time commitment, as participation with Operation Stand-By itself does not entail client representation. Over 350 attorneys in 47 states have registered to participate with Operation Stand-By, and military attorney-users view it as an invaluable resource to support their work on behalf of their clients.

The Project Is a High-Visibility, Public-Private Partnership that Reflects Positively on the ABA and the Legal Community

The Project has earned a significant level of credibility throughout the military legal community, and it is well-known as an effective collaboration between the military and civilian bars to meet military families' legal needs. Since 2008, over 1,600 civilian attorneys and pro bono coordinators have registered with the Project's roster with an interest in accepting pro bono cases and/or participating with Operation Stand-By. Over 1,400 military attorneys worldwide have registered to use the Project's referral system, Operation Stand-By and other website resources.

It is important to note that while the ABA, through the LAMP Committee, has taken a leadership role in creating this successful, national program, none of its success would be possible without the selfless efforts of volunteer attorneys. As noted above, these attorneys have given thousands of hours, valued at literally millions of dollars, to ensure that military members and their families do not go without the legal services that they need. The contributions of the private bar in this regard cannot be overstated.

Helping our Servicemembers Requires Ongoing Participation, Publicity, and Financial Support

The Project's success over the past four years has, understandably, resulted in ever-increasing demands for pro bono help through the resources it provides. Thus, in coming years, the Project will continue to work on meeting these challenges. The Project has an ongoing need for increasing volunteer attorney involvement. Continuing communication and maintaining relationships with existing legal aid, pro bono, and state and local bar programs will be essential in raising awareness of our servicemember's legal needs and how legal communities can help by volunteering with the Project.

In addition to the work of its volunteers, the Project's successes have been built and maintained by financial contributions from Project partners, law firms, corporations, and private individuals. Financial support from current and new Project sponsors is vital for the Project's ongoing maintenance, as the Project receives no general dues revenue from the ABA to support its operations.

The legal needs of our servicemembers are real and growing. With the continued participation of the military and civilian bars, along with support from financial sponsors, the ABA will continue to be a national leader in helping meet the civil legal needs of our servicemembers who sacrifice so much for us all.

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