



HOW TLTV AND LOCAL BARS SERVE VETERANS

As Texas Lawyers for Texas Veterans turns 10, participating local bar associations continue addressing the legal needs of military veterans.

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It's been 10 years since Terry Tottenham, past president of the State Bar of Texas and former U.S. Marine, dreamt up the Texas Lawyers for Texas Veterans, or TLTV, program and in the decade since, local bar associations across the state have joined its ranks to meet the legal needs of veterans and their families. Funded by the Texas Access to Justice Foundation, the State Bar's initiative pairs with legal aid organizations, veterans service providers, and law schools to give pro bono assistance to those who have served in the military, along with their loved ones, and are living in poverty or without homes.

"Since the program began 10 years ago, Texas lawyers have served, and in many instances saved, almost 40,000 Texas veterans and their families," Tottenham said. "[W]e now have similar programs in all 50 states."

According to a 2016 report by the Harris County Veterans Services Office,¹ 7% of Texas veterans, or 102,727, were impoverished. Twenty-eight percent, or 414,471, live with a disability, compared with 15% of civilians living with a disability. Texas Lawyers for Texas Veterans was designed to help such veterans who may not have the financial resources to attain legal representation to address their needs.

TLTV was modeled on the work started by the Houston Bar Association under the leadership of Kay Sim and Travis Sales, Tottenham said. The HBA has organized weekly legal clinics at Houston's Veterans Administration hospital since 2008. Through local bar associations across Texas, TLTV has helped arrange its own veterans legal clinics to address civil legal needs. The common areas volunteers help with include real estate law, family law, wills and probate, landlord-tenant issues, and disability and benefits.

"A specific success story involved Everett Hughes, a recently discharged Navy veteran who wrongfully was being denied his unemployment benefits," Tottenham said. "Through a TLTV flyer, he attended a TLTV clinic in San Antonio and met Karen Monsen. Karen took his case on a pro bono basis, got Mr. Hughes' unemployment benefits reinstated, and ensured that he received future benefits. Mr. Hughes outlined his case at a State Bar Board

of Directors meeting and observed, "TLTV saved my life."

The State Bar of Texas initiative has brought more than 25 bar associations and organizations to the fold to help others like Hughes. TLTV has provided to participants its Clinic in a Box and Veterans Clinic Marketing Tool Kit to offer applications, forms, office supplies, and in-depth resources for organizing and promoting legal clinics to veterans and volunteer attorneys.

The Tarrant County Bar Association hosts remote clinics, switching gears from monthly in-person clinics pre-pandemic. Applicants receive free consultations with pro bono attorneys. Since the start of the pandemic in March, 119 consultations have occurred with the help of 32 different volunteer lawyers by phone. When veterans meet the Tarrant County Bar's financial restrictions, the bar can match them with an attorney for further pro bono assistance. Seventeen have used those free civil legal services, excluding the 35 ongoing cases that began before the pandemic, Tarrant County Bar Association Pro Bono Programs Director Kayla Dailey said.

Additionally, the Tarrant County Bar Association hosted the Heroes Wills Clinic this summer, a drive-thru wills and end-of-life-planning documents signing ceremony that provided free wills and estates packages to 21 veterans and spouses of deceased veterans. "We were thrilled with how this event went and are planning another for this November to celebrate Veterans Day," Dailey said. For more information, go to txltv.org.

The Austin Bar Association also switched to clinics by phone in response to the pandemic, replacing its in-person schedule on second Mondays until at least 2021. In addition to typical legal needs faced by veterans, the Austin Bar helps with matters unrelated to military issues in areas such as divorce, business start-ups, and even criminal matters through its Lawyer Referral Service. Through this service, income ineligible veterans may qualify for a 20% discount on legal work. For a full list of programs under the Austin Bar Association, go to austinbar.org/for-the-public/legal-resources/veterans.

The Jefferson County Bar Association, through its Veterans Legal Initiative, offers its basic legal services to Jefferson, Hardin, Orange, Liberty, and Chambers counties. Its clinics serve veterans living up to 200% above the poverty level. Since 2010, the initiative has provided legal advice, resources, referrals, or legal representation to more than 975 veterans, with only 451 meeting TAJF financial eligibility.

Floods—first by Hurricane Harvey in 2017 and then Tropical Storm Imelda two years later—and this year's pandemic took the Jefferson County Bar Association's clinics out of the Veteran Outpatient Clinic in Beaumont, forcing the bar to adopt a virtual clinic model. However, since the pandemic, Jefferson County has continued to receive numerous referrals from other veteran and community organizations and remains in regular communication with veterans about resources and services, Jefferson County Bar Association Veterans Legal Initiative Coordinator Melissa Kirchmer said. For more information, go to jcba.org/page/VetsInitiative.

Other TLTV participants include the Amarillo, Dallas, Bell County, Denton County, El Paso, Houston, and San Antonio bar associations along with Baylor Law School, Legal Aid of NorthWest Texas, and Lone Star Legal Aid. Tottenham pointed to uniform acceptance by local bar associations as evidence of the success of Texas Lawyers for Texas Veterans.

For information on Texas Lawyers for Texas Veterans and a list of veterans legal clinics across Texas, go to texasbar.com/veterans. TBJ

NOTE

1. https://www.texvet.org/sites/default/files/1_newstart_2014/events/rotr-2017-01-houston-needs-assessment.pdf.