



## *Providing Legal Counsel to Those Who Served*

BY JUDY L. MARCHMAN

**I** didn't expect it to be a one-on-one basis. It's a lot better to talk to someone." So commented an Army veteran who attended the Austin Bar Association's first veterans legal clinic in June. He hadn't realized he would actually get to speak with a lawyer face to face and was grateful for the chance.

Many veterans don't get that chance. They may need assistance with a disability or other benefits claim or with basic legal services, such as family law issues or landlord-tenant problems, but may not know where to find legal assistance or cannot afford it.

The State Bar initiative *Texas Lawyers for Texas Veterans* is providing veterans with the opportunity to receive the legal aid they need through the work of local bar associations, legal aid groups, and volunteer attorneys across the state.

*Texas Lawyers for Texas Veterans* (TLTV) was conceived by State Bar President **Terry Tottenham** as a way to ensure that organized pro bono legal clinics were established statewide to

assist military veterans who otherwise cannot afford or do not have access to the legal services they need.

While there are many outstanding veterans service providers throughout the state, most are not equipped to provide basic legal services or advice. With the TLTV initiative, Texas lawyers can help fill that gap by providing pro bono legal assistance to veterans in need.

"*Texas Lawyers for Texas Veterans* is a win-win program for all of us. The men and women who have bravely served our country — many of them returning home to uncertain futures or facing mental health or physical disabilities — now have more options for receiving the legal help they need and deserve," said Tottenham, a former Marine. "At the same time, this initiative has completely energized our profession by expanding pro bono opportunities across the state. Lawyers who haven't done pro bono work before or for a long time are getting involved, so that's a great thing to see."

As Tottenham traveled the state last year talking about the need for a veterans' initiative, he found the response from lawyers to be overwhelmingly positive and enthusiastic. Austin attorney **Dan King** was quick to join the cause, serving as the first chair of the Texas Lawyers for Texas Veterans Committee during the project's planning stages.

"Having an affinity for those in need and always interested in helping those in our society who have the inability to access our judicial system successfully, I spoke with then President-elect Tottenham about my strong interest in volunteering to assist him with his key initiatives," said King. "This led to many meetings and detailed discussions regarding our underserved veteran population in Texas. With Terry's guidance, oversight, and vision, we developed an outline of the TLTV program."

Another key supporter has been Houston lawyer **Travis Sales**, who began a veterans' initiative in 2008 at the Houston Bar Association during his term as HBA president. He serves as co-chair of the Texas Lawyers for Texas Veterans Committee with Austin attorney **Jo Ann Merica**. Sales initiated the Houston veterans' initiative after learning about the severe backlog of veteran disability claims in the Houston area. Houston also has a high number of homeless veterans.

The Houston Bar's veterans legal clinic, held weekly at Houston's Michael DeBakey VA Hospital, has served as the model for the TLTV program. To date, the clinic has served more than 3,100 veterans.

"The HBA's veterans program was designed to help ensure that those who have served our country and defended our freedoms have full access to the justice system that they helped preserve and protect," said Sales. "The program also provides a unique way that we as lawyers can give back and say thank you to our veterans."

With its experience in working with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, local Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) and American Legion leaders, and other community leaders on how best to reach and work with veterans, the Houston Bar has also served as a resource for other local bar associations as they plan clinics. "Kay Sim, the executive director of the HBA, and the Houston Volunteer Lawyers Program have been invaluable in providing guidance and resources to other bar leaders and groups," said Sales.

## EXPANDING STATEWIDE

*Texas Lawyers for Texas Veterans* officially launched in July at the Bar Leaders Conference, but prior to that, several local bars had already inaugurated their own clinics, including ones in Austin, Dallas, El Paso, and San Antonio.

The veterans legal clinics are the initiative's primary mission, and as such, the State Bar is providing resource and educational materials to help local bar associations organize and maintain their clinics. Thanks to a grant from the Texas Bar Foundation, the Bar is providing Clinics in a Box to local bars or legal aid groups, and has printed and is distributing two pamphlets from the Texas Young Lawyers Association: *Resources for Veterans Seeking Help* (see p. 868) and *Resources for Lawyers Assisting Veterans* (see p. 848). The Clinic in a Box contains a how-to toolk-

it as well as all the practical materials, from office supplies and file folders to intake forms, flyers, and signage, that a local bar needs to get a clinic off the ground.

Local bars that have already held clinics have seen the number of veterans seeking assistance increase as word spreads. For example, the Austin Bar held its first monthly clinic in June with 69 veterans on hand; at the August clinic, 111 veterans showed up. Attorney volunteers at the San Antonio Bar's clinics in May and August handled 45 and 86 cases, respectively. Attorneys can volunteer at whatever level works best for them, whether participating for a morning or afternoon at a clinic, taking a veteran's civil case pro bono, serving as a substantive law expert for clinics, or becoming accredited with the VA to help with disability benefits claims.

In November, in commemoration of Veterans Day, veterans clinics are being held in all of the state's major metropolitan areas, as well as in Bastrop and Bell counties; Denton County; Fort Bend, Galveston, and Jefferson counties; and the Midland-Odessa-Big Spring area.

"I have been very humbled and exceedingly grateful for the response we've received from Texas lawyers who have overwhelmingly responded to our requests to volunteer to serve our veterans," said King. "Lawyers, in general, are oftentimes criticized for their lack of helping the communities in which they live. Not so with this program."

Sales concurred: "The lawyers I know who have participated in the program have said they have never felt better about being a lawyer than after they helped a struggling veteran with a pressing legal question or need."

As Tottenham has continued to speak around the state about *Texas Lawyers for Texas Veterans*, the program has received strong support from other legal groups, veterans service providers, and community service organizations throughout the state, including the VA, VFW, American Legion, Texas Council of Community MHMR Centers, and Texas Veterans Commission, which recognized Tottenham with its Excellence Award for his leadership in creating *Texas Lawyers for Texas Veterans*. In May, the Texas Access to Justice Commission dedicated funds raised at its annual gala to benefit low-income veterans. With the funds, the Texas Access to Justice Foundation was able to award special one-time grants to several legal aid organizations and local bar associations to help them further programs to provide legal services to low-income veterans.

In addition, the Texas Supreme Court recently issued an order amending the practice-rule for military attorneys that will help increase legal assistance for lower-rank service members and their dependents in certain civil matters. According to Tottenham, the new rule complements TLTV's mission by better enabling active service members to receive the necessary legal help they deserve.

"As lawyers, we have the opportunity to make a difference by using our expertise in the law to give back to the many men and women who have served our country, often at great sacrifice to themselves and their families," said Tottenham. "It is not only a privilege to do so, but it is the right thing to do."

To learn more about *Texas Lawyers for Texas Veterans*, visit [www.texasbar.com/veterans](http://www.texasbar.com/veterans). ☎