



The Houston Bar Association Legal Initiative for Veterans

The groundwork for the Houston Bar Association's current Veterans' Legal Initiative began two years ago, when the HBA's Houston Volunteer Lawyers Program established a monthly legal clinic for veterans at the Micheal E. DeBakey VA Medical Center, staffed by volunteer attorneys from the law firm of Beirne, Maynard & Parsons LLP. While this clinic helped numerous veterans, the need for legal services continued to increase. In May 2008, HBA President Travis J. Sales decided to designate legal assistance to veterans as the major focus of his administration.

Sales met with Mayor Bill White and County Judge Ed Emmett to discuss the HBA initiative, for which they expressed strong support. He also met with officials from the Regional Council of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and from the DeBakey VA Medical Center, to gather information and facts to assist in developing a program to meet veterans' needs.

To date, the program has served over 2,700 veterans with advice and counsel and/or legal representation. Nearly 200 attorneys have volunteered to assist with the Veterans' Legal Initiative.

The Legal Initiative has several components, some of which have been implemented through the HBA's Houston Volunteer Lawyers Program (HVLP).



2008-2009 HBA President Travis J. Sales counsels with a veteran at the DeBakey VA Medical Center Legal Clinic.

Components of the Veterans' Legal Initiative

- Legal advice clinics are held every Friday at the DeBakey VA Medical Center, from 2:00 p.m. until 5:00 p.m. Volunteer attorneys provide legal advice and intake for veterans on legal issues such as disability and benefits claims, family law, landlord/tenant issues, wills and probate, worker's compensation, tax laws, and many other legal issues. If the volunteer determines a veteran can be helped through HVLP, the veteran will be assigned a pro bono attorney to handle his or her case. The clinics help an average of 20-25 veterans each week.
- Legal clinics have been established at two permanent Harris County residential facilities for veterans: A quarterly clinic at DeGeorge at Union Station and a monthly clinic at USVETS at Midtown Terrace. Volunteer attorneys provide legal advice and intake for residents of these facilities. In addition to legal assistance, the HBA provides a speaker for each clinic on legal topics relevant to vets, including identity theft, disability claims, bankruptcy and creditor's rights, municipal court, elder law, importance of jury service, landlord/tenant issues, marriage and divorce law, wills and probate law, consumer rights/scams, worker's compensation, veteran's benefits and tax/IRS issues.
- A legal advice booth is provided for the annual Houston Stand Down, an event which serves homeless veterans. At this year's Stand Down, 21 volunteers assisted 83 veterans with legal advice and counsel.
- The HBA holds two district-wide legal clinics for veterans and the spouses of deceased veterans at either a VFW or American Legion Post. One clinic is held in February and one in November, in commemoration of Veterans Day. The February 2010 clinic served 75 veterans.
- With assistance from local veteran offices, the HBA prepared a pocket-sized card that lists helpful numbers for veterans in the areas of benefits, housing, health and mental health care, employment and other crucial areas. A local vendor provided printing at no cost. The cards are distributed at legal clinics, Stand Downs, and other venues.
- A Houston law firm donated bookshelves and furniture to set up a comfortable library space for veterans to read and study at USVETS at Midtown Terrace. The Houston Bar Association's Lawyers for Literacy Committee each year collects books for both the new Midtown library and a library at the DeGeorge facility.
- The HBA donates coats and warm clothing for veterans living at residential facilities from donations to the annual Fall Coat and Warm Clothing Drive.
- The HBA assists with holiday celebrations at both residential facilities, providing gift bags for all residents.
- The September-October issue of the HBA's magazine, *The Houston Lawyer*, which focused on veterans' legal issues, won first place in the Lone Star Press Awards magazine division.
- The HBA is assisting the State Bar of Texas as it implements its statewide veterans legal initiative, Texas Lawyers for Texas Veterans.