

HOUSTON BAR ASSOCIATION



VETERANS LEGAL INITIATIVE

Houston Bar Association
Houston Bar Foundation
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www.hba.org

The Veterans Legal Initiative

Serving Those Who Served

The Veterans Legal Initiative (VLI) was established in 2008 to provide legal assistance to veterans, and spouses of deceased veterans, in Harris County and surrounding areas. To date the program has served more than 17,000 veterans and spouses of deceased veterans. The program is sponsored by the Houston Bar Association and Houston Bar Foundation. The VLI has several primary components, with many of those implemented through the Houston Bar Association's Houston Volunteer Lawyers.



"It's such an easy way to give back to our community. Volunteering at the veterans clinic often provides people with the personal connection

and extra confidence to take a pro bono case."

*Taylor Lamb
Attorney*

Friday Clinics

Legal clinics are held every Friday at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center, from 1:00 p.m. until 5:00 p.m. Volunteer attorneys provide legal advice and intake for veterans on legal issues such as disability and benefits claims, family law, landlord/tenant issues, wills and probate, worker's compensation, tax laws, and many other legal issues. The volunteer pool represents attorneys from law firms of all sizes, corporate legal departments and solo practitioners. If the volunteer determines a veteran is income-eligible and can be helped through Houston Volunteer Lawyers, the veteran will be assigned a pro bono attorney to handle his or her case. The clinics help an average of 35-55 veterans each week.

Saturday Clinics

In 2011, the Houston Bar Foundation received a grant from the Texas Access to Justice Foundation to work with other local bar associations to provide legal advice clinics for veterans in previously underserved areas in a 14-county region in Texas, as well as to train volunteer attorneys in local bar associations in those areas. The HBF applied for the grant as part of a cooperative Veterans Legal Initiative (VLI) with the Jefferson County Bar Foundation and Fort Bend Lawyers Care. The VLI has been fortunate to receive the grant each year, and has been able to expand to additional counties, as well as adding the Austin Bar Association and Baylor Law School as partners. The program now covers the counties of Angelina, Bell, Brazoria, Brazos, Chambers, Galveston, Grimes, Fort Bend, Hardin, Harris, Jefferson, Liberty, McLennan, Montgomery, Orange, San Jacinto, Travis, Walker and Waller. These counties represent a veteran population of more 500,000, or approximately 30% of the veterans in Texas.

Residential Facility Support

The VLI works with two permanent resident facilities for homeless veterans to provide speakers, legal advice and intake as requested at DeGeorge at Union Station and U.S. VETS at Midtown Terrace. The HBA also assists with holiday parties for veterans at the two facilities, providing gift bags and door prizes, and stocks a library for veterans at both facilities.

Houston Stand Down and Veterans Fairs

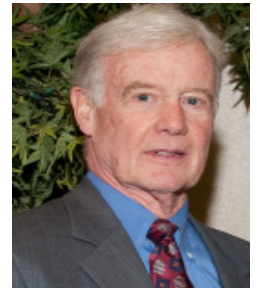
The HBA and HVL sponsor a legal advice booth each fall at Houston Stand Down, which focuses on services for homeless veterans. In addition, the VLI often provides advice and counsel, as well as information on other legal services, at Veterans Fairs and other special events focusing on veterans.

Eligibility

While veterans can have income no more than 200% above the poverty level for cases funded through most grants, the Houston VLI is able to accept cases for veterans who have income up to 300% above the poverty level through a grant from the Houston Bar Foundation, which allows for a higher income level to serve more veterans. The VLI also assists spouses of deceased veterans.

The VLI works with local bar associations to offer Saturday morning clinics on selected dates in counties covered by its service area. Volunteer attorneys meet one on one with veterans to listen to their legal issues, answer legal questions and give brief legal advice. If the veteran needs further legal representation, and meets income guidelines, he or she can be assigned a pro bono attorney through the HBA's Houston Volunteer Lawyers.

"I don't know that most of the bar knows the needs that veterans have, and I don't think they realize the satisfaction they would get from volunteering. You can't put it into words."



*Bob Devlin
Retired Attorney and Veteran*

Partnerships

The VLI has formed important partnerships that have allowed the program to better serve veterans. The VLI's relationship with the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center has been invaluable in providing a facility for weekly clinics. The social workers at DeBakey have embraced this resource as another way to get veterans the overall services they need. This partnership also has made it possible to hold most of the Saturday programs at VA Outpatient Clinics throughout the service area, giving veterans a convenient, familiar environment to get help for situations that can be stressful. A partnership with the Texas Veterans Commission places a TVC representative at every Saturday clinic, offering advice and counseling for those with questions and problems with VA benefits that have not yet progressed to legal problems. The VLI has created other partnerships to increase outreach to veterans who may not know about the program, including leaders in American Legion and VFW organizations that assist with statewide promotion of the legal advice clinics.

Outreach

Outreach is an important part of the program, and it is an area in which there is much work that can still be done. The clinics are publicized through outreach to local media, social media, personal visits to government offices, churches and businesses in the area, and through the VA Outpatient Clinics, VFW posts and American Legion posts, and other venues. The program has the ability to serve many more veterans, but reaching those veterans is a challenge. The Houston Bar Association, the Houston Bar Foundation and Houston Volunteer Lawyers are committed to continuing the provision of legal services to veterans in need, and will seek funding through general funds and grants to continue the program as long as there is a need.