

Proskauer and A&E Assist Los Angeles Area Vets

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My 16-year-old daughter, Helena, recently expressed an interest in helping veterans for a high school service project. I immediately took out my phone and emailed my partner Colleen Hart, a veteran of the U.S. Navy, who is heavily involved in veteran volunteer efforts. Colleen wrote me back inviting Helena to help with the Los Angeles County Bar Association's Veterans Legal Services Project (VLSP), a clinic that assists Veterans with legal issues.

Helena worked with Colleen at the VLSP in March, and returned home telling me how much she enjoyed the experience and the meaningful work. The clinic meets once a month, so I decided to join her the next time she went. In preparation, I took a training along with several attorneys from Proskauer and our client A&E Television Network.

California has the largest number of veterans in the country, 1.8 million, with 330,000 in Los Angeles County. Although the national unemployment rate is approximately 3.9%, the rate for Los Angeles County veterans is more than 10.9%. The adjustment to civilian life after military service is very difficult for many veterans who face issues such as homelessness and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

The VLSP runs a clinic once a month at the Bob Hope Patriotic Hall in downtown Los Angeles. The clinic is designed to increase veterans' employability by removing specific barriers to employment such as outstanding warrants, traffic citations, suspended licenses and some criminal convictions. Under California law, there is some discretion for judges to take into consideration military service and its after-effects when deciding whether to dismiss a traffic ticket or expunge certain convictions.

In April, clinic staffers from Proskauer and A&E interviewed approximately 20 veterans. The experience was truly eye-opening, as you get an opportunity to listen to real stories about their struggles and a system that presents significant challenges. Indeed, a simple ticket for driving without a license, normally \$35, can easily end up costing over \$1,000 with the addition of penalties and assessments if not addressed immediately. This kind of money is not attainable for many people, let alone those who are homeless. Relief from such burdens can greatly enhance ones quality of life.

Helena and I interviewed two of the veterans. One was a Navy veteran who wished to have a criminal conviction from 20 years ago expunged so that he “could tell his kids that he was a good man.” In the intake process, we detailed how this veteran had gone through a rough patch and had some legal troubles years ago but had since been clean, sober and law abiding.

The other veteran was from the Marine Corps and had fallen on hard times, and was living out of his car. He had served in multiple tours overseas in war zones and was receiving treatment for PTSD at the Veterans Administration (VA), which sits on a large federal property in West Los Angeles. The veteran had received two tickets while on VA property, one for sleeping in his car and the other for having a small amount of marijuana. Had this veteran parked his car anywhere outside VA property neither issue would have been an offense. The veteran, a man with quiet dignity despite his vast personal issues, told us, “If I don’t take care of this now, this small issue will become a big one.” We helped sort out the veteran’s paperwork, and took down the details of his service, as well as his life after the service, so that other attorneys at VLSP could help argue for dismissal of the tickets.

As we left for the evening, we saw the Marine Corps veteran sitting in his car with all his belongings. My daughter and I are both committed to helping this underserved part of our community.

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