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Wednesday, December 26, 2007

Law students advise state's needy veterans

UDM program includes mobile office to offer aid around the state.

Marisa Schultz / The Detroit News

For two years, Hugh Rowan, a Vietnam-era veteran, tried unsuccessfully to get his Social Security disability benefits restored.

"To say that Social Security representatives are not very receptive to you by phone would be an understatement," said Rowan, 55, whose health problems crippled his ability to walk and to work.

Now, Rowan is no longer homebound and credits a University of Detroit Mercy law student and professor for turning his life around.

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Shortly after contacting the law school's pilot veterans clinic, Social Security officials agreed to not only restore Rowan's monthly benefits, but also to award him pay for the two years his benefits were wrongfully cut off, he said.

"It was very dramatic," said Rowan, a Detroiter who served in the Air Force. "Two years without having income and the (resolution) happened almost instantaneously. I felt it was a true blessing."

The University of Detroit Mercy School of Law believes it will help thousands of other Michigan veterans like Rowan, thanks to a \$200,000 grant the state recently awarded the school to expand the veterans clinic and launch a statewide tour of its

Mobile Law Office -- a converted RV -- to provide legal assistance and representation for low-income veterans from Detroit to the Upper Peninsula.

UDM petitioned the state for the money because, by many accounts, the state's veterans could really use the help.

Michigan has 914,000 veterans and survivors, and they wait longer than the national average to receive a decision on their disability claims, according to figures gathered by UDM.

For those who receive payments, the amount is considerably less than the national average.

In all, Michigan ranks 45th among states in federal health care spending per veteran and 50th for the percentage of veterans enrolled in Veterans Administration health care, the figures show.

By assisting the veterans, the law school can help bring federal dollars to the state and perhaps alleviate the need for veterans to rely on state-funded health and social services, said law school dean Mark Gordon.

"It's a win-win-win for the students, veterans and for the state," Gordon said. "We are the only law school in the country that has a mobile law unit assisting veterans, and we are certainly proud of it."

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To contact the University of Detroit Mercy School of Law, call (313) 596-0262.

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Already, the RV made stops in Flint, Lansing and Grand Rapids.

"Over the next year, we will hit almost every major midsize population station in the state," Gordon said. The expanded clinic will have about 20 law students enrolled when classes resume in January -- up from eight in the fall semester when the clinic was a pilot program.

Most students will be in their third year and about 25-28 years old.

"When you think about it, many of them are the same age of the people coming back from Iraq and Afghanistan," said Michael Bryce, director of clinical programs at the law school.

UDM is one of the few law schools in the country that requires students to earn clinical experience before graduation.

The school offers seven clinics to help the community, including an immigration clinic and urban law clinic, where students get hands-on experience helping clients.

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