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## UDM to take mobile law clinic for vets national

February 6, 2008

By **ROBIN ERB**

FREE PRESS EDUCATION WRITER

When the phone lines began ringing at dawn, the dean of University of Detroit Mercy's School of Law knew his staff had stepped into a need bigger than they'd ever imagined.

It was April 21 and UDM law students were rolling out a mobile clinic that would travel around metro Detroit to offer veterans free legal help in obtaining federal benefits.

"It was 6:12 a.m. That was our first call," Dean Mark Gordon said.

They didn't stop. A veteran from the West Coast phoned: "He was actually crying. ... He felt so abandoned and was so pleased that someone was listening," Gordon said.

Now, less than a year after its debut, the service is going on a national tour. The clinic -- for now in a converted Winnebago -- heads out Thursday for an American Legion post in San Antonio. As it tours the country, it will be staffed by UDM students and faculty. UDM staff also will work with local attorneys in each city who will offer pro bono work.

UDM's original van will continue to tour metro Detroit, Gordon said.

Veterans long have complained that they are often unable to get their benefits because of fragmented and overloaded veterans offices. Some veterans don't realize they're entitled to benefits, said Tyrone Chatman, a Vietnam veteran and associate director of the Michigan Veterans Foundation/Detroit Veterans Center, which offers emergency shelter and transitional housing for veterans.

"They just couldn't get plugged in" to benefits, said Chatman, 55. "For whatever the reason the system wasn't there for them."

The students began dropping by the center last year, and Chatman said a number of its veterans are now in the long pipeline to get services -- a process that can take months.

And the clinic soon will have fancier digs -- a wheelchair-accessible, top-of-the-line 2008 Winnebago Outlook 31C that is being customized by General Motors Corp.

"This doesn't really fall into anything we do, but it's such an intriguing project," said E. Christopher Johnson Jr., vice president and general counsel for GM North America.

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Veterans seeking help from law clinic students may attend an educational session at 10 a.m. Thursday at the University of Detroit Mercy School of Law, 651 E. Jefferson. Attorneys will be available throughout the day.

Veterans who want individual sessions with law clinic staff can register at [www.law.udmercy.edu](http://www.law.udmercy.edu), where donations are being sought as well to support the clinic's operations.

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