



STAND **SMART** FOR HEROES

The Case for Collaboration: Strengthening Ties Between Civil Legal-Aid and Veteran-Serving Organizations

ISSUE/CHALLENGE

Civil legal problems—from threatened evictions to other-than-honorable discharges from the military—are often the greatest obstacles to a veteran’s health, housing, stability, and productivity. According to a study by the Legal Services Corporation (LSC), 76 percent of low-income households with veterans or service members reported experiencing at least one civil legal problem in 2021, and 44 percent had five or more civil legal problems.¹ Despite the prevalence of those needs, low-income households with veterans and service members reported receiving either inadequate or no professional legal help for 84 percent of their civil legal problems.²

Many funders, civil legal-aid providers, and pro bono programs strive to provide at least some legal assistance to every veteran who approaches them. But a significant gap remains between identifying veterans in the community who need legal assistance and connecting them to appropriate legal services. Roughly one-fourth of community-based partnerships that serve the military and veteran population lack a community partner to provide legal services.³ Complicating the issue further, veterans’ service providers and veterans themselves do not always recognize that many of the issues veterans face may require a legal intervention to be fully resolved.



**Approximately 1/4 of
Community-Based Partners
Serving Military & Veteran
Populations are Lacking
Legal Services**

KEY FINDINGS

- Veterans’ service providers do not always realize that a legal intervention may be necessary to fully resolve a veteran’s needs.
- Civil legal-aid providers that do not specialize in serving the military and veteran community are often less familiar with non-legal supportive services addressing veterans’ issues.

For many clients, seeking assistance can be overwhelming. Collaboration and communication among veterans’ service providers, including those offering legal services, could create a single network to address the needs of military or veteran clients that helps them navigate the resources available to them. Veterans’ service providers are skilled at connecting veterans with a wide range of non-legal services and performing outreach to identify at-risk veteran populations. Those providers could offer their expertise with veteran-specific issues—such as navigating education, employment, and housing programs to civil legal-aid providers, who often have less exposure to those programs. Veterans’ service providers could also inform the veterans they encounter about how to access civil legal services, even if those providers’ primary focus is on a different veterans’ issue.

In turn, civil legal-aid providers could educate veterans’ service providers and transition programs about how to help veterans access free assistance for civil legal issues outside the expertise of veterans’ service providers. Collaborating with veterans’ service providers would probably also facilitate trust between veteran clients and legal-aid attorneys.

RESEARCH CONDUCTED

In January 2020, the board of directors of the LSC established the Veterans Task Force to raise awareness about the civil legal issues that veterans experience. The task force was also charged with strengthening relationships between civil legal-aid providers and other organizations that serve veterans, such as the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), treatment courts, and veterans’ advocacy organizations. Task force members represented a variety of backgrounds, including the veteran, legal-aid, private practice, VA, academic, Veterans Service Organization (VSO), and nonprofit communities.

The Veterans Task Force highlighted model programs that provide effective, integrated services to veterans and recommended strategies for engaging attorneys to furnish legal assistance to veterans on a pro bono basis, including for complex legal issues. The task force also published a report with recommendations detailing the ways in which the legal-aid community, law firms, corporate lawyers, and governments have the power and resources to fill the service gap for veterans.⁴



IMPLICATIONS

Organizations could adopt a “no wrong door” policy to ensure that the first service provider any veteran encounters will conduct a complete needs assessment and either address those needs or place the veteran with a network partner that can address them. “No wrong door” policies foster trust and confidence on the part of clients. Creating a platform in which all organizations work together enhances clients’ access to resources, provides options for their care, and builds the type of collaborative environment in which, for example, mental health providers work hand in hand with case managers or lawyers.

Organizations with successful “no wrong door” policies follow these practices:

- **Warm handoffs to other veterans’ service providers.** If a veteran needs to see multiple service providers, each provider should ensure that the veteran reaches the next provider, that the next provider and the veteran understand why the veteran is there, and that each provider addresses the veteran’s questions before completing the handoff. A warm handoff can keep a veteran from feeling like just another client whom providers are more interested in processing than helping.
- **Close interaction with the veteran’s case manager, when possible.** VA case managers are nurses or social workers assigned to help a veteran navigate the VA system and to coordinate the veteran’s patient care needs. If a veteran has a case manager, service providers should seek ways—with the veteran’s consent—to cooperate and collaborate with the case manager, who can assess the veteran’s needs and coordinate care. A case manager is a resource not only for a veteran but also for other service providers. Service providers should ask a veteran client early in the process for consent to contact and coordinate with the case manager to ensure maximal benefit for the veteran.

Find a collection of great resources here to help your organization reach its maximum potential.

[More Resources](#)

GOALS FOR THE FUTURE

- Veterans’ service providers and other organizations that work with veterans should maintain a “no wrong door” policy.
- Collaboration should improve between the legal-aid and veterans’ service provider communities.
- Civil legal-aid providers should coordinate and share expertise with veterans’ service providers to improve their ability to identify legal issues and refer veterans to legal services.
- Veterans’ service providers should seek out partnerships with legal-aid providers to facilitate warm handoffs of clients between providers.

RESOURCES

¹ Legal Services Corporation, *The Justice Gap: The Unmet Civil Legal Needs of Low-Income Americans* (prepared by Slosar Research, April 2022), Section 3, p. 41, <https://justicegap.lsc.gov/the-report>.

² Ibid., Section 4, p. 55.

³ Those findings come from the Bob Woodruff Foundation’s Local Partner Self-Assessment Tool, a survey of community-based partnerships in the foundation’s Got Your 6 Network that provides insights about the needs of veterans in local communities and about communities’ ability to meet those needs.

⁴ Legal Services Corporation, *2021 Report of the Veterans Task Force*, <https://tinyurl.com/2s35k28x>.

⁵ That income level is generally the cutoff for eligibility for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. See Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, *SNAP Helps 1.2 Million Low-Income Veterans, Including Thousands in Every State* (November 9, 2021), <https://tinyurl.com/2h36kd47>, and *A Quick Guide to SNAP Eligibility and Benefits* (January 6, 2022), <https://tinyurl.com/2ztpb5yz>.

ABOUT LSC

The Legal Services Corporation is an independent nonprofit organization established by Congress in 1974 to provide financial support for civil legal aid to low-income Americans. LSC provides funding to 132 independent, nonprofit legal-aid programs in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and U.S. territories. The programs that LSC funds serve households earning less than 125 percent of the federal poverty guidelines (approximately \$16,000 for one person and \$33,000 for a family of four). According to the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities, between 2016 and 2018, some 1.3 million households containing veterans earned 130 percent or less of the federal poverty guidelines.⁵ Many of those households are financially eligible to receive legal assistance from LSC-funded legal-aid organizations.

ABOUT STAND SMART FOR HEROES

The Bob Woodruff Foundation is proud to partner with best-in-class scientific organizations to provide important research findings to the community of organizations that represent and serve post-9/11 veterans, service members, families, and caregivers. For more information on the Bob Woodruff Foundation and Stand SMART For Heroes, please see bobwoodrufffoundation.org.