



## PRESIDENT'S PAGE

DEIRDRE M. KELLY

# Honoring Those Who Serve Our Veterans

As I was on my summer vacation with my family on the east coast over the Fourth of July week, visiting Revolutionary War sites and ending up in Philadelphia on the Fourth, I was inspired to think about the sacrifices made in the past, and currently being made, by our men and women in the armed forces. In Orange County, we have a wonderful organization committed to assisting veterans with their legal issues.

Based in the heart of Orange County, Veterans Legal Institute (VLI) is a rising pro bono military-specific legal aid that boasts a national reputation as a model service provider. A grassroots operation funded primarily by donations and grants (including a yearly grant from the Orange County Bar Association Charitable Fund), VLI has quickly become a beloved staple of pro bono services in Orange County. VLI's reach is expanding quickly with offices in Santa Ana, Tustin, and over thirty-five yearly mobile legal clinics including those hosted by the City of Mission Viejo, the VA Hospital in Long Beach, and as far east as the County Veteran Service Offices in Riverside and San Bernardino, where free legal services for veterans otherwise do not exist. To date, Veterans Legal Institute has served over 6,000 low income veterans and utilizes over 200 volunteers per year, many of whom are members of the Orange County Bar Association.

With veteran suicide climbing upwards of twenty-two deaths per day, VLI is at the forefront of advocacy and awareness in an effort to lift up these American heroes, many of whom call Orange County home, into self-sufficiency. Asked why she dedicates all of her time to VLI and the veterans it serves, Executive Director and Co-Founder Antoinette Balta, also on the Board of the OCBA, states: "It's alarming that so many veterans who fought for our freedom are dying by their own hand on American soil. With VLI, I dedicate my time to creating a movement that advocates for these heroes, and inspires my patriotic colleagues to use their legal skill sets to serve—regardless of whether or not they ever wore a uniform." When asked what her ultimate goal for VLI is, she simply states, "to save lives."

One such example was recently featured in the Orange County Register (<https://www.ocregister.com/2019/05/24/navy-veteran-fights-homeowners-association-after-tree-falls-on-his-house/>). A tree had fallen during a storm and collapsed the roof of the home of an elderly, cancer-stricken Navy veteran. Despite the fact that the tree was rooted in a common area, the HOA refused liability. Living on social security alone, the veteran explained that he and his wife use the entirety of their income on food and could not afford to fix their home or hire an attorney. In other words, without resolution, the couple would likely become homeless. Newly minted VLI attorney John Anthony Alaimo

immediately took the case and is being supervised by VLI volunteer (and OCBA member) Sherry Bragg, a long time patriot and Partner at Weintraub Tobin.

When asked why she volunteers her time at Veterans Legal Institute, Sherry stated: "As a trial attorney, I understand that access to justice is an increasingly difficult challenge, and it concerns me. I am passionate about VLI's mission because I believe that the legal services provided by VLI offer our military men and women and their families an opportunity to attain the justice they deserve. With these services, VLI gives us the ability to say simply 'Thank you for what you have done for our country.'" Indeed, the Navy Veteran she is presently advocating for is incredibly grateful for Sherry's services.

On a separate occasion, VLI attorney Ian Deady learned of a predatory company that was illegally luring in veterans to assist them with benefits and then charging an exorbitant fee disallowed by federal statute. In this case, an elderly veteran was billed \$15,000, and sent a slew of bad faith demands with threat of a lawsuit. Knowledgeable in this area of law, Ian immediately advised the client that it is against federal law to charge veterans for assisting them in the preparation,

presentation, and prosecution of VA claims prior to the filing of an appeal. As a result, VLI assisted in return of the initial payment to the veteran, and the company has since ceased advertising their unlawful activity.

Apart from serving veterans, VLI has provided a unique opportunity to locals who want to give back. This summer, VLI hosted thirteen law clerks hailing from Chapman, UCI, USC, and other fine institutions. The law clerks enjoyed exposure to clients, appearances in court, and field trips to places like the District Attorney's office, the Veterans Treatment Court, and the Appellate Court. While the clerks are getting invaluable training and fine-tuning their legal skills, they are also nurturing a desire and bandwidth to serve. VLI believes their volunteers will continue to carry the proverbial pro bono beacon of service on to their new employers once they graduate law school.

Home to one of the only military-specific legal aids in the country, the addition of Veterans Legal Institute adds to the rich history of Orange County as a testimony of our appreciation and honor of service.

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