

OVERVIEW OF THE 9th ANNUAL VETERANS' LEGAL ASSISTANCE CONFERENCE & TRAINING

By: Christine Flynn, Pro Bono Coordinator & NFPA/ABA Liaison to the Standing Committee on Pro Bono and Public Service

GENERALLY

The 9th Annual Veterans' Legal Assistance Conference & Training was held at the University of Baltimore School of Law on Friday, June 2, 2017. Opening remarks were presented by Hugh McClean, Professor of the University of Baltimore School of Law, Ronald Welch, Dean of the University of Baltimore School of Law and Antonia Fasanelli, Executive Director, Homeless Persons Representation Project. Antonia Fasanelli also serves as the chair of the ABA's Commission on Homelessness and Poverty. Attendees at the conference included attorneys, paralegals, professors, pro bono directors and veterans. There were approximately 100 attendees.

MORNING SESSION

The morning session was held from 9:00-12:00 noon. This was a three hour overview and training on Veterans Benefits 101. This topic was presented by Swapna Yeluri and Michael Stone of the Homeless Persons Representation Project (Baltimore). The Homeless Persons Representation Project handles criminal expungements, public benefits, veterans' benefits and public housing. Some of these items fall under the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans. The presenters covered an extensive overview of the various types and stages of veterans' claims, including navigating the system from the initial intake through disposition or final appeal. A comprehensive background was provided on the VA, along with definitions and requirements. The presentation reviewed the various intake forms, procedures for ordering records, time frames as well as special considerations in working with veterans' claims. A great deal of time was also spent covering stages and procedures for handling appeals. It was noted that the greatest need for assistance is in the states of Florida and Texas.

Following the morning session I introduced myself to Michael Stone. I explained the goals of NFPA and our dedication and commitment to pro bono. I also noted our adoption of the Veterans Initiative. Mr. Stone noted an ongoing need for paralegal involvement in pro bono and "definitely" in his projects. He stressed that homelessness is a very real problem for veterans as they return from service and are faced with family, health and financial issues including the need for employment, addiction issues and even divorces. His program assists veterans in filing claims. He asked us to follow up with him. Michael Stone noted client intakes can even be done by paralegals in surrounding states either by phone or Skype. He also welcomed the idea of veterans and members of the armed forces participating in pro bono to assist other veterans.

As part of participation in the conference, I am required to attend three (3) pro bono clinics during the next year for the Homeless Persons Representation Project in Baltimore. I will be contacting HPRP in order to determine upcoming dates in 2017-2018 and arrange attendance. Once I participate in the actual clinic, I will report back to the NFPA Board to outline procedures and training.

LUNCHEON

The Honorable John J. “Jack” Farley, Retired Judge of the U.S. Court of Veterans Appeals delivered the keynote address in the Business Center Atrium. Judge Farley discussed the legal system in the handling of veterans’ claims, including judicial involvement. I sat with several members of the Maryland pro bono community, including two attorneys and two other woman who worked on veterans’ homelessness projects in Baltimore. We discussed the role of homelessness in the veteran community and how so many areas tie directly into that issue, including employment, medical care, etc. We exchanged business cards and agreed to keep in touch regarding future events and projects.

AFTERNOON SESSIONS

The first afternoon session I attended was “Alternative Solutions to Expedite Claim and Service Decisions.” This panel was chaired by Judge John Crowley, Interim Chief Veterans Law Judge, Board of Veterans Appeals. The panel presented an interactive discussion on the overview of appeals including background, appellate landscape, evidence and hearings. Judge Crowley noted that there are currently over 470,000.00 appeals pending with a total wait time of six to eight years on final decision. This number and time frame are staggering. The panel noted that veterans have right to appeal all decisions regarding VA benefits. Appellants have one year to initiate an appeal of a VBA Regional Office (RO) decision. There is a multi-stage VA appeals system. This included Board Review (de novo) and possible federal court review (appeal outside the agency to the US Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims, the Federal Circuit and ultimately to the United States Supreme Court.

A discussion was then held on the role mediation can perhaps play in reducing these appeals to allow the system to “do its job.” Judge Crowley noted that while legislation is pending to overhaul the system, the need for individuals to assist in pro bono in handling and processing claims and appeals is great. Judge Crowley provided his cell phone number for further consultation and discussion on any issues.

The second afternoon session I attended was “The Impact of Service on Employment”. This was also a panel discussion lead by Swapna Yeluri. The panel consisted of members from Easter Seals and the Department of Labor discussing how companies can work with veterans in placing them not only in employment positions but also in assisting in the overall re-entry to the community and employment, i.e. temporary housing, training, etc. By companies and corporations committing to assist veterans in these types of program, it can certainly aid in reducing unemployment and homelessness among veterans.

ABA CONNECTION

Sharon Goldsmith was in attendance at the conference. Sharon is the Executive Director of the Pro Bono Resource Center in Maryland. She is also a former member of the ABA Standing Committee on Pro Bono & Public Service. I previously worked with Sharon during her time on the ABA committee. I stopped and spoke with Sharon just following the morning break. Sharon was extremely pleased that we attended the conference. We exchanged updates on projects. Sharon noted an ongoing need for paralegal involvement in pro bono and noted that she 'always' has a need for paralegals to assist with intakes, etc. She is very supportive and is a good contact for us in the Maryland area.

During lunch, I introduced myself to Antonia Fasanelli. As noted above, Ms. Fasanelli is the Executive Director of the Homeless Persons Representation Project as well as the chair of the ABA's Commission on Homelessness and Poverty. I explained our work with the ABA on behalf of NFPA. We briefly discussed some of our projects and future goals, including our Veteran's Initiative. Ms. Fasanelli thanked NFPA for its support and noted that we should feel free to contact her in the future if she can be of any assistance. We should keep in mind that she may be an excellent speaker for a future event or webinar as well as a good contact in our work with the ABA, especially in the veterans' initiative.

WEBINARS

This conference highlighted the need for NFPA to schedule and conduct a pro bono webinar on paralegals working with individuals in a pro bono setting. This webinar should highlight importance of keeping appointments and commitments, building trust, communication and listening skills, managing client expectations and guidelines, working with pro bono attorneys, following up tasks, the role of the paralegal, etc. We should also consider hosting a pro bono webinar on the facets of pro bono as well as national pro bono opportunities (which the pro bono committee is already working on for the Fall, 2017).

MATERIALS

I have obtained the conference program, agenda and materials. I have also obtained a flash drive of the materials from the presentations, including the Powerpoints, which I am forwarding to Linda Odermott, Armed Forces Coordinator.

ITEMS TO FOLLOW-UP ON

- The work that needs to be done to assist veterans is overwhelming;
- There are multiple pro bono areas where we can assist veterans including (1) homelessness and housing (2) addiction; (3) employment/work re-entry; (4) disability claims and benefits; (5) Wounded Warriors project; (6) scholastic; (7) training; (8) incarceration/expungement; and (9) emotional and psychological support;

- We may wish to narrow the areas down so that we can truly focus our efforts and resources to certain areas, i.e. specific areas such as homeless advocacy or specific projects such as the Wounded Warriors;
- The homeless topic is definitely one area we should concentrate our efforts in- this conference really brought that topic to the forefront as an issue that ties directly into so many problems and issues that veterans face;
- There is certainly a need for the armed forces to assist other veterans in the area of pro bono. This is especially true in that it gives the service member or veteran a true level of comfort and support when working through an issue directly with another armed force member who has a direct understanding of feelings, issues and difficulties. We will work with our armed forces pro bono members in identifying and coordinating participation in events;
- A follow up call should be held with the pro bono committee, VPPD and Linda Odermott, Armed Forces Coordinator, in order to continue our joint efforts in address paralegal involvement in connection with the veterans initiative;
- CMF will place a follow up call to the Homeless Persons Representation Project who are in immediate need of paralegals to assist with intakes and ordering records as well as paralegals serving in the armed forces to assist on multiple veterans' claims;
- CMF will arrange to attend and complete pro bono service at the Homeless Persons Representation Project and report back to the NFPA Board on that experience.

FUTURE CONFERENCES

This was truly an excellent conference. I would suggest that any future NFPA pro bono chair/coordinator attend this conference in connection with our commitment and support of the armed forces. There is no charge for the conference and it is wonderful opportunity to network, exchange ideas, and receive background and training in many areas of veterans' legal assistance. Bear in mind however that attendance at one of the morning sessions *requires* a pro bono commitment in the Baltimore area by the paralegal attending. The conference also provides a wealth of potential speakers and panelists for future NFPA events and webinars.

The NFPA Board as well as the armed forces, pro bono coordinators and regional directors should also work together to identify any similar free conferences across the United States and encourage attendance by local pro bono chairs.

CONFERENCE CALL

Linda Odermott, Yvonne DeAntoneo and Christine Flynn will have a conference call on June 14, 2017 to discuss the conference in further detail as well as to narrow our veterans' initiative projects and commitments. We will also discuss attendance at future conferences. We will update the NFPA Board as necessary.