

OPERATION EDUCATION

Touro Law School Reopens Veterans' and Servicemembers' Rights Clinic



A veteran of the Iraq war was enrolled at SUNY-Stony Brook, working toward his master's degree in social work, when he hit a brick wall. Despite having served in the military and being a United States resident, the veteran wasn't, in fact, a citizen. He possessed his Green Card, but hadn't applied for citizenship, which meant he wasn't eligible for a clinical internship, a requisite for his degree program.

Unsure of where to turn, the veteran was referred to the Veterans' and Servicemembers' Rights Clinic, a recently-revived program at Touro's Jacob D. Fuchsberg Law Center. Christina Knorr, a third-year law student, worked with a volunteer immigration attorney to help the vet apply for citizenship and ultimately land the internship he wanted.

Often the process for getting help is overwhelming and the guidance of an advocate can make a tangible difference. Knorr says, "It didn't take long but the help made a big difference. Now he can pursue his dream."

Suffolk County, Long Island, where the clinic and law school are located, has the largest population of veterans of any county in New York state—an estimated 80,000 former service members—and one of the largest populations in the U.S. Of this population, an estimated 5,000 are homeless. Even for those who are not homeless, returning home after a tour of duty can bring a host of challenges, such as coping with forgotten traffic tickets, dealing with debts, child support and/or mortgage payments, getting the appropriate benefits and finding jobs (or getting old ones back).

To address these myriad needs of veterans—especially preventing or alleviating homelessness and removing obstacles to reintegration into civilian life—the Law Center initially opened the clinic in 2010, and ran it for two years before it had to shut down in 2012 due to lack of funding. But Touro, understanding the growing need to help returning soldiers who fought in Iraq and Afghanistan and aging Vietnam-era vets, was determined to reopen it. After finding new funding from private foundations, government sources and individual donors, the clinic reopened its doors in August 2013

under the leadership of Ken Rosenblum, Touro's longtime associate dean for administration.

Rosenblum, who has been at the law school for 24 years, was the perfect choice to run the clinic. A Vietnam veteran with five years of active duty as a U.S. Army Judge Advocate General's Corps officer, where he worked as a court-martial prosecutor, Rosenblum was strengthened by volunteer legal work he had done on behalf of veterans, including with the local chapter of the Vietnam Veterans of America.

"These are men and women who have made extraordinary sacrifices for their nation. Among Vietnam veterans there is a foundation principle that never again will a generation of veterans abandon another," says Rosenblum, explaining his dedication. "We, as a school and community, owe this to the vets for their service."

While the circumstances of a particular war—and the demographics of the vets who serve—may vary, shared experience in the military is a plus when it comes to providing legal assistance.

"The veterans' ethos is to keep it all in and not tell anyone when you're experiencing hardship," Rosenblum says. "To the extent that vets will open up at all, it's going to be to another vet."

Of the nine second- and third-year law students involved with the clinic last fall, two are U.S. military veterans themselves—one who served in Iraq and the other in Afghanistan. This past spring, 11 new students were signed up for the seminar and

clinic work, several of whom had family histories of military service.

To help students communicate with their clients, the clinic includes weekly three-hour seminars that focus, in part, on the unique language and culture of veterans. For example, using acronyms when referring to war is a key signifier of understanding the veteran experience, i.e. asking vets if they served in "OEF" (Operation Enduring Freedom) or "OIF" (Operation Iraqi Freedom) can help establish instant rapport.

The seminars also cover practical skills like interviewing and public speaking; legal subjects common in veterans' work, like professional ethics and confidentiality, debt collection, credit, traffic tickets, child support modification and bankruptcy; as well as the more traditional veterans' benefits and discharge review and upgrades.

Students work on cases 12 to 15 hours per week, and also sit in on Suffolk's Veterans Treatment Courts, one of about 20 in the state that help veterans by diverting them from the traditional criminal justice system and providing them with the tools they need to live productive and law abiding lives through treatment, rehabilitative programming, reinforcement and judicial monitoring.

Many veterans find themselves involved in the criminal justice system due to "battlemind," where they are still in the mindset of combat and the threat of imminent danger, even after returning home. This could lead to an overly-aggressive response to what might otherwise be an everyday situation, such as getting stuck in a traffic jam.



Left: Clinic student Matthew Domanick with Clinic Director Ken Rosenblum

Right: Clinic students and veterans advocates meet with N.Y. State Senator Lee Zeldin. L-R: Ken Rosenblum; Don Howe, Suffolk Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) Chapter #11; Senator Zeldin; clinic students Christina Knorr and Tesla Carrasquillo; and Ralph Sanchelli, Suffolk VVA #11.





Background, L-R: Spring 2014 Vets Clinic students Giuseppe Rosini, Priscilla DeLeon, Rachel Klebanoff; Clinic Director Ken Rosenblum; clinic students Jess Montefusco, Robert Manetta, Paul Lipsky and Matthew Domanick. Foreground, center: The Honorable John Toomey, Presiding Judge, Suffolk County Veterans Treatment Court; flanked left and right by the peer-to-peer counselors from Suffolk County Chapter of the Vietnam Veterans of America; and far right, Eric Bruno, LCSW, Veterans Justice Outreach Coordinator, Northport VA Medical Center. Students visited the Veterans Treatment Court. Judge Toomey and court staff spent an afternoon in the clinic seminar discussing the work of the court.

Other vets recently returned from combat suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and/or traumatic brain injury (TBI), which could lead them to self-medicate with drugs or alcohol. These courts give vets charged with relatively minor non-violent crimes a chance to get out of the criminal justice system, and earn a reduced charge or a lenient sentence, in return for completing an individualized treatment program, which might include drug or alcohol rehab or anger management counseling.

For Angela Pugliese, a third-year law student in the clinic last fall, the experience was eye-opening. “I have many friends who are veterans, but it’s another thing to learn directly from people who have suffered service-related injuries that you don’t know personally,” she says. “This is a population that often doesn’t realize how much trauma they have incurred. And we can really help.”

As Pugliese came to understand in her tenure at the clinic, one symptom of PTSD is a lack of awareness that one is suffering. She was able to work hand-in-hand with the Northport VA Medical Center on behalf of a veteran who was having a hard time finding a job and had fallen behind on his child support payments. As it turned out, PTSD was at the root of his situation. Pugliese teamed up with a social worker at the Northport VA to get a proper medical evaluation, which she then brought to the court to get the vet a break on his child support payments until he could get back on his feet.

“It’s definitely gratifying to identify the problems and then help out in a concrete way,” says Pugliese. “As a law student you play psychologist, listening and realizing just how often help goes unasked for because there’s not an understanding of the system.”

Many veterans find themselves still in the mindset of combat and feeling the threat of imminent danger, even after returning home.

In addition to performing much-needed services, the students agree that their experience is valuable for their law careers. Pugliese, for example, currently works at a law firm that specializes in workers’ compensation. The firm may open a branch specializing in veterans’ benefits, something she’d now be well-prepared to handle. Knorr has benefitted greatly by practicing her listening skills and learning how to establish trust with clients.

Another student, Justin Hoitsma, offers a slightly different perspective. Having completed two deployments in Iraq, Hoitsma knew as soon as he heard of the clinic that he wanted to get involved. He says, “With my prior experiences, I knew I could bring a lot to the table.”

Hoitsma, who was born in the Bronx and raised on Long Island, says he always knew he wanted to help people, which is partly what drew him to law. As a second-year student at the clinic he had many opportunities to help. On one occasion, he helped a veteran get their disability rating status re-evaluated so the vet could qualify for increased benefits. In another case, he worked with a veteran who needed his re-enlistment code altered so that he could qualify for the New York City Police Department. Hoitsma explains that it’s easy for veterans to receive a code that might not be entirely accurate, especially if there had been a disciplinary issue. Making slight changes can have a big impact.

Whatever the issue, Hoitsma remains matter-of-fact about his role. “These are people who fought for our country’s freedom,” he says. “I never looked at the work as challenging. To me, it was just something that needed to be done.”

Last semester, a new group of clinic students took on cases, though many from the fall remained in contact with

Touro’s Veteran’s Affairs Program

A New Initiative From the Office of the President

Rosenblum and social workers at the VA. In one instance, Pugliese has made herself available. “I would hate for a vet to feel like he or she is being passed around,” she says.

The work at the clinic extends beyond the individual cases, too. After witnessing bureaucratic roadblocks firsthand, several students, with Rosenblum’s support, approached New York State Senator Lee Zeldin. The students asked Senator Zeldin, who served in Iraq himself, to introduce legislation they had drafted to make it easier for vets to resolve problems with the State Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV).

In the proposed legislation, the DMV would have to appoint a liaison to help veterans cut through the red tape of reinstating their licenses after their tours; in another bill drafted by the students, veterans courts would be given greater discretion over waiving mandatory court fees that can cause financial hardship on vets, many of whom are already strained monetarily.

This is just the beginning. The good work done at the clinic is certainly fulfilling a need—and all who are involved are striving to ensure its longevity. Hoitsma says, “With the current conflicts around the globe, I certainly hope the clinic has staying power—it’s essential.” ■



Colonel (Ret) Geoffrey Slack

Earlier this year, the Office of the President formally established the Veteran’s Affairs Program to support veterans who are currently enrolled at a select number of Touro campuses in New York City and Long Island. Colonel Geoffrey Slack, who recently retired after a 34-year tenure with the U.S. Army, is spearheading the program.

He says, “The program’s principal goal is to assist veterans and their dependents (spouses and children) through the process of entering Touro College at either the undergraduate, graduate or professional program level, and to continue to offer direct assistance throughout their education at Touro.”

Presently, Slack is on a fact-finding mission to identify the baseline issues. Slack is focusing on how veterans interface with Touro, via the registrar, bursar, financial aid office and more. As the budding program develops, it may expand, depending on the scope of need. Going forward, recruitment efforts may become part of the program’s activities as well.

“Veterans benefit from having a network,” Slack says. “I joined the Touro team because I was profoundly impressed by the level of concern for the educational needs of veterans by the leadership of Touro College. From the president of the college down through the entire academic and administrative staff of Touro, I have been welcomed, encouraged and supported as we work to build the Veteran’s Affairs Program.”

For more information, please contact Colonel Slack at: 631-665-1600, ext: 6317.