



# IMPORTANT WORK TO BE DONE

Thanks to Texas Lawyers for Texas Veterans clinics,  
attorneys across the state take on pro bono cases that change lives.

BY HANNAH KIDDOO

Warren Bert had a lot on his mind when he walked into a legal clinic at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center in Houston last year. Bert, a veteran who served as an administrative specialist in the Army from 1981 to 1984, had just lost his father, was in the process of moving, and was working toward an associate's degree in substance dependence counseling.

On top of it all was a haunting past mistake that led Bert to the clinic in the first place: In 2002, he was arrested for a felony. Bert had accepted and completed three years of deferred adjudication and 240 hours of community service and was ready to move forward. But, as the years passed and he looked for housing and gainful employment, his criminal history complicated the process.

"It was kind of rough with that on my record," Bert said. "I'd take an office clerical test at some of these temp

agencies and they would say, 'We love you. You ranked high in our national tests, but I'm sorry. Because of the clients that we represent, we can't take you.'"

Bert knew that he needed a fresh start. As a patient and a former employee of the VA, he often heard announcements about Texas Lawyers for Texas Veterans clinics, free events for current and former service members with law-related concerns. In fact, he had previously received assistance with a civil matter at one. When he realized that a lawyer could assist with sealing the felony arrest on his record, he decided to attend again.

At the clinic, Bert met Jamie Sullivan, a volunteer attorney who was helping with the intake process and answering general law-related questions. As Sullivan—a veteran herself—learned the details of Bert's case and met his fiancée, she knew she wanted to represent him.

Handling the particulars of Bert's case was somewhat foreign to Sullivan. The representation required a court appearance, and as an intellectual property lawyer at ExxonMobil in Spring, she does not frequently appear in court. But Sullivan maintains that growing her legal knowledge was one of the many rewards of volunteering for the matter. "That was part of the fun really—to have a different legal experience," she said. In the months that followed, Sullivan navigated the case using resources including guides from Houston Volunteer Lawyers and the State Bar of Texas.

Ultimately, the felony record was sealed. Now Bert says he no longer worries about his arrest record when filling out housing and job applications. "I feel a whole lot better," he said. "It was a big lift for me to get that sealed. I don't have to deal with that right now."

Sullivan estimates that she spent 15-20 hours over 12 weeks on the case, though much of this consisted of doing background work to "over-prepare" for her appearance in court. "The judge questioned me for nearly five minutes about the facts and about the petition and then he said, 'OK, your petition's granted.' And that was it," she said. "It was fairly intimidating, but at the end of the day, you feel like you really did some good."

Bert's circumstances are not unique. Texas has the second-highest population of veterans in the nation—with 1.6 million—and many of them have legal concerns. In 2010, the State Bar of Texas and then-President Terry Tottenham launched Texas Lawyers for Texas Veterans to help local bars provide no-cost legal assistance to veterans and their families. Since the initiative began, TLTV volunteer attorneys have served more than 18,000 veterans in clinics across the state, and the program continues to spread. Representatives from the State Bar presented on TLTV at two American Bar Association meetings in 2015, while supporting materials, such as the TLTV Tool Kit and Clinic in a Box, help make hosting a clinic as simple as possible.

Volunteer attorneys can attend a clinic or contact their local bar association to find out what activities are already in place. Sullivan said she has been surprised by how crowded the TLTV clinics at the VA sometimes are. For those anxious about volunteering on matters outside

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of their comfort zone, she stressed that lawyers who choose to take on more complex cases can pair up with other volunteers. Still, she added, many veterans come seeking answers for basic questions. "Much of it is just giving common-sense, practical advice to people," Sullivan said. "A lot of times there's not even a real legal issue that's outstanding at the end of the day."

Regardless of the level of attention required, volunteering can have a significant impact on veterans.

"It's nice to know that we have resources," Bert said. "Having that support is a life-changing experience, and I'm forever grateful." **TBJ**

For more information on TLTV, go to [texasbar.com/veterans](http://texasbar.com/veterans) or call (800) 204-2222, ext. 1514.



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