

SPOTLIGHT ON OCBA VETCOM: ACHIEVING JUSTICE FOR OUR WARRIORS: PAST, PRESENT, & FUTURE

by SHEILA-MARIE FINKELSTEIN

The OCBA Veterans & Military Committee (VetCom) was established as an OCBA committee in 2015. This article explains how it came to be, provides an update on which issues the committee addresses, and identifies ways you can help.

Past: There are more than 137,000 veterans living in Orange County who face a wide variety of legal issues across all practice areas. Too many veterans suffer invisible war wounds including post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury, which create significant barriers to re-entry into civilian life and often lead to a labyrinth of life-altering legal complications. Unfortunately, without access to an experienced attorney who understands military issues, many veterans suffer unemployment, homelessness, incarceration, and suicide. Even without war wounds, many veterans and their families need pro bono legal assistance just to receive the benefits they earned but are not aware of the legal resources available.

The needs of the Orange County veteran population were being underserved. Most lawyers lack the necessary education and training to navigate the waters of the Vet-

eran Affairs system. Additionally, the fact that most attorneys have never served in uniform and are unfamiliar with military culture hinders the ability to fully represent the interests of service members. The organizations that provided pro bono services to the veteran community were not yet fully coordinated.

In recognition of this significant access to justice issue, then-OCBA President Ashleigh Aitken established the Veterans and Military Task Force in January 2015. Steered by Dwight Stirling and myself, the Task Force created a multi-faceted, content-rich veterans resource website organized by practice area (veterans.ocbar.org), launched the popular “Want to Help a Vet?” MCLE series, and administered an OCBA-wide survey that showed at least 300 OCBA members were interested in assisting veterans with their legal issues.

In November 2015, the OCBA Veterans & Military Committee (VetCom) was established in appreciation of our service members’ important contribution to society and recognition of the importance of serving as a platform for the collaboration, education, and engagement in the legal arena of military

and veterans affairs. Dwight and I drafted the mission statement: *The mission of the Orange County Bar Association’s Veterans and Military Committee (VetCom) is to empower the legal community to serve those who serve our nation through education, engagement, and action.*

Present: The original task force of over a dozen private practitioners, students, public defenders, district attorneys, pro bono legal service organizations, and Vietnam Veteran Justice Eileen Moore has more than doubled to the VetCom current roster, adding in-house counsel members, VA Long Beach Healthcare professionals, veterans, veteran family members, and four judges. VetCom deeply appreciates the dedication of all its members, with exceptional admiration for those members who have served and/or currently serve in uniform.

Access to justice remains a pressing issue for veterans. Veterans are still an underserved population, with a 15% unemployment rate, a disproportionate number of veterans who experience homelessness and/or are in the criminal justice system, and a national daily average of twenty-two deaths by suicide. VetCom assists veterans across



the board by providing a place for the legal community to coordinate, collaborate, and educate. VetCom furthers the OCBA's mission of enhancing the system of justice, supporting the lawyers who serve it, and assisting the community served by it, by enabling pro bono legal service providers, the OC Veterans Treatment Court, law school clinics, private sector law firms, and individual attorney volunteers to work synergistically.

VetCom also partners with the OCBA Pro Bono and Education Committees, as well as the various OCBA sections (Family Law, Criminal Law, Trusts & Estates, etc.) and affiliates (OCWLA, OCJBA, etc.) to provide MCLE programs on military cultural competency, VA Benefits, Discharge Upgrades, and military specific aspects of civil law, family law, criminal law, tax law, and other crossover practice areas. It is essential to build the legal community's military cultural competency, including the ability to spot important issues unique to veterans within their practice areas. VetCom members are integral in the process of establishing a California Bar Veterans and Military Program and growing the American Bar Association Military and Veterans Legal Center (<https://tinyurl.com/abamilvets>).

Future: You, dear reader, are our future. VetCom will continue to provide the Orange County legal community with invaluable assistance in the quest to honor and serve the brave men and women who sacrifice so much on behalf of our nation. One of the most meaningful ways you can honor a veteran for their service is to become a "Lawyer for Warriors" and help serve those who selflessly served our country. There are many ways you can help, including:

1. Attending the VetCom CLE program this November, *Achieving Justice for Our Warriors: How to Navigate Discharge Upgrades*;
2. Joining VetCom, where you can coordinate MCLE programs, prepare holiday cards for service members, and/or collect gift cards for the OC Veterans Treatment Court;
3. Taking a pro bono case from Public Law Center (PLC) or Veterans Legal Institute (VLI);
4. Donating to VLI's "Lawyers for Warriors" (vetslegal.com); and/or
5. Becoming a VA-Accredited Attorney.

To the world, you may be just one person, but you have the power to change the entire world for at least one person. For additional information, please read "When Less is More: What You Can Gain from Pro Bono and Low Bono Work" and "How to Become

VA-Accredited," available at <https://ahavalaw.com/sheila-marie-finkelstein/>.



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This article first appeared in Orange County Lawyer, November 2020 (Vol. 62 No. 11), p. 30. The views expressed herein are those of the author. They do not necessarily represent the views of Orange County Lawyer magazine, the Orange County Bar Association, the Orange County Bar Association Charitable Fund, or their staffs, contributors, or advertisers. All legal and other issues must be independently researched.