

How to Start a Veterans Legal Clinic: Lessons Learned by the Tallahassee Veterans Legal Collaborative

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Introduction

In less than two years, the Tallahassee Veterans Legal Collaborative (TVLC) has grown from a small group of volunteers to a full-service Veterans legal clinic. Over 700 Veterans have sought services from TVLC, not just in Tallahassee, or Leon County, but throughout the State of Florida. This group began as a completely volunteer organization fueled by people who were passionate about serving Veterans. While we believe that TVLC is unique, we also believe that it can be duplicated throughout the State.

The goal of this guide is to provide a blueprint for creating a Veterans civil legal clinic. But it must be remembered that each community is different, and what worked for us might not work the same way in every community. We hope that by sharing our experience, we can inspire communities throughout Florida to join us in providing legal services to those who have served in our military. We will be happy to consult with anyone interested in creating a Veterans legal clinic in Florida.

Overview of the Process

Creating a Veterans legal clinic takes time, but the most important thing is to get started! These are the steps that should be taken:

1. Establish a Steering Committee
2. Recruit & Train Volunteers to Staff Clinic
3. Create an Operating Plan for the Clinic
4. Publicize the Clinic to Veterans
5. Recognize Volunteers
6. Evaluate the Clinic
7. Implement Changes

Description of the Process

1. Establish a steering committee: The first step of the process is pulling together the stakeholders and those who are most connected to the Veteran population. These are the people who will help you recruit volunteers, find funding opportunities, and reach out to Veterans.

a. Identify organizations and partners in the community who help Veterans (even those organizations that do not provide legal services will have some idea of what the legal needs are, and will be able to publicize the clinic and refer clients to the clinic; they will also be good partners for providing other services that the clinic cannot provide)

1) Determine services provided and eligibility requirements

2) Determine individual contacts in each organization by name, phone number, email

b. Plan & convene informational meeting

1) Before the meeting

a) Decide on location: convenient to working members;
Easy parking

Examples: American Legion Post, Churches, Community Centers, Libraries, Law Firm Conference Rooms, Schools

b) Decide on time: lunchtime (brown bag); early evening? weekend?

c) Draft agenda: explanation of purpose; introductions, committee chairs/members, next steps

d) Make personal contact with each organization and invite them to informational meeting; solicit input from those unable to attend

5) At the meeting

a) Present purpose of the group; assure that all will be heard; encourage sharing of credit; emphasize collaboration

b) Have all in attendance introduce themselves and their organizations

c) Appoint committee chairs & members (get everyone involved)

d) Determine Meeting schedule

e) Action items for next meeting

3) After the meeting

a) Follow up with summary of meeting, action items

b) Schedule interim committee meetings

2. Recruit & Train Volunteers to Staff Clinic

a. Networking: voluntary bar associations (CLE)

b. Presentations to law firms, clubs

c. Meetings with individual lawyers/paralegals

3. Create an Operating Plan for the Clinic

- a. Identify legal services already available to Veterans to determine areas of greatest need
Examples: Landlord/tenant, divorce, child support, driver license reinstatement
- b. Location
 - 1) Public transportation available
 - 2) Handicap accessible
 - 3) Cost?
 - 4) Space enough for confidentiality
 - 5) Storage space for files & office equipment
- c. Day/Time
 - 1) Public transportation available
 - 2) Convenient for lawyers & other volunteers
- c. Staff needed (see job descriptions attached)
 - 1) Staff attorney
 - 2) Clinic Coordinator
 - 3) Community Service Hours Facilitator (optional)
 - 4) Paralegal (optional)
- d. Equipment needed
 - 1) Tables & chairs
 - a) Legal consultations
 - b) Files, office equipment, and supplies
 - c) Sign-in for volunteers & Veterans
 - d) Waiting area
 - 2) Copier/scanner (paper & ink)
 - 3) File cabinet (with lock)
 - 4) Pens, pencils, staplers, file folders/labels, nametags for volunteers

4. Publicize the Clinic to Veterans

- a. Create flyers & post everywhere that Veterans might be
- b. Talk to media
- c. Table at events (job fairs, Stand Downs, markets)

5. Recognize Volunteers

- a. Write letters of appreciation
- b. Provide certificates or tokens (challenge coins)
- c. Host a lunch/dinner event

6. Evaluate the Clinic

- a. Solicit input from Veterans and Volunteers (see forms)
- b. What works?
- c. What can be improved?

7. Implement Changes

ATTACHMENT A: Job Descriptions

Community Service Hours Facilitator

1. Maintain a list of suitable placement opportunities for all veterans performing community service hours (CSH), including those with special needs;
2. Assist each Veteran with finding a suitable placement;
3. Contact each Veteran at least weekly by telephone or email, in a manner that ensures that the Veteran receives the communication;
4. Arrange for in-person contact with any Veteran who is non-compliant and cannot be contacted by telephone or email;
5. Document each Veteran's performance of CSH and all contacts with Veterans;
6. Coordinate with the offices of the clerks of court to ensure timely reporting of all CSH performed;
7. Communicate with the offices of the clerks of court to obtain necessary extensions of time for performance of CSH;
8. Attend weekly staffings;
9. Provide to the TVLC core team a weekly report of CSH performed and each veteran's compliance or noncompliance;
10. Notify TVLC core team immediately upon learning that a Veteran is noncompliant;
11. Provide, in a timely manner, all reports requested by TVLC core team;
12. Assist with administration of weekly advice and referral clinic;
13. Notarize CSH letters and other documents needed by Veterans;
14. Maintain confidentiality of all information relating to services provided to Veterans;
15. Assist with other events or emergencies as necessary on a short-term basis to ensure TVLC team success;
16. Submit monthly invoices for services rendered, indicating services provided & hours worked, itemized by week.

Clinic Paralegal

1. Attend weekly advice and referral clinic;
2. Work under the supervision of a licensed Florida attorney to provide advice or representation to Veterans, including:
 - a. complete intake forms for Veterans needing services;
 - b. providing advice to Veterans needing assistance;
 - c. drafting documents and pleadings;
 - d. attending court hearings and mediations;
 - e. interviewing Veterans and witnesses;
 - f. maintaining Veteran files and documents (hard copies and cloud-based);
3. Supervise paralegal interns working with weekly advice and referral clinic;
4. Consult with Veterans who need help with reinstatement of driver license;

5. Pay driver license reinstatement fees authorized by TVLC subcommittee and submit receipt for reimbursement;
6. Assist with other events or emergencies as necessary on a short term basis to ensure TVLC team success;
7. Submit monthly invoices for services rendered, indicating services provided & hours worked, itemized by week;
8. Comply with Chapter 4, Rules Regulating The Florida Bar;
9. Assist with other events or emergencies as necessary on a short-term basis to ensure TVLC team success;
10. Submit monthly invoices for services rendered, indicating services provided & hours worked, itemized by week.

Clinic Staff Attorney

1. Refer Veterans' legal issues and cases to attorneys, taking into consideration the area of law and specialty, the geographical and other jurisdictional needs to address each case, and ability to pay or the likelihood that the case will be fee-generating;
2. Recruit and maintain a list of lawyers available for referrals in pro bono, reduced-fee, and fee-generating cases;
3. Provide weekly reports to Clinic Director identifying referrals made;
4. Maintain regular communication regarding case status with lawyers to whom referrals are made;
5. Supervise weekly advice and referral clinic; ensure that all Veterans are seen in a timely manner; supervise clinic staff and volunteers;
6. Comply with Chapter 4, Rules Regulating The Florida Bar;
7. Submit monthly invoices for services rendered, indicating services provided & hours worked, itemized by week.

Clinic Office Manager

1. Provide administrative services
2. Manage case files and case management software;
3. Maintain office supplies and equipment;
4. Assist in legislative reporting and grant applications;
5. Answer phone calls and emails from prospective clients;
6. Assist with design and purchasing of marketing materials;
7. Assist with e-filing of court documents;
8. Assist with planning and implementation of special events
9. Provide notary services.

Clinic Coordinator

1. Assist with administration of weekly advice and referral clinic;
2. Plan periodic celebration/appreciation events;
3. Plan periodic training events;

4. Represent TVLC in activities with other Veteran organizations, along with TVLC core team;
5. Maintain confidentiality of all information relating to services provided to Veterans;
6. Assist with other events or emergencies as necessary on a short term basis to ensure TVLC team success;
7. Submit monthly invoices for services rendered, indicating services provided & hours worked, itemized by week.

ATTACHMENT B: Eligibility Guidelines

Tallahassee Veterans Legal Collaborative, Inc. Legal Services Eligibility Guidelines

Purpose:

These guidelines establish the financial and military service requirements for applicants seeking legal assistance from the Tallahassee Veterans Legal Collaborative. This policy does not create any entitlement to services for applicants deemed financially and otherwise eligible.

Definitions:

(a) "Advice" means legal assistance that is limited to the review of information relevant to the Veteran's legal problem(s) and counseling the Veteran on the relevant law and suggested course of action.

(b) "Referral" means directing a Veteran to seek assistance from another qualified provider, including an attorney or Veteran Service Officer. Any fees charged by the provider would be agreed upon by the provider and the Veteran.

(c) "Representation" means legal assistance such as preparing legal documents, advocating in litigation, at an administrative hearing, alternative dispute resolution proceeding, extended negotiations with a third party, or at a court hearing, or other legal representation that undertakes responsibility for protecting or advancing a client's legal interests beyond legal advice.

(d) "Veteran" means a person who was on active duty in the Armed Forces of the United States of America for ninety days or more in a status other than for training, or who received a discharge for medical reasons.

(e) "Income" means current annual total cash receipts before taxes of all persons who are members of, and contribute to the support of, an applicant's household. Total cash receipts include, but are not limited to:

- (1) Gross wages and salaries;
- (2) Income from self-employment;
- (3) Regular payments from Social Security;
- (4) Unemployment and worker's compensation;
- (5) Spousal support and child support;
- (6) Veterans benefits;
- (7) All other regular or recurring sources of income.

Services Provided:

The Tallahassee Veterans Legal Collaborative provides free legal advice and referrals to all Veterans, regardless of income. The Tallahassee Veterans Legal Collaborative may provide representation to those Veterans who do not exceed the asset and income limits.

(a) The asset limit shall be \$3,000 of cash, or items readily convertible to cash that are currently and actually available to the applicant's household and are not excluded or exempt as indicated below:

- (1) The applicant's primary residence and household goods;
- (2) Vehicles used by the applicant or household members for transportation; and
- (3) Assets used in producing income.

(b) The income limit is 200% of the Federal poverty guidelines.

(c) Exceptions may be made if the Veteran completes an application for civil indigence. A review panel of three members of the TVLC Core Team will review the application and any other pertinent information and determine what services, if any, should be provided to the Veteran.

ATTACHMENT C: Members of the Tallahassee Veterans Legal Collaborative

Dan Hendrickson, President
Washington Sanchez, Vice President
Carmen Trammell, Treasurer
Donna Barron, Secretary
Florida State University College of Law, Veterans Legal Clinic
 Jennifer LaVia, Director
 Carl Baum, Office Manager
Frank Norris, Department of Veterans Affairs, Justice Outreach Specialist
Leon County Veteran Services
Tina Reason, Sacred Soil for Veterans, Vet Events Tally
Legal Services of North Florida
Legal Aid Foundation of Tallahassee
Second Judicial Circuit Public Defender's Office
Second Judicial Circuit State Attorney's Office
Leon County Veterans Treatment Court
Patriotic Partners of North Florida