

H.E.L.P.ing Connecticut's Homeless



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By Ndidi Moses and Georgina Lathouris

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"You have not lived today until you have done something for someone who can never repay you."

— John Bunyan

We pass them every day on the way to work. Many of them have become part of the tapestry of living in a city. Some days we don't notice them at all; but they exist, and are in need of help. According to the Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness Point-in-Time Count¹ of Connecticut's homeless population, 3,387 people were homeless on the 2017 survey date. While this number represents a drastic decrease from the state's all-time high of 4,627 people in 2008, the stark decline is due to the combined efforts of the state and non-profits dedicated to ending homelessness in Connecticut. One such effort is the Homeless Experience Legal Protection initiative (H.E.L.P.).

H.E.L.P. is a national legal initiative providing pro bono legal services to the homeless. It was established in New Orleans in 2004 by Judge Jay C. Zainey, a federal district court judge committed to helping those in need. Judge Zainey began H.E.L.P. by gathering volunteer lawyers to staff a weekly clinic at a shelter in New Orleans. Over the years, he has recruited hundreds of lawyers and created numerous clinics in shelters in over 35 cities across the United States.

From 2009-2014, Connecticut Appleseed, with the encouragement of Judge Zainey and law students at the University of Connecticut School of Law, organized H.E.L.P. clinics for the homeless in Hartford. Connecticut Appleseed has volunteered to re-establish and administer the program a second time because of its worthwhile purpose and its powerful impact. This fall, H.E.L.P. clinics will be held in New Haven and Hartford to as-

sist the homeless. Connecticut Appleseed is recruiting attorneys and law firms and coordinating clinics at the Columbus House shelter in New Haven and South Park Inn in Hartford.

Day Pitney LLP and Murtha Cullina LLP have each volunteered to adopt three months of the Hartford H.E.L.P. clinic. Connecticut Appleseed is currently working to recruit firms and bar associations to staff the remaining clinics. Additionally, it is currently in talks with Quinnipiac University School of Law and the University of Connecticut School of Law regarding the participation of volunteer law students.

Judge Zainey encouraged Connecticut Appleseed to start a Connecticut H.E.L.P. program because it is one of a handful of states with a law that provides free medical records for those who cannot afford them. This law allows homeless individuals, with the help of volunteers, to apply for social security benefits. Bob Kettle, the executive director of Connecticut Appleseed, estimates that the Hartford H.E.L.P. program held over 200 clinics, and provided free legal assistance to over 600 homeless individuals over its five years in operation. Most of those individuals needed help applying for social security benefits.

Nationally, H.E.L.P. has partnered with hundreds of organizations to bring a variety of services to those in need. Volunteers include lawyers, law students, paralegals, and law firm support staff who help individuals complete application forms for social security benefits and obtain required medical records. The clinics also assist clients with a variety of issues including ob-

taining identification, child custody issues, child support issues, creditor/debtor law, disability law, driver's license suspensions, government benefits, immigration law, housing issues, landlord/tenant law, and minor criminal and traffic violations.

In every community they serve, H.E.L.P. clinics provide greatly needed services to individuals and families who do not have access to them. According to Alexis Smith, the executive director of New Haven Legal Assistance, who has trained H.E.L.P. volunteers in Connecticut since 2009, for every 10,000 people living in poverty, there are approximately 1.5 legal aid attorneys. However, Judge Zainey notes that because over half of the homeless population suffers from a mental illness, these individuals do not know how to access the few legal service providers available to them, and so many remain homeless. Lawyers can help fill this void, sometimes with a simple phone call. Judge Zainey recounts a story of a homeless man in New York who could not get a job because there was a warrant out for his arrest for failing to appear on a 12 year old misdemeanor charge for possession of marijuana. The man, who sought help from a New York H.E.L.P. clinic, was unaware that the statute of limitations had run. With a simple phone call, an attorney at the H.E.L.P. clinic was able to get the misdemeanor charge dismissed, allowing the man to obtain a job and apply for the social security benefits he was eligible to receive.

Dena Castricone, a partner at Murtha Cullina LLP in charge of the firm's pro bono program, explained that, "attorneys can learn so much from their pro bono clients about compassion, the impor-

tance of giving back, while at the same time honing their legal skills." Daniel Wenner, a partner at Day Pitney LLP noted that his firm was excited to participate in the H.E.L.P. program again because the firm "has long strived to help people in the Hartford community who otherwise do not have access to legal services." Wenner explained that Day Pitney has, "a deep commitment to pro bono service and this is a great opportunity for us to engage with the community to provide assistance and to demonstrate the impact volunteers can make in it."

"The benefits of the H.E.L.P. program are two-fold," explained Alexis Smith. On one hand, attorneys are able to help those who cannot afford one but are in need of legal assistance. At the same time, the program allows young lawyers and law students to gain practical experience. Jessica Soufer, who worked to coordinate the H.E.L.P. program while at the University of Connecticut School of Law, noted that, "access to justice continues to be a major problem for the homeless and this program is a way for lawyers to stem that tide." **CL**

To learn more about H.E.L.P., visit homelesslegalprotection.com, or contact Bob Kettle, Connecticut Appleseed, 25 Dudley Rd, Wilton, CT 06897, (203) 210-5356, bobkettle@optonline.net.

Notes

1. The Point-in-Time Count provides information each year about the scope of homelessness in Connecticut. For more information see <http://cceh.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/CT-Counts-2017.pdf>



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