

# Around the water cooler: John Marshall's veteran's clinic

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August 27, 2008

Each week *Chicago Lawyer* will highlight a different case or legal happening, and solicit your thoughts on the impact of it in the legal community.

The John Marshall Law School's Veterans Legal Support Center & Clinic (VLSC), which began in January, is one of the nation's first law school clinics dedicated solely to addressing the legal needs of veterans seeking their benefits from the Veterans Administration (VA).

A number of organizations and studies have highlighted the unavailability of competent legal representation for our veterans, according to the law school. The purpose of the VLSC is to assist veterans filing VA benefit claims as well as to provide representation for veterans during the appeals process through the statewide network of pro bono attorneys.

Since the clinic has opened, it has taken over 300 calls from veterans and currently has about 70 active cases, said Brian Morris, staff attorney at the clinic. About 16 law students participate in the clinic, and about 120 Illinois lawyers offer to take on these cases on a pro bono basis.

"The focus of the clinic is to try and help veterans of all generations navigate that [military law] system," Morris said. "We train law students to take phone calls from veterans. Under my supervision, we review the claims for disability or compensation, and where we can help them directly we do."

The law school's Veterans Advocacy Course includes the study of federal, state, and local laws pertaining to veterans' advocacy. Through examining the historical origins of veterans' advocacy law and the procedural and substantive texts used by the courts and attorneys, students learn federal agency litigation practice, sharpen their analytic skills and become confident in their ability to deal with clients, federal agencies and the courts, according to the law school.

In addition to dealing with the theoretical legal problems presented by veteran status, the Clinical Program emphasizes the practical aspects of handling Veteran Benefits Administration claims from the initial factual intake to the technical aspects of representation at the appellate level.

"People sometimes forget that liberty comes at a cost," Morris said. "Families that sacrificed to various

degrees are promised that 'if you are injured in the line of duty, our government in our country will take care of you.' Sometimes to get that promise fulfilled, it takes some advocacy. That is why we are there — to guide those veterans through the process."

The clinic is working on creating a continuing education book that would serve as a practical guide to military law, and how that law impacts veterans, Morris said. The clinic is also working with the University of Southern Illinois as they start a similar program.

"I'm a veteran. For me it's personally rewarding. I know firsthand about the frustration that comes with having to prove you were injured in the line of duty," said Morris, who has spent 18 years in the Army and Army Reserves. He is currently a major in the Army Reserve who was deployed in 2003, 2004, and 2005 to such places as Bosnia and Iraq.

"The VA system is complicated for a reason. It's a huge bureaucracy with a lot of red tape. The system is designed to thwart people that want a quick solution or a quick answer to a claim. It takes determination to persevere in this process."