

The Legal Intelligencer

Select '**Print**' in your browser menu to print this document.

Copyright 2011. ALM Media Properties, LLC. All rights reserved. *The Legal Intelligencer.*

Page printed from: [*The Legal Intelligencer*](#)

[**Back to Article**](#)

Initiative to Help Homeless veterans Celebrates 10th year

Marsha Cohen

2011-01-24 12:00:00 AM

Since the fall of 2001, the Homeless Advocacy Project has dedicated itself to serving the unique legal needs of Philadelphia's homeless veterans population, especially those suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder.

In doing so, HAP has held a bimonthly legal clinic for Philadelphia's homeless veterans at the Perimeter, a daytime drop-in center for homeless veterans operated by the Philadelphia Veterans Multi-Service and Education Center. To date, HAP has helped 982 homeless veterans with their legal needs.

Since 2006, the clinics have been staffed by volunteers from Saul Ewing under the leadership of HAP board member Caitlin Piccarello. As the project celebrates 10 years of success, HAP is now poised to expand the depth and reach of its Veterans Project by offering services to veterans at new locations in Philadelphia and Camden.

Instrumental in the success of HAP's Veterans Project is HAP's staff attorney, Michael Taub, who marks seven years at HAP this year. In addition to staffing the clinics and representing his many clients, Taub continues to conduct frequent accredited veterans law trainings for attorneys around the country. The success of the project is also attributable to the energy, support and guidance of HAP board members Ethan Fogel, a partner at Dechert, and Wesley Payne IV, a partner at White & Williams and the chair of the bar association's military affairs committee.

According to the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans, 23 percent of all homeless individuals are veterans. Before HAP established its Veterans Project, there were no legal services attorneys in Philadelphia specializing in VA benefits. Most veterans with active VA benefits claims or appeals experience confusion as to the status of their cases and what is required to win benefits. The process is even more daunting for homeless veterans, many suffering from PTSD, who have fought for years, unsuccessfully and without representation, to obtain benefits.

As part of the expansion of its Veterans Project, HAP is embarking on a new partnership with attorneys from CIGNA, who, in collaboration with volunteers from Saul Ewing, will volunteer their time and talents to provide free legal services at the Perimeter. Additionally, HAP has recently partnered with Archer & Greiner, under the leadership of HAP Board Member Natalie D'Amora, and South Jersey Legal Services, to bring legal services to the large number of homeless veterans residing in Camden, N.J. This spring, HAP will also be expanding its services to Impact Services, a transitional housing facility in North Philadelphia, which will be staffed, in part, by the military affairs committee of the Philadelphia Bar Association.

So many homeless veterans are in dire need of legal services and HAP faces the challenge of trying to meet those needs. Consider, for example, the case of a Vietnam-era U.S. Army specialist who turned to HAP. The veteran — the mother of a son with learning disabilities — was diagnosed with severe mental health problems, including PTSD, and was discharged for medical reasons. Afterwards, she was unable to hold down a job, despite numerous attempts, and applied for VA benefits, which were denied. Eventually, she met Taub, the HAP staff attorney, at a legal clinic, and he agreed to represent her on an appeal of the VA's denial. As part of the appeal, Taub conferred with her psychologist and submitted, as evidence, a written medical opinion letter in support of her veterans disability claim. He then represented her at a hearing before a veteran's law judge and submitted a post hearing brief.

Subsequently, the VA reversed its denial and issued a fully favorable decision awarding \$2,675 in monthly VA benefits. Additionally, the VA awarded the veteran more than \$100,000 in back benefits, enabling her to move into an apartment in a safe neighborhood, purchase a car, meet with a financial planner and draft a will to provide for her son's future needs.

Nearly 10 years after the formation of the Veteran's Project, HAP continues to provide successful legal services for homeless veterans in their attempts to access VA benefits. We invite you to become part of our success. For more information about pro bono opportunities with HAP, please visit HAP's website at www.homelessadvocacyproject.org or contact HAP's volunteer coordinator, Cary Moritz, by phone at 215-523-9595 or e-mail cmoritz@philalegal.org . •

Marsha Cohen *is the executive director of the Homeless Advocacy Project.*