

**Statement for the Record**

*of*



*Submitted by*

**Cynthia Johnson**  
**Interim Executive Director**

**For the Hearing of the**  
**Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs**

*Concerning*

**S. 1072, The Homeless Veterans Prevention Act of 2017**

**July 23, 2018**

Chairman Isakson, Ranking Member Tester, and other distinguished members of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs:

On behalf of the Connecticut Veterans Legal Center (CVLC), thank you for the opportunity to provide a statement in support of S. 1072, the Homeless Veterans Prevention Act of 2017, as part of today's hearing. CVLC strongly supports passage of S. 1072, which includes critical provisions to address the urgent nature of veterans' legal needs in Section 3 of the bill ("PARTNERSHIPS WITH PUBLIC AND PRIVATE ENTITIES TO PROVIDE LEGAL SERVICES TO HOMELESS VETERANS AND VETERANS AT RISK OF HOMELESSNESS").

CVLC is a civil legal aid organization that provides free legal services to low-income veterans recovering from homelessness, mental illness and substance abuse. In 2009, CVLC started the first medical-legal partnership in the country to integrate free legal help into care for veterans. This model creates interdisciplinary teams of medical providers and lawyers working shoulder-to-shoulder to resolve legal issues that destabilize veterans' housing, health care, income and family relationships.

To date, CVLC has helped over 3,012 veterans across Connecticut achieve their legal goals. The Department of Veterans' Affairs (VA) recognized this path-breaking partnership with its National Community Partnership Award in 2015.

According to the VA's annual CHALENG survey, homeless veterans clamor for legal help. In the 2017 CHALENG report, legal assistance in five areas (eviction/foreclosure, child support, restore driver's license, outstanding warrants/fines, and discharge upgrades) were five of the top eleven unmet needs of homeless veterans. Homeless veterans rank these legal needs as less likely to be met than their needs for permanent, transitional, or emergency housing. Legal needs similarly dominated the CHALENG survey in other recent years.

CVLC's client Mr. LaPointe provides a powerful example of how addressing these unmet needs helps end veteran homelessness. Mr. LaPointe, who had suffered for decades from schizophrenia, got a notice of eviction after the social security checks that paid his rent stopped coming. He tried to solve the problem himself by driving a cab, but couldn't make ends meet. Homeless and desperate he looked for help. Connecticut VA helped him get into housing he could afford and referred him to CVLC to help him improve the stability and security of his income so he could stay housed. CVLC argued successfully to get his Social Security reinstated, *and* got him 100% service connection after thirty years of unsuccessful applications. "All my anxiety left. My depression left. They gave me hope again," Mr. LaPointe says of his medical-legal team.

As Mr. LaPointe experienced, resolving legal needs improves veterans' mental health and reduces homelessness. According to research recently published in *Health Affairs* by CVLC and its research partners, veterans who received legal representation integrated with VA care showed significant reductions in homelessness, substance abuse, and symptoms of posttraumatic stress

disorder and other mental health issues, along with increased income. The study, which was funded by Bristol Myers-Squibb Foundation, enrolled 950 veterans between 2014 and 2016 across two states. The typical legal intervention studied only cost between \$207 and \$405 – a small amount relative to the annual costs of providing medical care for the chronically homeless and mentally ill.

The legal community has responded to the legal needs of veterans by opening over 140 clinics in VA facilities. VA leadership nationally and locally has embraced the mission of these clinics resulting in continued demand and growth. VA visibility and interest in these innovative, public/private strategies have led to the establishment of a VA working group focused on building medical-legal partnerships, as well as an internal blog post by the VA Secretary in support of this work.

Unfortunately, the capacity of existing legal aid programs, including CVLC, pales in comparison to the scope of the problem. Many legal programs serving veterans are volunteer-only, providing advice once a month on a limited number of legal topics. Most importantly, few if any veterans in rural areas have any access to legal help at all. Given that the number of homeless veterans has recently increased after years of significant decline, Section 3 of the Homeless Veterans Prevention Act of 2017 provides an urgently needed, cost-effective way to reduce homelessness and improve mental health for veterans everywhere.

CVLC applauds the Committee's leadership in considering this important legislation to address the legal needs of our nation's veterans. Again, thank you for the opportunity to share our views in support of S. 1072, and please do not hesitate to contact us if we may provide any additional information or assistance.

Sincerely,

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July 23, 2018

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

Dear Chairman Isakson and Ranking Member Tester,

We write collectively on behalf of the undersigned non-profit veterans legal clinics, including law school clinics, medical-legal partnerships, and others who provide legal aid to veterans on a wide range of matters. We respectfully urge you to ensure the VA provision of funding for veterans' legal services through the Homeless Veterans Prevention Act of 2017.

There is no question that the existing resources to support veteran access to legal resources are insufficient and leaves vulnerable veterans without critical legal resources to ensure their well-being. Indeed, the VA's annual survey of homeless veterans and service providers cites legal problems as a key factor in persistent homelessness for veterans. Public interest and pro bono attorneys assist veterans in a variety of ways to improve their mental and physical health and quality of life. We act to prevent unnecessary evictions that contribute to the crisis of veteran homelessness, and stabilize veterans' incomes through representation in VA benefits and other legal matters. Compared to the civilian population, veterans are at increased risk of homelessness and are more likely to experience disabilities and poor health, and thousands of veterans have been victims of sexual assault. These complex challenges create legal problems that can be resolved with the help of a skilled attorney. A recent study published in Health Affairs in December 2017 found that veterans who received legal representation showed significant reductions in homelessness, substance abuse, and symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder and other mental health issues, along with increased income. Veterans, particularly those who face homelessness and challenges posed by service-connected disabilities, deserve high-quality, free legal representation that can improve their lives, and this committee is best equipped to ensure access to that critical resource.

There could be no greater way to care for our veterans than enabling them access to legal services through the provision of VA funding for those services. We commend the bipartisan efforts made in the creation of this Act, and urge you to ensure that the provision of quality care to veterans in crisis includes helping with their legal problems.

We respectfully urge you to ensure the VA provision of funding for veterans' legal services through passage of S. 1072, the Homeless Veterans Prevention Act of 2017.

Sincerely,

SIGN-ON LIST FOR VETERANS HOMELESSNESS PREVENTION ACT  
ALPHABETIZED BY SIGNATORY'S LAST NAME  
As of 7/23/2018

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