



## Legal Services to Low-Income Veterans And Military Families

### **New National Website**

[www.StatesideLegal.org](http://www.StatesideLegal.org) is a free legal resource for low-income individuals with a military connection, including veterans and current members of the military and their families. The website is the first in the nation to focus exclusively on federal legal rights and resources important to these families.

The categories of legal content on StatesideLegal.org include housing, consumer, disability, government benefits, employment protections, wills and estates, military/veterans issues (such as correcting conditions of discharge) and family law.

The site:

- Provides accurate, user-friendly legal content in high priority areas of the law.
- Identifies the legal protections and programs available for specific groups, such as veterans, activated Guard members, or spouses.
- Provides links to other resources on a state-by-state basis.

The site's primary developer, Pine Tree Legal Assistance of Maine, updates and improves content on a continuous basis. The site currently has more than 120 pieces of original content in a straightforward way that enable low-income individuals with a military connection to identify resources, produce documents and access representation to secure the legal protections and benefits to which they are entitled.

LSC awarded a grant to Pine Tree in 2009 to develop the website. Established in 1974, LSC receives an annual appropriation from Congress to promote equal access to justice and to provide for high-quality civil legal assistance to low-income individuals and families. About 95 percent of the

appropriation is distributed as grants to 136 independent nonprofit legal aid programs across the nation. The legal services programs close about one million cases and provide more than five million other services and referrals annually.

## **Awareness Campaign**

Local legal aid offices are gateways for veterans in need of civil legal assistance. These offices have established networks with bar association pro bono programs, law school clinics and social services agencies, and are experienced in using Help Lines to provide information on complex subjects.

The Readjustment Counseling Service, known as the Vet Center Program, at the Department of Veterans Affairs, offers counseling and outreach services to veterans who served in combat zones and to their spouses and children. Anecdotal information suggests that many of these veterans also are confronting legal problems, such as child custody, employment and homelessness, handled by LSC programs.

An Awareness Campaign is underway to further collaborations among legal services programs and Vet Centers. LSC and LSC-funded programs have reached out to 51 readjustment counseling centers operated by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs in the mid-Atlantic region, Maine and Arkansas to share information about legal services and to create appropriate referral systems to minimize veterans' frustration in obtaining advice and representation on civil legal problems.

## **Examples of Current LSC-Related Veterans Initiatives**

Most LSC grantees routinely provide legal assistance to low-income individuals with a military connection. Many also have notable initiatives specially targeted to these individuals. Examples of these include the following.

- LSC funds multiple technology initiatives to enhance services to veterans and current members of the military and their families. For example, an on-line "triage" tool enables Kentucky legal services providers to readily identify and respond to veterans' legal needs. And legal aid attorneys in Colorado provide on-line "chat" assistance to guide veterans to the legal resources and/or assistance that will meet their particular legal needs.

- LSC funds the Veterans Consortium Pro Bono Program, a partnership of major Veterans Services Organizations, which provides pro bono representation for *pro se* appellants before the U.S. Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims.
- The Bill Smith Homeless Veterans Project at the Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles assists veterans who are homeless or at imminent risk of becoming homeless on a wide range of legal issues. The program has recruited and trained 10 attorneys from major private firms to enhance the project's impact.
- The Veterans' Rights Project at the Legal Aid Foundation of Metropolitan Chicago helps veterans secure VA benefits and protects their legal rights on consumer, housing and related issues.
- The Veterans Legal Advocacy Project at Community Legal Services of Mid-Florida provides assistance to veterans who served in Afghanistan or Iraq, and their family members, who reside in Brevard, Orange and Seminole counties.
- The Kentucky Corps of Advocates for Veterans (KCAV) at the Legal Aid Society of Louisville, Kentucky, is a collaboration with the state bar, the courts, the Kentucky Department of Veterans, and veterans services organizations to increase legal assistance available to veterans.
- AmeriCorps Fellows specializing in veterans issues are working for LSC grantees around the country, including Legal Aid of West Virginia, Northwest Justice Project in Washington State, and the Three Rivers Legal Services program in Jacksonville, Florida.