

# More than a VA Medical-Legal Partnership: Connecticut Veterans Legal Center Partners with Law Firm Pro Bono Programs to Serve Our Veterans

By Ashleigh Backman

VETERANS CONTINUALLY STRUGGLE with and suffer from the invisible wounds of war. Indeed, our veterans experience unbelievable trauma—including violent and repeated combat or military sexual trauma—which often times result in post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Sometimes these PTSD symptoms begin during service.

Unfortunately, the military misinterprets these biological symptoms as misconduct. As a result, veterans suffering from mental illness are issued other-than-honorable discharges, also known as a “bad paper” discharge. “Bad paper” discharges can prevent veterans from receiving federal benefits, such as healthcare, disability payments, and education and housing assistance. More specifically, veterans are returning home seeking treatment for PTSD but are being prevented from gaining access to critical mental health services.

Celebrating its 10th anniversary, Connecticut Veterans Legal Center (CVLC) is the first legal aid program in the country to establish a medical-legal partnership (MLP) with the Veteran Administration healthcare system. As a trailblazer, CVLC and the VA recognize mental health problems can be more effectively treated by integrating access to free legal assistance.

CVLC eliminates access to justice barriers by integrating legal services into the setting where veterans already receive other forms of care. CVLC attorneys and VA cli-

nicians work side-by-side to advocate for the well-being of our veterans. This network of support increases a veteran’s fair and equal access to stable housing, affordable healthcare, employment, educational opportunities, suitable income, and access to VA medical and financial benefits. Indeed, CVLC is the only legal aid organization in Connecticut helping our veterans restore their right to VA mental healthcare through a discharge upgrade legal process.

Although CVLC attorneys tirelessly work with veterans to secure discharge upgrades and VA disability compensation claims, CVLC enlists and leverages pro bono legal assistance from Connecticut’s leading law firms in order to meet the legal needs of our veterans.

McCarter and English LLP has been a tremendous supporter and long-standing partner of CVLC’s work to provide legal assistance and increased access to justice for our veterans. McCarter’s pro bono attorneys—throughout their nine offices—prioritize pro bono work for veterans, and have successfully assisted veterans with VA disability compensation claims, discharge upgrades, and eviction defense to break through the cycle of chronic homelessness among veterans. McCarter pro bono attorneys who partner with CVLC believe men and women, who have spent years protecting all of us, deserve the utmost respect and support at home as they face what is often a difficult transition back into “civilian” life.

Joseph J. Cherico, managing partner of McCarter’s Stamford office, explains, “Several partners and associates based in our Stamford and Hartford offices have taken on pro bono matters with the CVLC because these cases make a real, meaningful difference in the day-to-day lives of these men and women.”

Moy N. Ogilvie, managing partner of McCarter’s Hartford office, said, “Offering legal aid for veterans who have been left behind has been a transformative, eye-opening experience, and CVLC is an indispensable organization. We look forward to continuing our work to serve Connecticut’s veterans and help them start anew.”

CVLC and the Connecticut Bar Association continue to challenge CBA members and Connecticut law firms to join McCarter and English LLP in learning more about the ways to serve and honor our veterans by providing them with the necessary free legal representation and legal support. To join CVLC’s team of pro bono supporters, please contact CVLC’s pro bono manager, Ashleigh Backman at [abackman@ctveteranslegal.org](mailto:abackman@ctveteranslegal.org). ■



## ASHLEIGH BACKMAN

*Ashleigh Backman is the pro bono manager and intake attorney at the Connecticut Veterans Legal Center where she leverages private bar*

*engagement and works with veterans to identify their legal issues.*