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Viewpoint: Giving Back to the Veterans

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The U.S. ended its nine years of war with Iraq in 2011. The President plans for the remaining 55-60,000 troops from the war in Afghanistan to return home by the end of 2014. Between the two wars, more than two million Americans have been deployed overseas. According to the National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, California is home to nearly two million veterans, more than any other state in the country. While California veterans live primarily in rural areas of the state, where cost of living is lower than it is in the San Francisco Bay Area, more than 26,000 veterans call the Bay Area home. Even those living in surrounding communities rely on services, and in particular legal services, available in the Bay Area.

At the ABA's August meeting, the Department of Veterans Affairs, the American Bar Association and the Legal Services Corp. announced a new partnership and pilot program aimed at reducing the veterans' claims backlog and making it easier for unrepresented veterans to receive assistance developing claims for disability pay. The program provides free assistance from ABA and LSC attorneys to a targeted group of unrepresented veterans who request their help in filing disability claims. These are important initiatives. The significant backlog requires that more lawyers do more to begin to ensure those who have served our country receive the assistance and support they deserve.

California is home to 16 veterans courts of 166 such courts nationwide. These special courts are created to recognize and address the special needs of individuals who have served in combat. In California and other states, veterans advocates, bar associations, organizations such as Equal Justice Works, law schools like Golden Gate University School of Law, firms' pro bono lawyers and others have created other innovative ways to help veterans with their legal needs. Texas created "Legal Clinic in a Box," as a way to scale legal clinic services for veterans. In California, Greenberg Traurig, Loyola Law School, and others created the "VALOR Guide," comprehensive guides for veterans in need of legal representation in the state. Locally, Swords to Plowshares has online guides for legal services, and the San Francisco Bar Association has as part of its lawyer referral program the Military Assistance Program (MAP), dedicated to helping veterans get the representation they need. While these programs and plans for scaling legal services for veterans are admirable and much-needed, the number of veteran clients who need advocates still outweighs the actual supply of lawyers.

A veteran myself, my pro bono practice is focused on helping veterans with benefits claims to address the backlog that adversely affects this distinguished population. I have done this work since I was admitted to the bar in 2010. Now, as an adjunct professor at Golden Gate University School of Law, I am teaching my students how to serve those who have served this country.

The Veterans Law Externship course I teach is structured to allow students to learn the substantive area of veterans' benefits law, and then apply that knowledge to an actual case. Students work in teams of two, meet with veteran clients and communicate with them throughout the semester to gain evidence in support of their claim, then file the claim at the end of the semester. This semester my students are analyzing and drafting claims for service connected injury benefits due to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as well as claims for VA Health Care and the GI Bill that were previously denied. Without the help of these students, these veterans might not be able to gain access to the benefits they have earned.

This model allows students to gain hands-on experience under the supervision of a practicing attorney and provide much-needed pro bono services for a deserving population. Students learn and practice critical professional skills including client relations, factual investigations, and legal research and writing. These skills allow them to both help

veterans and provide much-needed experience for a successful career. Providing the students with practical experience while they are in law school allows them to hit the ground running with their legal careers. While this starting point feels good, GGU Law is partnering to implement strategic interventions that will address more of the immense legal needs of the Bay Area's 26,000 veterans.

As a GGU Law alumnus, it's extremely rewarding to give back to my school by teaching tomorrow's graduates. As a veteran and American, I feel tremendous satisfaction in giving back to those who have served our country. As an attorney, I seek to contribute to new, innovative programs that will meet the needs of veterans and I encourage my colleagues in the legal community to find ways to use your expertise to serve this very deserving population.

Daniel R. Devoy practices civil litigation with an emphasis in business litigation, real estate/property law and personal injury, with a pro bono practice focused on assisting veterans. In addition to his law practice, Devoy is an adjunct professor at Golden Gate University School of Law, where he coaches mock trial teams and teaches externship courses related to Veterans Benefits Law.

The Recorder welcomes submissions to Viewpoint. Contact Vitaly Gashpar at vgashpar@altn.com.

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