



1. VLI Summer Staff 2. Allison Higley at Saddleback College 3. Scott Douglas and William Sims working at the VA Hospital in Long Beach

HONORING VETERANS IN ORANGE COUNTY

by BRIANA F. RICHMOND

A tearful woman seeking assistance with a family dispute over her mother's will. A wheelchair-bound man looking for a care provider. A young mother of two asking for help with her custody issues. An unemployed man facing eviction proceedings. What do these individuals have in common? They are all former service members of the United States military, and all of them attended the Veterans Legal Institute's (VLI) monthly legal clinic at the Veterans Affairs Long Beach Hospital. Each of these individuals had significant legal issues, but few to no resources to assist them.

These individuals were just a few of the many veterans that I met while volunteering at the legal clinic. My time during the clinic confirmed what I already knew: there are too many veterans without proper care, housing, income, or access to legal resources. A sampling of statistics further confirms the difficulties faced by the Orange County veteran population.

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Orange County has one of the largest veteran populations in California, consisting of approximately 130,000 former servicemen and women.¹ Those same veterans comprise 12% of the Orange County adult homeless population.² One 2015 study of Orange County veterans reported that 18% of the post-9/11 veterans surveyed had been homeless in the past year.³ That same study found that almost half of those post-9/11 veterans were unemployed, despite being told "by everyone" that they would easily land a job with the skills they gained in the military.⁴ Forty-three percent of young veterans reported having trouble getting assistance to go back to school.⁵ Even a large number of pre-9/11 veterans reported being unemployed.⁶

Worse, many of the post-9/11 veterans (approximately 19%) reported having suicidal thoughts.⁷ This percentage is well above the 4% national average reported by the Centers

for Disease Control and Prevention.⁸ Indeed, on a national scale, approximately twenty-two veterans a day commit suicide, according to the Department for Veterans Affairs.⁹ (For those in need, the Veterans Crisis Line is available at 1-800-273-8255.)

Two Orange County lawyers, Antoinette Balta and Dwight Stirling, are determined to combat these devastating statistics. Dwight and Antoinette are well-versed in the struggles of the veteran population and have utilized their military backgrounds and legal expertise to assist veterans in Orange County. In 2014, they founded VLI—one of the nation's only military-specific, public interest law firms. VLI is a non-profit organization that provides *pro bono* legal services to low-income, at-risk, homeless, and disabled veterans.

Since its founding, VLI has assisted thousands of veterans with legal issues ranging from discharge upgrades to immigration. VLI dedicates itself to fully and completely

addressing its clients' legal issues. VLI strives to "eradicate barriers to housing, health-care, education, and employment, and foster self-sufficiency."¹⁰

VLI's work includes assisting the spouses and parents of veterans, many of whom often serve as caregivers for veterans. As but one example, Scot Douglas, an Army veteran who served in Vietnam and is now one of VLI's staff attorneys, assisted a widow of a United States Marine Corps veteran. The widow initially came to VLI for assistance with a tenant who refused to leave her property. Scot assisted the client throughout the eviction process. With Scot's help, the client was able to successfully evict the tenant and defend the tenant's attempt to overturn a default judgment.

After the eviction proceedings were complete, the former tenant initiated two civil lawsuits against VLI's client. Scot continued to provide legal assistance. With his support, the client successfully quashed service in one lawsuit. Scot thereafter engaged in significant discovery in the remaining lawsuit. Faced with Scot's extensive discovery, the former tenant simply dismissed the case.

In other instances, VLI attorneys helped obtain immigration paperwork for the spouse and caregiver of a United States Marine Corps veteran. A homeless veteran with medical issues turned to VLI and was able to obtain the proper disability evaluation from the Veterans Affairs board. Yet another homeless veteran utilized VLI's services to restore her unemployment benefits.

Dwight and Antoinette's work extends beyond VLI. Over the course of the past year, Dwight, along with VLI board director Martin Ellison, have worked extensively with the California State Bar to develop a Veterans Committee. The committee's purpose is to educate California lawyers about the rights and liabilities of veterans, with the hope of providing more resources for veterans' legal needs.

While these success stories present a hopeful picture for Orange County's veterans, there is still more to be done. VLI receives requests for legal help every single day, amounting to thousands of inquiries a year. Numerous veterans line up for VLI's monthly legal clinics in Long Beach and Santa Ana. Despite the tireless devotion of its attorneys and staff, VLI is still limited in resources.

As Veterans Day approaches, we in the Orange County legal community must ask

ourselves: "How can we help?" For starters, Orange County lawyers can subscribe to VLI's regular newsletter, which lists active, pending legal matters. VLI is constantly looking for attorneys to provide *pro bono* assistance for its cases. Orange County lawyers are also encouraged to attend fundraisers for VLI, such as the annual Lawyers for Warriors event and the annual VLI Golf Tournament.

I became involved with VLI in 2016. I am the daughter, granddaughter, great-granddaughter, sister, and niece of men who have served in the United States Army, Navy, and Air Force. My family members served in World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the Gulf War. During law school and after, I have often been inspired by a fellow law student, Claire J. White, an associate at Morton & Russo, LLP in Vallejo, CA. She is an Iraq War veteran who strives to provide legal services—often on the criminal defense side—for veterans. Her advocacy is unwavering and inspirational.

When I began looking for a *pro bono* oppor-

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tunity, I knew that any connection with our veteran population would be meaningful to my loved ones. I was introduced to Dwight and Antoinette by partners at my law firm. Their passion for helping and supporting veterans was palpable, and confirmed I had made the right choice. With my firm's support, I joined VLI's Board of Directors. The Board of Directors consists of other members of the Orange County legal community, many of whom have extensive military experience. I also began attending VLI's monthly legal clinics.

At the legal clinics, I have found that many veterans simply want to be heard. They often feel overlooked by the government upon their return from combat or the conclusion of their service. They also may feel alone in their struggles. Oftentimes, my skills as a human being are more useful than my legal expertise. For many of these veterans, being able to speak to someone is the first step in the solution to their immediate problems.

As Antoinette once said, "Not everyone

can join the military, but everyone can be a patriot." This Veterans Day, I encourage all members of the Orange County Bar Association to devote some assistance—no matter how small—to the Orange County veteran population. In today's tumultuous world, helping others provides a great sense of solace. I hope that the Orange County bar strives for that solace and truly supports our troops.

ENDNOTES

(1) Carl Andrew Castro et al., *The State of the American Veteran: the Orange County Veteran's Study*, USC Sch. of Soc. Work, Feb. 2015, at 8, http://cir.usc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/OC-Veterans-Study_USC-CIR_Feb-2015.pdf.

(2) Megan Kurteff Schatz et al., *Orange County Homeless Count & Survey Report*, Focus Strategies, Jul. 2015, at 12.

(3) See Castro et al., *supra* note 1, at 23.

(4) *Id.* at 16-17.

(5) *Id.* at 36.

(6) *Id.* at 17.

(7) *Id.* at 28.

(8) Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Suicide: Facts at a Glance* (2015), at 1, www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/suicide-datasheet-a.pdf.

(9) U.S. Dept. of Veterans Affairs, Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs, *VA Conducts Nation's Largest Analysis of Veteran Suicide* (July 7, 2016), www.va.gov/opa/pressrel/pressrelease.cfm?id=2801.

(10) Veterans Legal Institute, www.vetslegal.com/mission—overview.html.



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If you are looking to honor a veteran this Veterans Day, please consider taking a case, attending a free legal clinic, or participating in one of VLI's events to support our local heroes. You can learn more at www.vetslegal.com.

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