



# VETERANS LEGAL ASSISTANCE CLINIC

# SERVING THOSE WHO HAVE SERVED US



## OVERVIEW

Since 2006, the Veterans Legal Assistance Clinic at Thomas Jefferson School of Law has provided limited legal assistance as well as full-service legal representation to more than 500 U.S. military veterans in San Diego. Many of these veterans are residents and alumni of Veterans Village of San Diego (VVSD), which is a highly successful residential program that provides housing, substance abuse, mental health and job-training services to formerly homeless veterans struggling to regain full participation in society. Now, through our collaboration with VVSD, these veterans also have access to civil legal counsel and representation thanks to the efforts of the Thomas Jefferson students and supervising attorneys who participate in our nationally recognized Veterans Legal Assistance Clinic (VLAC).

Our VLAC serves as a model for similar clinic operations throughout the country. We were one of the very first law school clinics in the country to focus exclusively on addressing the legal needs of veterans. Not only does our VLAC help these veterans transition back into productive lives, but our students gain valuable hands-on representation experience with real clients. Just as important, our students feel a tremendous sense of accomplishment and satisfaction as a result of providing much needed service to those who have served our nation.

The growing number of homeless individuals in San Diego is a serious problem. According to a recent report by San Diego's Regional Task Force on the Homeless, an estimated 18% of the approximately 9,000 homeless in San Diego are veterans. In addition, San Diego is home to more "recently returned" veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan than any other county in the nation. And, San Diego County has nearly double the number of "recently returned" veterans than Los Angeles County, which is ranked second.

## THE VLAC LEARNING EXPERIENCE

Each semester, 8 participating students are supervised by a Thomas Jefferson School of Law professor and clinic fellow. Students must be certified by the California Bar to provide direct client representation. They are assigned full service as well as limited assistance cases that provide practical experience in:

- Drafting legal documents
- Interviewing and counseling clients
- Engaging in legal research
- Conducting discovery
- Representing clients in court
- Performing "intake" interviews with prospective clients

Our VLAC students are required to work at least 20 hours per week on their cases. They are exposed to a broad and diverse array of legal issues and often complex cases that typically fall within these main areas of focus:

- Family Law - child support, custody and visitation; dissolutions of marriage; guardianships; domestic violence; and property issues
- Administrative Law - Social Security/SSI; Unemployment Insurance/California State Disability Insurance; Veterans' Disability Compensation; military discharge status upgrades; Food Stamp matters; and professional licensing
- Bankruptcy - general counseling and assistance
- Offender Reentry - probation modifications; record expungements

Every year, students also have the chance to represent limited assistance clients at Stand Down, a VVSD event attended by hundreds of homeless veterans in the San Diego area. Stand Down offers food, clothing and showers to the homeless attendees as well as a special session of the San Diego Superior Court's Family Support Division that hears child support cases. Our students work alongside VLAC alumni and current and former VLAC fellows to represent all of the veterans on the division's Stand Down calendar.





*"The Thomas Jefferson Veterans Legal Assistance Clinic has afforded me an opportunity to lend a hand to my fellow veterans as they work to get their lives on track. I have personally seen the hope return to the eyes and the smile return to the face of our clients as a result of the work that we put in."*

**Matthew Ferrara , Class of 2012**  
**Veteran of the United States Marine Corps**

*"The Thomas Jefferson School of Law Veterans Legal Assistance Clinic is a tremendous asset to the San Diego community. Many of these individuals feel as though the entire world is on their shoulders, and need advocates who will work to protect their interests. It was a great privilege to work with these veterans during my time in law school and help make their lives a little easier."*

**Elisabeth Donovan, Class of 2012**



While gaining practical experience through field work at VVSD and Stand Down, our students are afforded additional opportunities to polish their legal skills by engaging in two hours of classroom activities and exercises each week that include:

- Client interviewing and counseling
- Fact investigation
- Negotiation and mediation
- Motion practice

They also reflect on their fieldwork through case rounds, allowing students to share their experience with other VLAC students.

## SUCCESS STORIES

Many of the veterans who enter the VVSD program are burdened with legal issues that hinder their chance of success and assimilation back into society, and threaten to return some of them to self-destructive cycles of homelessness and drug and alcohol abuse. Many of these legal issues involve tremendous debts that clients are unable to pay or that will leave them destitute if their wages are garnished. Our VLAC, however, has successfully helped many of these veterans overcome their legal obstacles. A sampling of recent success stories include:

- Obtained an order for child visitation beginning on Christmas Eve for a client who had not seen his son for about two years
- Obtained an order terminating a guardianship and allowing a 12-year-old son to be reunited with his father
- Had thousands of dollars in probation fees and costs waived or stayed on behalf of multiple clients
- Obtained a reduction of thousands of dollars in past due child support payments on grounds that the client was not properly notified of the legal proceedings against him
- Obtained divorces on behalf of several clients
- Obtained releases of multiple drivers' licenses which had been suspended for non-payment of child support
- Successfully represented a client in an administrative hearing in which the Employment Development Department (EDD) sought repayment of more than \$1500 in SDI benefits paid to the client

Our VLAC clients also have expressed satisfaction and gratitude regarding the services they receive from our students. Clients often feel empowered by our students' willingness to pay serious attention to the clients' problems, to carefully listen to client histories and to provide whatever assistance possible, including pointing clients in the right direction to address problems on their own.

## NEW VETERANS SELF-HELP CLINIC

In addition to the thriving VLAC, Thomas Jefferson School of Law has opened a new Veterans Self-Help Legal Clinic on campus to help low to moderate income former military service members with their legal needs. The veterans will be assisted by volunteer lawyers from the community working side-by-side with TJS� law students. The clinic offers a half-hour consultation with a licensed attorney and a law student, who will provide limited assistance only. Self-help services available to veterans include help with filling out forms for court, computer access and assistance with legal research, and document review.



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