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Attorney wants to bring free legal aid to veterans

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For veterans, filing for disability and pension benefits can often be a long and challenging process.

Some veterans are simply not aware they are eligible for benefits and others face a lengthy appeals process.

"Delay seems to be the hallmark," Michael Bryce, a professor at the University of Detroit Mercy School of Law, said.

To help clear up issues veterans many be having, the school has launched Project SALUTE - Students and Lawyers Assisting U.S. Troops Everywhere. Project SALUTE has taken to the roads, traveling the nation in its mobile law office, a recreational vehicle converted into an office space. With the help of UDM faculty, law students and volunteer attorneys, they offer free assistance and legal representation to low-income veterans regarding federal benefit issues.

Currently, there are no scheduled stops in St. Clair County, but a Port Huron lawyer wants that to change. Gregory Stremers, who practices in Port Huron, is actively working to bring the mobile law office to St. Clair County to assist veterans.

"It's really a good thing," Gregory Stremers said. "It's taking off, it's growing, it's huge. I really want to help the vets out. (Filing for benefits is) tough. It's really confusing; it goes in circles."

All you have to do is listen to the number to know how much the service is needed.

Bryce said after the launch of the program, they received more than 400 calls within three weeks.

"Many of those calls had to do with other issues," he said. "But it just shows that half of the people that may qualify for benefits are not represented in a hearing. Vets really don't even seem to be aware of or knowledgeable about benefits they

might be entitled to."

Project SALUTE also aims to engage pro bono attorneys in hopes they will continue the work even after the tour leaves their city. UDM Law School provides training on federal benefits issues to attorneys who are willing to donate time to assist veterans on a pro bono basis.

"We've been getting a great reception," Bryce said. "The demand has indicated there's a significant number of people who need help."

Recently, Project SALUTE

organizers met to discuss making a stop in Port Huron, Bryce said. While no firm date has been set, they are hoping to be in Port Huron within the next two months.

"I think there's people here that do have a need," Stremers said. "Even if these men and women come and talk and say 'Do I have a case?' it could help."

For more information on Project SALUTE or UDM's Veteran's Clinic, call (313) 596-0235.