



HOMELESS ADVOCACY PROJECT

"..Legal Aid to break the cycle of poverty and homelessness"

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May 22, 2019

The Honorable Johnny Isakson
Chairman
U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs

The Honorable Jon Tester
Ranking Member
U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs

Re: S.980, the Homeless Veterans Prevention Act of 2019

On behalf of the Homeless Advocacy Project (HAP), a non-profit organization that provides free legal services to homeless veterans in Philadelphia, we write to express our full support for Section 3 of S.980, the Homeless Veterans Prevention Act of 2019 (HVPA).

For the last 20 years, HAP has provided civil legal services to countless homeless veterans in Philadelphia. As a result, HAP attorneys know firsthand that civil legal aid is an indispensable component to ending veteran homelessness. The harsh reality, however, is that veterans lack access to critical civil legal services because the resources allocated to this population are inadequate. By passing HVP A, however, the VA can partner with legal service providers to ensure that veterans have access to skilled attorneys dedicated to resolving the legal issues that perpetuate their homelessness.

In 2012, HAP and the Philadelphia VA Medical Center (VAMC) began exploring a partnership, at the VAMC's request, to establish a free legal clinic onsite at the VAMC to serve its patients receiving medical and psychiatric care. In particular, VAMC staff wanted HAP to offer veterans access to legal representation in HAP's highly successful SOAR (SSI/SSDI Outreach, Access and Recovery) Project, a program intended to expedite and increase access to Supplemental Security Income and/or Social Security Disability Insurance for disabled adults who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. The HAP/VAMC legal clinic, however, hit a wall due to VA restrictions on financially supporting free legal services. Fortunately, HAP subsequently secured a two year grant from the Independence Foundation, a private foundation dedicated to supporting the work of organizations that provide free legal aid to underserved populations.

With the Foundation's financial support, HAP established a free legal clinic for homeless veterans at the VAMC in September 2014.

Throughout the two year grant, HAP collaborated with VA social workers and medical providers to provide a holistic approach to addressing the legal needs of homeless veterans in Philadelphia, especially their need to secure mainstream income supports (SSI and SSDI) to prevent or resolve their housing instability. HAP's first SOAR case from its VAMC legal clinic involved an Army veteran who suffered from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. While he was stationed at Fort Bragg, the infamous Jonestown Massacre occurred. In response to the mass suicide, the United States sent military personnel to assist in the bagging and loading of over 900 bodies to be sent back to the United States. This veteran volunteered to assist with the military cleanup and the horrific images he witnessed greatly impacted his mental health. Within just one month of our initial meeting, HAP secured SSDI benefits for this veteran via SOAR. With this income, this homeless veteran rapidly secured stable housing and was better able to focus on his mental health treatment and recovery from the trauma he experienced in the military. He is now employed at the Free Library of Philadelphia. While this particular veteran stands out as an example of the importance of free legal representation for homeless veterans, his story is not unique. For the last 20 years, HAP attorneys have been successfully representing homeless veterans in cases ranging from landlord/tenant disputes and expungements to VA Compensation claims for veterans who experienced the traumas of war or sexual assault.

When HAP initially applied for private foundation funding to establish its VAMC legal clinic, S.825, the Homeless Veterans Prevention Act of 2013, was introduced in the Senate. We were hopeful that the bill would pass so that we could seamlessly extend our services at the VAMC at the completion of the grant period. Despite its success and overwhelming need, however, once the Independence Foundation grant ended and without VA support, HAP was forced to drastically reduce its legal services offered at the Philadelphia VAMC. From a monthly legal clinic, HAP is limited to holding a legal clinic at the VAMC only 4 times annually. Consequently, we are serving far fewer veterans in need of legal representation.

Nearly six years after our initial optimism, we are hopeful that Congress will now pass Section 3 of S.980, the Homeless Veterans Prevention Act of 2019. Our veterans, especially those experiencing homelessness and suffering from a myriad of mental health and physical impairments, deserve no less.

Thank you for your leadership on this important issue. If you have any questions concerning the Homeless Advocacy Project or the legal services we provide to homeless veterans in Philadelphia, feel free to contact Alie Muolo at (215) 523-9579 or amuolo@haplegal.org.

Sincerely,



Alie Muolo
Staff Attorney



Michele Levy
Managing Attorney