

Call for Justice, LLC—United Way 2-1-1 Training Paper

Session 17: Veteran Legal Resources/Community Resources

January 16 and 17, 2014: Sara Sommarstrom, Vetlaw Director for the Minnesota Assistance Council for Veterans and Maria Wetherall, Director of the Ramsey County Veterans Services.

Featured Speakers' Topics

This month, we hear from Sara Sommarstrom and Maria Wetherall on legal and social service resources for veterans, as alternatives to services provided by the Veteran's Administration.

What is the Minnesota Assistance Council for Veterans (MACV)?

The mission of the Minnesota Assistance Council for Veterans (MACV) is to provide assistance throughout Minnesota to "positively motivated veterans" and their families who are homeless, at risk of becoming homeless, or experiencing other life crises. MACV accomplishes its mission by providing services directly or in collaboration with other social service agencies. It is believed that there are at least 400,000 positively discharged veterans in Minnesota. (This number is thought to be low.)

Important Tip: Many people with military service don't consider themselves "veterans" because they didn't serve in combat or because they didn't serve at a time when the country was at war. Regardless of their service assignment or the timing of when they served, anyone with military service with a positive discharge status (not dishonorable) is considered a "veteran." Thus, a way to screen for this is to simply ask, "Did you serve your country?" If you receive an affirmative answer, then you're talking to a "veteran."

MACV's Vetlaw Program

The MACV Vetlaw Program provides low-income positively motivated Minnesota veterans with legal assistance designed to prevent or end homelessness. This legal mandate is interpreted broadly; thus, services include helping veterans increase access to benefits and income or decrease expenses in addition to responding to legal issues directly related to housing.

The beauty of the Vetlaw Program is that it's both expansive and leveraging. The program operates in all 87 Minnesota counties, with regional offices in the Twin Cities, Duluth and Mankato. The program operates clinics in 10 or so counties a year, utilizing both local attorneys and law students to provide brief legal advice/services, thus leveraging local resources. It also partners with various Legal Aid offices to provide full representation to eligible veterans. Finally, MACV also works with law firms and corporate pro bono attorneys who appear at clinics either in person or via remote access (FaceTime/ITV/Skype).

Eligibility: MACV works only with veterans living in Minnesota who are positively motivated and experiencing homelessness or other life crises. Representation services through MACV are available to veterans with incomes at 125% of the Federal Poverty Guidelines. For veterans aged 60 or older, financial eligibility increases to 200% FPG. Any veteran may attend Vetlaw legal clinics or StandDown events regardless of income level.

Important Tip: Sara is developing relationships with other veteran/legal assistance organizations across the country, and thus, if 2-1-1 receives calls from a veteran with legal needs in another state such as Texas (where there are many military bases), a referral to MACV would be appropriate; in all likelihood, Sara would be able to put that veteran in touch with a legal provider in Texas.

MACV Social Service Programs

In addition to legal services, MACV provides a variety of social services, such as transitional and permanent housing, rental assistance (it will pay a veteran's future rent in order to keep the veteran housed), employment assistance (help with resumes and interviewing skills) and case management.

To serve veterans, MACV has 26 employees located in its three regional offices (Twin Cities, Duluth and Mankato). The program will collaborate with other veteran-related programs and various social service providers as needed.

While only those with positive discharge statuses (e.g. not dishonorable) are considered "veterans," anyone with a military service record should be referred to MACV so that it can determine if there are resources available.

What are County Veterans Services?

County Veterans Service Offices are located in every county in Minnesota. They are available to provide guidance and assistance to veterans, their dependents, and survivors in applying for veteran benefits provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs (MDVA), and a huge array of other community-based programs and services available to veterans. Among the activities of the Ramsey County Veterans Services—or for that matter any VSO—are:

- Assisting veterans in obtaining their military discharge documents (DD Form 214)
- Assisting veterans in enrolling in the VA Healthcare system
- Filing claims for VA disability benefits
- Assisting with obtaining veteran pensions based on war era service
- Applying for assistance from state programs
- Assisting with burial benefits

VSOs are trained and accredited by the VA and MDVA and their primary purpose is to provide veterans and their dependents and survivors with assistance in navigating the complex eligibility requirements associated with accessing their benefits. This is in part because many veterans find that they can't work with the VA because of bureaucratic entrenchment or past negative experiences with the VA.

The Ramsey County VSO website (www.co.ramsey.mn.us/vs) has an alphabetical listing of services and assistance that the office can provide to veterans, ranging from financial assistance, to education benefits, to health care/medical benefits, to special veteran license plates. This is an excellent resource to refer veterans with computer access.

There are VSOs located in every county in Minnesota. The contact information for each office is located at <http://www.macvso.org/directory.aspx>

Important Tip: Many veteran benefits are applicable both to the veteran and their relatives/survivors. Many relatives/survivors don't understand this. A good simple screening prompt would be, "Did you serve your country or are you related to or the survivor of someone who served their country?"

A Few Words about Veterans Courts

You may have heard about Veterans Courts in various Minnesota counties. The concept of Veterans Court is part of a nationwide initiative to divert veterans from the court system as much as possible. Since 2007, there have been 170 Veterans Courts created nationally. The courts are connected with local Veteran Administration offices.

Various counties in Minnesota (Ramsey, for example) offer Veterans Court Tracks which essentially serve the same purpose as stand-alone Veterans Courts. Typically only residents of the county are offered the option to participate in the Veterans Court located in that county. The requirements for participation vary. Also, some counties will take veterans with dishonorable discharges and others will not.

The Fourth Judicial District Court and Hennepin County implemented Veterans Court in 2010, with the mission to promote public safety and assist and support veterans and their families by creating a coordinated response through collaboration with the veteran's service delivery system, community-based services, and the criminal justice system. This is a 12-18 month coordinated program that promotes sobriety, recovery and stability involving cooperation and collaboration with traditional problem solving court partners.

The Hennepin County Veterans Court operates on a weekly basis, as a separate calendar within the existing Criminal Mental Health Court. Under the guidance of their defense attorney and with the consent of the prosecutor, defendants may apply to participate in Veterans Court. The

target population consists of defendants who have served in the United States Armed Forces who are experiencing treatable behavioral and chemical health issues, i.e., post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury (TBI), anger management/domestic violence, and/or substance abuse or chemical dependency. Defendants must be willing to take responsibility for their crimes. Eligible offenses include misdemeanor, gross misdemeanor and felony offenses, except mandatory and presumptive prison commitments. Misdemeanor and gross misdemeanor cases are also accepted from the suburban courts as well. A treatable behavioral or chemical health issue is determined by an assessment completed by qualified personnel at the Veterans Administration or Veterans Court. The court establishes jurisdiction on both a pre-trial and post-conviction basis.

Participation in the minimum 12-month program is voluntary. Defendants are legally screened by the prosecutor. Clinical screening is accomplished by Veterans Court professional staff, and by referral to the VA Medical Centers. The screening is intended to determine the impact that behavioral and chemical health issues are having on the defendant's criminal behavior. If screeners find the defendant suitable for Veterans Court, a plan is proposed which then becomes the basis of the sentence imposed. The defendant's participation in treatment is then monitored by a probation officer. In all cases, a mentor is assigned to support and encourage the participant in the Veterans Court process. Each defendant also periodically appears in court for judicial supervision.

Hearings take place every Monday at 10:00 a.m. at the Hennepin County Government Center in courtroom C857.

Upon completion of the Veterans Court program, participants are provided a certificate of completion. Depending on the sentencing option imposed by the court, some cases are either dismissed or the charges reduced. Probationers may be placed on administrative probation and subject to various requirements.

In addition to Hennepin County, there are Veterans Courts in Blue Earth, Anoka, Ramsey, Washington, Stearns and Carver counties.

General Non-VA Veteran Resources—Twin Cities Metro and Greater Minnesota

- 1. Minnesota Assistance Council for Veterans**, 360 Robert Street N, Suite 306 Saint Paul, MN 55101 (651.291.8756) (mac-v@mac-v.org). Sara Sommarstrom's (Vetlaw Director) direct contact is 651-224-0292 (office); 612-367-6786 (cell); ssommarstrom@mac-v.org.
- 2. Ramsey County Veterans Services**, 90 West Plato Boulevard, Suite 210, St. Paul, MN 55107(651.266.2545)(AskVeteransService@co.ramsey.mn.us) (www.co.ramsey.mn.us/vs). A link to other VSOs can be found at <http://www.macvso.org/directory.aspx>.

- 3. Veterans Linkage Line, 1-888-LinkVet (546-5838)(www.minnesotaveteran.org)**
Online support is available seven days a week for Minnesota Veterans and their families. LinkVet is staffed by a team of support specialists trained through the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs (MDVA). Contact by phone (1-888-LinkVet), [live chat](#) or [ask a question](#).
- 4. Beyond the Yellow Ribbon (<http://www.btyr.org/>).** BTYR is a comprehensive program that creates awareness for the purpose of connecting service members and their families with community support, training, services and resources. There are phone numbers for connecting to various program members on the BTYR website.

There is no Zoey Zalopa word problem this month. Don't fret—she'll be back, we promise!

Let us know if you have any questions!

Ellie and Emily, Call for Justice, LLC