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IN MEMORY OF CO-FOUNDER

HOWARD R. UDELL / 1941-2013

May 21, 2019

Dear Sen. Isakson and distinguished members of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs,

I write on behalf of the Connecticut Veterans Legal Center ("CVLC") in support of S.980, the Homeless Veterans Prevention Act of 2019. CVLC strongly supports passage of S.980, 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 and 501(c)(3) non-profit whose mission is to lower the legal barriers to housing, healthcare, and income for veterans recovering from mental illness and homelessness. 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. The Department of Veterans' Affairs (VA) recognized this path-breaking partnership with its National Community Partnership Award in 2015.

But the real testament to the need for legal services is the lived experience of at-risk veterans.

When we met one of our clients, Mr. S., he was 70 years old and living in his car. He was looking for assistance adjusting an old debt, but the root cause of his homelessness was his sudden loss of VA benefits. Mr. S. was a Vietnam veteran recovering from PTSD and the discontinuance of his VA benefits left him with only limited social security payments as income. CVLC not only renegotiated his debt, but was also able to get his VA benefits reinstated. Today, Mr. S. has health care, a monthly pension, and stable housing.

He is not alone. In the past ten years, CVLC has represented over 2,400 veterans across Connecticut, handling cases for approximately 600 clients last year alone. Nationwide, the VA's annual CHALENG survey shows the deep need for legal services among homeless veterans. According to the 2018 CHALENG report, legal assistance in seven areas (child support issues, financial guardianship, eviction and foreclosure prevention, restoration of driver's license, assistance with outstanding warrants and

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finances, discharge upgrade and credit counseling) were seven of the top ten unmet needs of homeless male veterans. For homeless female veterans, legal needs were five of the top ten unmet needs (financial guardianship, credit counseling, child support issues, eviction and foreclosure prevention, and discharge upgrade). These unmet needs have been remarkably consistent over time. For the last decade, legal needs have been reliably half or more of the top ten unmet needs for homeless veterans.

The legal community has responded to the legal needs of veterans by opening over 160 clinics in VA facilities across the country. VA leadership nationally and locally has embraced the mission of these clinics resulting in continued demand and growth. While we were once the only medical-legal partnership in the VA healthcare system, today the VA reports that more than two dozen of the 160 free legal clinics are medical-legal partnerships.

Unfortunately, the capacity of existing legal aid programs pales in comparison to the scope of the problem. CVLC remains the only legal aid organization in the country to provide full-time hours of operation at a VA center and even we cannot meet the full legal needs of homeless veterans in our state. Of the remaining facilities, only one other organization provides three days of operation and 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.

The Homeless Veterans Prevention Act of 2019 can help address these problems. Medical research has increasingly established that social determinants such as income and housing can have an equal or greater impact on a person's physical and mental health as medical treatment. Section 3 of S.980 will provide the resources to address these "social determinants of health" within the veterans' healthcare system. This will provide new pathways to reach homeless veterans and increase the reach of existing programs, filling an urgent need in a cost-effective way that reduces homelessness and improves 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. Please do not hesitate to contact us if we may provide any additional information or assistance.

Sincerely,



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