



Volunteers at a legal clinic at Lamar University in Beaumont. Back row, left to right: Kendall Cockrell, Bill Little, Chris Kirchmer, Bob Black, Mitch Smith, Michele Smith. Front row, left to right: Sheigh Summerlin, Stefanie Adams.

TEXAS LAWYERS FOR TEXAS VETERANS

Continuing the Commitment to Veterans

BY TERI RODRIGUEZ

Two years after the *Texas Lawyers for Texas Veterans* initiative launched, Texas attorneys have served more than 6,000 veterans and the program continues to make an impact in the lives of veterans and those who volunteer their time. Launched in 2010, the program's main objective is to support local efforts to develop and assist pro bono legal clinics for veterans who otherwise could not afford or do not have access to legal services.



Volunteers at a legal clinic at the Orange County Courthouse. Left to right: Stephen Townsend, Judge Courtney Arkeen, Gordon Friesz.

LOCAL BARS COMMITMENT

Texas Lawyers for Texas Veterans was inspired by the Houston Bar Association's successful veterans legal clinics program and modeled after the work done through the Houston Volunteer Lawyers Program. Since the statewide launch in 2010, TLTV has expanded across several counties connecting and serving veterans. Local bar associations in Austin, Bastrop, Bell County, Dallas, Fort Worth, Hidalgo County, San Antonio, and West Texas quickly adopted the program and continue to expand services.

This year, TLTV support has grown, thanks to new partnerships and local bar support. The Galveston County Bar Association held its first clinic in February and assisted 31 veterans with the help of 14 volunteer attorneys. Collin County attorneys assisted 33 veterans through a clinic supported by its local bar and Lone State Legal Aid-Longview continues to hold legal clinics every Thursday offering assistance with veterans benefits, consumer issues, wills and estate planning, and other legal matters.

Bonnie Dean, executive director of the Jefferson County Bar Association, remembers the large turnout at their first veterans legal clinic — more than 100 veterans. The clinics that followed have not matched the inaugural attendance, but she hopes to reach that number again. "One of the problems is getting the word out to veterans and convincing them that our services are legitimate because some veterans think our clinics are too good to be true," Dean said.

The Jefferson County Bar Association Veterans Initiative reports that in the last year, 138 veterans have attended a legal clinic, 140 legal issues were presented by veterans, and 63 veterans qualified for free legal representation. In addition, Dean says that calls they receive from veterans seeking assistance — outside of scheduled legal clinics — have increased. "It has become a full-time project for us," she said. "It is one of the most rewarding things I've done."

Last year, the Jefferson County Bar Association formed a coalition, Veterans Legal Initiative, with the Houston Bar Association and the Fort Bend County Lawyers Care program. This year, they added Baylor Law School and the Austin Bar Association. The coalition now offers assistance to veterans within a 17-county region. They also partnered with a local paralegal group, the Beaumont Veteran Outpatient Clinic, and all area Veteran Service Officers in support of the initiative.

Thanks, in part, to a grant the Jefferson County Bar Association received from the Texas Access to Justice Foundation, Dean explained that their mission for this coming year is to expand their outreach. "We need to make it a top priority, especially in rural and smaller counties, to get the word out to veterans," she said. Instrumental in helping the Jefferson County Bar reach this goal are local churches and the Salvation Army. Both distribute legal clinic flyers — churches to their congregations and the Salvation Army to charitable organizations such as homeless shelters. Dean says such groups have

been phenomenal in lending support to publicize clinics.

J. Elizabeth Spears, an associate with McLeod, Alexander, Powel & Appfel, P.C. in Galveston, led the effort to establish the first veterans legal clinic with the Galveston County Bar Association. Spears learned about the initiative while attending a workshop at the Bar Leaders Conference in 2010. She obtained a Clinic-in-a-Box, enlisted the help of county Veteran Affairs Officer Frank Furleigh, a group of high school foreign exchange students she was hosting, and 25 volunteers — to her delight, they assisted nine veterans that day. These days, Spears has also received support from the Veterans Legal Initiative. “They have always been available for any questions I’ve had along the way,” she said.

The veterans they assist have questions covering a multitude of topics: contract issues, pre-deployment wills or powers of attorney, family matters, and tax law. At times, veterans do not have a pending case but need someone to assist with an explanation or guidance on a variety of topics.

“They have documents or some situation and just don’t know what to do,” Spears said. “The vast majority of issues can be solved with a simple action by the veteran, but they need to know where to go or who to contact.” Spears said all of the veterans she assists are special to her. “Sometimes one will stop and shake my hand, thanking us for doing the clinic, with tears in his eyes. I am incredibly humbled and express my deep gratitude for their service to all Americans.”

Penny Phillips of The Law Office of Penny Phillips in Plano volunteered to help establish legal clinics in Collin County. Phillips worked with Legal Aid of NorthWest Texas-McKinney in setting up the clinics. Soon afterward, the Workforce Center — a division of the Texas Veterans Commission that assists veterans in finding job opportunities — reached out to Phillips. “Everyone from TVC that I’ve worked with is also a veteran, so they really get why this is so important,” Phillips said. TVC added thousands of veterans to its mailing lists and continues to distribute information about upcoming legal clinics.

Phillips, who served six years as a JAG officer in the U.S. Air Force, remembers a veteran she met at the first legal clinic at which she volunteered. The veteran was a woman who served in Vietnam and needed help understanding a letter she’d received from the Department of Veterans Affairs. During their information session, Phillips learned about the veteran’s experience in the military, noting that women at that time made up an even smaller percentage of the military than they do now. “She is a courageous trailblazer and I feel immense gratitude to her and all the women who served in the military before me,” she said.

VOLUNTEER COMMITMENT

Bridget Fuselier, a professor at Baylor Law School, became interested in starting a veterans legal clinic at the school after reading about the initiative in a *Texas Bar Journal* article that highlighted TLTV. “I thought this would be a great opportunity for the law school to do something impactful in the com-

munity,” Fuselier said. “While reaching out and helping others our law students have the opportunity to participate in a pro bono program and witness firsthand how important and rewarding it is to help others.”

Fuselier explains that it is important to her to be involved with the legal clinics. “Especially in today’s military, when there are multiple deployments, people living with post-traumatic stress disorder, and other physical injuries, it is the least we can do to give something back to those who have given so much for all of us,” she said.

Baylor Law School held its first veterans legal clinic last month. The initiative is supported by a \$22,500 grant the school received from the Texas Access to Justice Foundation. The clinic is organized as a law school program with local attorneys assisting with advice and counsel sessions and also providing legal representation if needed. Law students can offer assistance under the supervision of licensed attorneys. In some instances, law students are assigned to assist with cases that are handled by local attorneys. Baylor law student Amanda Sherek volunteered at the first legal clinic. She is applying for active duty in the Army JAGS Corps and says she feels a sense of connection even though she has yet to serve. Sherek feels honored to have the chance to assist veterans. “This is a great way to give back to those who have served our country,” she said.

SUPPORT

The Texas Access to Justice Commission honored the service of veterans at the Champions of Justice Gala Benefiting Veterans. This year, the event raised more than \$413,000 to help provide civil legal services to low-income Texas veterans. More than \$1 million has been raised by the gala over the past three years — all of which benefits veterans legal assistance programs.

The State Bar of Texas received a \$20,000 grant from the American College of Trial Lawyers to expand TLTV throughout the state and beyond and to provide educational support to volunteer lawyers. A webcast scheduled for Nov. 28 from 10:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. will provide three hours of CLE credit that can be used to fulfill the accreditation requirements of the Veteran’s Administration for representation of veterans. The webcast is free to attorneys who pledge to volunteer at a Veterans Legal Clinic or take 1 pro-bono case serving a veteran in the upcoming year. “I strongly encourage attorneys to take advantage of this free CLE opportunity, to apply for VA accreditation, and to volunteer assistance to our veterans,” said **Jo Ann Merica**, a statewide leader of TLTV and member of the State Bar Board of Directors. Information can be found at texasbar.com/vetstraining.

As volunteers and bar entities continue in their commitment to offer assistance to veterans, a resonating sentiment is clear — that lending support to TLTV is just a small gesture of return for the veterans who have served this country.

Contact Lindsey Ratcliff at lrattcliff@texasbar.com or (512) 427-1517 for more information. Resources for attorneys and veterans are available at www.texasbar.com/veterans.