Upon discharge from the military, many veterans face homelessness, family issues, education challenges, and employment-related difficulties. Today’s veterans are more likely than ever to find themselves in poverty, suffer from a service-related disability, or have difficulty finding employment. The needs of those who served our country are great, and sadly, many of those needs remain unmet. Studies conducted by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs reveal that legal services rank among the most significant unmet needs of veterans.1

Unfortunately, in Nebraska, there are few service providers or programs dedicated to providing free or low-cost legal services to veterans. The Nebraska College of Law’s Veterans Advocacy Project (VAP), which was launched in 2015 within the Civil Clinical Law Program, was created with the goal of filling this gap, while providing law students valuable and rewarding practical legal experience.

Through the VAP, senior certified law students, under faculty supervision, provide legal services to veterans through a number of programs, including the Wills for Heroes Program, the Clean Slate Project, and the Veterans Coffee and Counsel Program.

Will for Heroes

The Wills for Heroes Program provides free basic estate planning services to veterans, spouses of veterans, active duty military, those serving in the National Guard, and reservists. The services include the drafting of a simple will, a power of attorney instrument, a living will, a health care power of attorney, and if appropriate, a transfer on death deed. Students also provide general estate planning advice, including how to properly title property and the importance of updating beneficiary designations. Veterans with significant assets or who require complex estate planning are referred to private attorneys who have the requisite expertise to meet the needs of the veteran.

The Wills for Heroes Program began in the summer of 2015 as a one-day clinic facilitated at the Lincoln VA Medical Center, where law students under attorney supervision offered will drafting services to qualifying veterans. A second event was held the following summer. At each event, law students served 15 to 20 veterans, and afterward, the Civil Clinic phone lines were flooded with calls from veterans who had missed the event but needed these services. To meet this demand, the program was converted from a one-day, once-a-year event to an on-going program incorporated into the Civil Clinic’s caseload. Each semester, every student team enrolled in the Civil Clinic is given the opportunity to work with at least one veteran client seeking estate planning services, but students often request additional opportunities to work with veterans during a given
semester. Additional veterans have been served by non-Clinic students while earning pro bono credit toward their Pro Bono Certificate. The students are paired with a faculty member or a private attorney who supervises the student’s work.

Since 2015, the program has assisted 168 veterans and spouses, and Civil Clinic students have drafted over 500 estate planning documents.

**Clean Slate Project**

The Clean Slate Project is another program operated within the Nebraska College of Law’s Civil Clinic. The primary goal of the Clean Slate Project is to assist veterans and other Nebraskans seeking a fresh start and improved employment opportunities by rehabilitating their criminal record.

While working with veteran service providers, the Clinic discovered that many who served our country often face challenges as a result of a criminal record, stemming from incidents occurring shortly after discharge from the military—during that difficult transition period. A veteran’s record will often include a series of minor assaults or drug-related offenses and then a long period without any contact with law enforcement. Upon investigation, it was often discovered the veteran suffered from symptoms of PTSD that had initially gone undiagnosed and untreated. Once receiving treatment, the criminal activity ceased. The Clinic found that although the veteran was no longer committing offenses, the mere existence of their past criminal record often created insurmountable obstacles preventing them from reintegration into society, including restrictions in obtaining employment, housing, benefits, and education. In response, the Clinic dedicated a portion of its caseload to working with veterans in seeking to have their past convictions either set aside or pardoned, and to have certain records sealed.

Since its inception, students and faculty leading the Clean Slate Project have worked to advance justice by working with courts and legislators to improve the laws that permit a citizen to earn a second chance. They have also facilitated off-site legal service fairs to help veterans and the homeless seek clean slate relief, and so far have provided direct representation to over 200 veterans and other Nebraskans seeking a fresh start.

**Veterans Coffee and Counsel Program**

The Veterans Coffee and Counsel (“C&C”) Program is a collaborative project between the College of Law’s Civil Clinic, the Vet Center, and Starbucks. In working with the Starbucks Regional Office, the location at 33rd and O agreed to aid in facilitating the one-day event, where law students, under attorney supervision, set up shop at a local Starbucks and meet with veterans free of charge. During the pre-scheduled, one-hour appointment, students provide legal advice, assistance in reviewing or drafting legal documents, and other basic legal services that can be limited in scope. The Starbucks’ atmosphere, veterans report, is less intimidating and more comfortable and accessible than a law office or law school. Starbucks provides the space, as well as free coffee and pastries for the veterans.

Once an event is scheduled and marketed, veteran service providers will refer to the program veterans who are in need of the type of legal services the C&C Program can provide. If the matter is determined to be an appropriate fit, it will be assigned to a Civil Clinic student team, who will further evaluate the matter, develop a plan of action, and perform all preparatory research and legal work required. Preparatory work typically involves reaching out to the client to confirm acceptance and gather additional information, developing a proposed plan for resolving the legal issue, conducting research or factual investigation, and, when appropriate, drafting necessary documents or instructions for the client. The capstone of the representation is the in-person appointment where the students provide the legal advice requested, answer the veterans’ questions, and provide the documents needed to assist the veterans with their legal issues.

By limiting the scope of representation to only that which can be accomplished with little preparation and a one-hour appointment, the program is able to serve a greater volume of veterans. In fact, it is estimated that with the same time and resources typically expended in assisting a single client through full representation, the program can serve 10-12 veterans through this short-term, limited-scope model. Since the first event in the spring of 2017, the program has assisted over 150 veterans with various civil legal issues, including estate planning, criminal conviction set-aside and pardon, debt collection defense, rental disputes, bankruptcy, child support modifications, divorce, name change, small claims, and many others. The program will typically facilitate 8-10 events per year. Since the start of the Pandemic and the inability to host the events at Starbucks due to social distancing, the program has been facilitated entirely virtually with great success.

**Impact Story**

One memorable and impactful representation of a veteran assisted through the Coffee & Counsel Program involved a disabled veteran who had not been permitted parenting time with his three children for nearly a decade.

The veteran learned of the Coffee and Counsel Program through a veteran service provider and applied for services. At the time, the program had no remaining appointments available that semester, so he was put on the waitlist for the next term. Desperate for help, the veteran came to the Coffee and Counsel event without an appointment, hoping for a cancellation and an opening (this is actually a common practice in the
VETERANS ADVOCACY PROJECT

Brian Lisonbee and Megan Shupe as third year law students in Spring 2017 volunteering at Coffee and Counsel.

Third year law student Haleigh (Brockman) Carlson volunteers at Coffee and Counsel in Spring of 2017.

Third year clinic students volunteer to promote the Clean Slate project Fall 2019. Pictured L-R: Lauren Ziegenbein, Ryan Sullivan, Brianna Poppert, Noah Rasmussen, Jake Schneider, Alexander Sycher, Luke Hautzinger, Shelby Rowan, Brittany Shultz.

Third year law students Joy Kathurima and Allee Barton volunteer with Ken Colson, a Veterans Outreach Program Specialist with the Vet Center, to promote Coffee and Counsel in Fall of 2018.

Liz Flynn and Megan (Meyerson) Sinovic assist a veteran at Coffee & Counsel.
In the end, the students were able to locate a psychologist willing to conduct a risk assessment, an attorney offering to serve as guardian ad litem, and a therapist willing to conduct the initial therapeutic visit—all without charge to the veteran. With all the legal and practical hurdles now overcome, the veteran was able to see his young children for the first time in nearly a decade. I still get goosebumps thinking of what that moment must have felt like for him.

To memorialize the event, the veteran covertly worked with the Governor's office to have a flag flown over the capital on the day of the veteran's first visit with his children, in honor of the Veterans Coffee and Counsel Program. The flag was then formally presented to the program by Senator Brewer, a fellow veteran. It can be found in the clinical wing of the Law College within a custom frame that was hand-built by the veteran through a veterans' program at Nebraska Innovation Campus.

I share this story to highlight one of the many successes of the Veterans Advocacy Project and the ways in which our students serve the community, and to hopefully inspire members of the Nebraska bar to carve out a few hours each month to provide free or sliding scale legal services to those who served this country.

Endnote

1 See, e.g., U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Community Homelessness Assessment Local Education and Networking Groups, Fact Sheet (June 2016) (fact sheet stemming from a 2015 survey of 6,161 veterans; the study found that seven of the top 10 unmet needs involve the legal system).