

## Law Schools Unite Through Nonprofit to Help Veterans

by Karen Sloan | November 11, 2016

Veterans clinics at law schools across the country are banding together to share notes and strategies in hopes of improving legal representation for former military personnel.

The National Law School Veterans Clinic Consortium, which formed in 2014 as an informal resource for the country's law school veterans programs, last month transitioned into an official nonprofit organization — a move leaders hope will boost the group's credibility with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and lawmakers.

"Because we now have such significant numbers of law school veterans clinics, we thought the time had come for us to have a more formal organization to increase our effectiveness, particularly with outside bodies," said consortium chairwoman Patricia Roberts, director of the veterans clinic at the College of William and Mary Marshall-Wythe School of Law. "We're confident we will have more of a voice and more opportunities to have a seat at the table as a formal nonprofit operation that speaks with a united voice."

There are more than [50 veterans clinics](#) at law schools today, up from about seven in 2008, and more are coming on line every year.

Some clinics focus on helping veterans obtain benefits through the VA, while others offer civil legal aid specifically to veterans or represent them in veterans treatment courts. The informal iteration of the consortium had 60 law school members, and Roberts said she hope those schools and more will join the newly formalized group.

For now, William & Mary; Stetson University College of Law; and The John Marshall Law School are spearheading the effort. Thus far, the consortium has helped law schools launch new clinics by sharing clinic blueprints and offering feedback and technical assistance.

"By increasing the number of law school clinics, and supporting that increase, we are of course increasing the capacity to serve more veterans and train more law students," Roberts said. "No one clinic can do it all."

The consortium also serves as a national referral network when schools are contacted by veterans outside their geographic areas or who have legal needs beyond the scope of their clinics.

Additionally, the consortium has collaborated on amicus briefs, publications, legislation and conferences, said board member Brian Clauss, who directs John Marshall's Veterans Legal Support Center. "The consortium will continue to be a unifying force to share best practices and encourage the development of additional law school clinics," he said "We also are actively seeking solutions to achieve long-term sustainability for the initiative."

The legal needs among veterans are vast. A July survey of homeless veterans by the VA found that legal assistance accounts for four of the top 10 most pressing unmet needs among that population. Homeless veterans particularly need legal help preventing eviction and foreclosure, restoring drivers licenses, on child support issues, and on outstanding warrants and fines.

Meanwhile, veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan have boosted the need for VA benefits assistance. Veterans whose disability claims are denied often wait four years or more for an appeals hearing.

"We've found that the veterans claim process is so complex, pro bono clinics immediately benefit from understanding where other programs have achieved successful outcomes for veterans," said consortium board member Stacey-Rae Simcox, who directs Stetson's Veterans Advocacy Clinic. "In addition to serving veterans, we see the [consortium] as an outstanding way for legal clinics to leverage curriculum best practices when training the next generation of lawyers."