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Law school to give free legal help to veterans

UDM clinic also makes house calls

April 21, 2007

BY KRISTEN JORDAN SHAMUS
FREE PRESS EDUCATION WRITER

Some are poor. Some are homeless. Some are making ends meet but need a little help dealing with child support, taxes, preparing a will or getting Social Security disability coverage. Others need help avoiding a foreclosure on their homes. All of them served this country.

For that, the University of Detroit Mercy School of Law is going to give them the help they need by becoming the first law school in the state to offer free legal assistance to veterans across Michigan.

The law school is already signing up potential clients. And rather than asking the veterans, many of whom have disabilities, to travel to downtown Detroit for their services, the school's lawyers and law students will hit the road this summer and fall in an RV-turned-office to make house calls.

"They served our country. They protected our freedoms. As law students and as an institution of legal study, it's the least we can do," said Anthony Mosko, 24, a first-year law student from Cincinnati who plans to help with the veterans clinic.

"They go and protect our freedoms to have a legal system like ours and due process. I feel we owe this to individuals who serve us overseas."

While law schools around the country are stepping up efforts to help military personnel and veterans, largely in a response to need from service members coming home from Iraq and Afghanistan, the Detroit program stands out for its law-on-wheels approach. Only, perhaps literally, in the Motor City.

"To the best of my knowledge, Detroit's mobile office is unique," said Stephen Lessard, the student liaison to the American Bar Association's committee on Legal Assistance for Military Personnel and a law school student at Georgetown University.

About 280,000 veterans live in Wayne, Oakland and Macomb counties, according to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

One of them is Thomas King of Melvindale, who at 60 is still dealing with post-traumatic stress disorder from his time in the Marine Corps -- including a stretch in Vietnam -- between 1966 and 1972. He said he'd love some legal help with filing a claim for Social Security disability.

"I want somebody who knows what they're doing to help me," said King, who is senior vice commander for American Legion Post 472 in Melvindale.

"Basically, I want to be considered disabled," said King, who is unemployed and does odd jobs to help pay his rent. "I don't know if they could get me on the disability Social Security list or not."

Tyrone Chapman, who runs the Detroit Veterans Center, a 104-bed transitional facility for homeless veterans, said the free legal service could make a world of difference for his clients.

Many of the men and women who come to his center have alcohol or drug dependencies. He said they often get nuisance tickets for things such as loitering, having open intoxicants, vagrancy and public urination, and they need

PHOTOS

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(AMY LEANG/Detroit Free Press)

Instead of requiring veterans to come to them, the lawyers go to veterans. Their RV office-on-the-go sits outside a Vietnam Veterans of America support center in Roseville on Wednesday as Oren Wall, a 75-year-old Korean War vet from Macomb Township, waits for a benefits specialist.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Get help, give help

Vets can sign up now

If you're a veteran and could use some help from the University of Detroit Mercy School of Law, call 313-596-0262.

The school is signing up clients now. Work is likely to begin in earnest in the fall.

Do a little, or a lot

To donate to the law school's veterans clinic, call 313-596-0274. Law school Dean Mark Gordon said any amount can help. Attorneys can volunteer their time by calling 313-596-0256.

Other services

The University of Detroit Mercy School of Law was the only school in the country to win a prestigious award from the American Bar Association in 2006 for its public-interest programs and community service.

Incoming UDM law students are required to either take part in one of several clinics that offer free legal services to poor people or do an externship. In addition to the new Veterans Law Clinic, other offerings include:

- The Urban Law Clinic
- The Immigration Law Clinic

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legal help to clear those up so they can find a job or get an apartment. Many of them have been living on the street for years and are in trouble because they haven't paid back child support.

"To know that U of D is going to do this sort of mobile legal clinic is certainly something we could benefit from," said Chapman, who served in the Vietnam War.

With more veterans coming home from Iraq nearly every day, UDM law school Dean Mark Gordon said there couldn't be a better time to offer a service like this.

"There is a need out there," he said. "Whatever your position on the Iraq war, there's certainly no disagreeing that veterans who served the country deserve the best care."

He said UDM is paying for the roughly \$100,000 in start-up costs for the clinic, but he remains hopeful that the state, private donors and other attorneys will step up to help.

"We care enough about this program. We see a need out there," said David Koelsch, director of the Immigration Law Clinic. "It's sort of an 'If we build it, they will come' approach."

If there's enough support for the program, Gordon said, UDM would like to add a second Mobile Law Office, and turn the veterans clinic into a permanent offering.

Pat Daniels, president of the Vietnam Veterans of America Chapter 154 in Mt. Clemens, agreed that veterans often need support, but don't receive it when they return home from service.

"We deal with World War II veterans on a daily basis, right through with kids coming home from Iraq today," he said. "Because of what's happened over there and what they've gone through, they're not the same. We need to take care of our veterans."

Contact KRISTEN JORDAN SHAMUS at 313-222-5997 or kshamus@freepress.com. Staff writer Tamara Audi contributed to this report.

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wzjpkp

veterans, especially wounded ones should be cared for and assisted however much is needed....it is too bad that the current administration has so much contempt for them and the current military...the draft dodgeing s.o.b.'s that are running our govt. support the military jsut enough to make their defense contractor friends richer...the current suppliers have been sent to war without proper equipment, have had their benefits cut ..teh whole time that chimp in a suit ..sits there on his lazy white house azz saying he "supprts our troops" ..teh hypocrisy is astounding and the ..only reason anyone criticizes lawyers outright is because they are a brainwashed moron that wouldnt know how to make a decison without being told if their lives depended on it..so all you neocon pigs that say you support the war and the pres...take your kids college money and donate it to veterans and then have them join the military ..practice what you preach.

Posted: Mon Apr 23, 2007 7:46 am

hautamja

Midtown - As a law student about to graduate in a few weeks your comments about lawyers being the "slime of the earth who can only occasionally do some good" ignores the thousands of lawyers who work for very low salaries providing legal services not only to veterans, but to the poor, the exploited, and the marginalized via legal services coproations and legal aid. These lawyers typically make \$30-\$50K barely enough to live off of, much less pay the \$80-\$110K in debt they7 have accumulated gaining this legal education. Only 10% of lawyers make the outrageous salaries people like you imagine we make.

Secondly, your ignorance ignores the hundres of thousands of hours that those large salary lawyers and firms donate pro bono to various causes, nonprofits, local community groups, homeowners associations, and those most vulnerable.

Lawyers are not sharks and ambulance chasers. We're concerned citizens who look to find ways to deliver legal services to those people who ned them most, in this case with UDM veterans. Your stereotyping of lawyers not only makes you look stupid, but it discourages those who need legal assistance mopst from seeking it, from fear that lawyers will take advantage of them or overcharge them. We're hear to serve our clients effectively, efficiently, and zealously and we take an oath to do so. Your jealousy or ignorance is grossly misplaced.

Posted: Sun Apr 22, 2007 12:06 pm

Thatsjustice4U

The World War ONE Generation were disciplined and had respect. So did the generations of Veterans between World War II and Vietnam who made this country even greater with their sacrifices.

We now have a me first , selfish , bitter generation who thinks the world owes them everything while contributing NOTHING to it. A draft would change their WHINY attitudes.

I'm a 100% disabled veteran who served in four conflicts over Four enlistments in two different services. I've done my " job " and according to the medical board who rated me total and permanent , it's the only one I can have. The pension is OK , not substantial , but I don't starve and I have free medical care at the VA. It could be better , but I

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am still living . The VA sent me to college twice as long as the Chapter 31 allegedly allows , and I thank them for that and giving me a chance. I worked 11 yrs for the Federal Government after I was discharged from the Armed Forces , so I paid my dues and my taxes , so ANDY you are talking a bunch of garbage. My hats off to those who serve and my deepest contempt for those who make excuses.

Posted: Sun Apr 22, 2007 8:02 am

chubsoda

I have been working along side the military for six months and I live exactly what is happening, unlike what you posters think about life while sitting pretty in your plush homes. Unless any of you here have been here, you need to keep your mouths shut. It's easy for you complainers to point the finger and judge the military but have you ever been in a war zone? Unless you have, you don't know what it's like to wake every day and feel fear from getting shot, being blown up, or crashing in a helicopter or plane. Your nerves are shot, good sleep is something that was left back home, and we're working seven days a week 12 hours minimum a day. All this plus following rules, reg's and showing respect 24/7 to everyone regardless of one's opinion. Reading your posts about why they do not deserve any more of what's owed them is typical of a self-serving American populace. Unless you have the guts to come out here (which I bet you do not), then you will not reap the rewards. Life isn't free and it never has been. But like most, you like to sit your fat azz in front of a computer and judge like you're an expert. Do something for someone else in this world instead always thinking of you. You're indignant attitudes remind me of children who are spoiled brats. YOU PEOPLE OWE THESE MILITARY FOLKS YOUR RESPECT AND LIVES. What are you going to do for them when they get home? These military folks are the first ones to get hired by corporations because they have proved themselves while all of you minimum wage earners feel sorry for yourselves and complain. Just because your life sucks isn't our problem.

Posted: Sun Apr 22, 2007 3:21 am

Ultimate Patriot

Because we gave up years of our lives. Those other occupations, while just as honorable, you can walk away from whenever you want.

Like I said to Andy, if those of us who volunteered didn't, then all you unappreciative people would've been drafted.

Posted: Sun Apr 22, 2007 3:10 am

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