



# Strategic Plan

2019-2021

CVLC

## **The Connecticut Veterans Legal Center**

### ***VISION:***

***Our vision is for all military veterans to live with adequate means, affordable healthcare, safe and secure housing, and peace of mind.***

### ***MISSION:***

***To help veterans recovering from homelessness and mental illness overcome legal barriers to housing, healthcare, and income.***

## **History**

The seeds of the Connecticut Veterans Legal Center (CVLC) were planted in 2007 at the VA's Errera Community Care Center (ECCC) when veterans learned that a volunteer—Howard Udell—was an attorney. Veterans started asking him for advice about their legal troubles. Soon a line would form on days when Howard was coming in. Before long, Howard was assisting thirty veterans on his own; he was walking proof of the unmet legal needs of veterans rebuilding their lives.

In 2009, Howard met a young, idealistic attorney named Margaret Middleton. The power of legal services to transform the lives of low-income veterans instantly inspired Margaret. Later that year, Margaret and Howard created the United States' first medical-legal partnership with the Veterans Health Administration. They incorporated CVLC with seed funding from the Yale Initiative for Public Interest Law. Margaret shared her infectious passion for bringing access to justice to low-income veterans to partners throughout the state and set the stage for a decade of growth.

Over the last ten years, CVLC became a leading voice for veterans in need and a trailblazer in the field of veteran legal services. CVLC lawyers work in interdisciplinary teams with mental health and medical clinicians to solve veterans' legal problems. CVLC assists veterans recovering from mental illness and homelessness in overcoming the legal barriers to health care, housing, and income for veterans. CVLC's achievements over the last decade have paid significant dividends for its clients and led to a continued expansion of the organization to address increasing and emerging needs. This success has positioned CVLC to continue to expand its impact throughout the next decade.

### **Scope of Impact on CT Veterans**

In pursuit of its mission to remove legal barriers to housing, healthcare, and income for veterans recovering from mental illness and homelessness, CVLC has handled over 3,000 cases for over 2,300 low-income and at-risk veterans in Connecticut.

### **National Leadership on MLP and Veterans Legal Services**

CVLC's successful service model has greatly influenced legal services for veterans nationwide, positioning CVLC as a leader in medical-legal partnerships (MLPs) and legal services for low-income veterans. While CVLC remains the most robust MLP at a VA facility, since its founding thirty additional medical-legal

partnerships have launched within the VA nationwide. Other organizations frequently approach CVLC to learn from its model and request CVLC's assistance in building their own institutional capacity to serve veterans' legal needs.

### *CVLC's Organizational Growth, 2009-2019*

In its first decade, CVLC focused on building organizational capacity to overcome the legal barriers to housing, healthcare, and income for greater numbers of low-income veteran clients.

Since implementation of the 2016-2018 Strategic Plan, CVLC has continued to grow, build its staff, and expand its programs. CVLC now has thirteen staff members and roles within the organization have become more specialized. To this end, CVLC has

- Grown its direct staffing of its generalist, VA benefits, and discharge upgrade practices;
- Begun to alleviate the need for staff attorneys to manage pro bono attorneys by transitioning pro bono case supervision to a pro bono manager; and
- Built a development department that has a development director and support staff, and that works closely with the executive and deputy directors and pro bono manager.

## **NEEDS STATEMENT**

U.S. veterans face a unique set of challenges that often result from legal barriers to housing, healthcare, and income. While veterans comprise approximately 7% of the U.S. population, they account for 12% of the homeless population. Year after year, the VA's CHALENG survey shows over half of the top ten unmet needs for homeless veterans are legal in nature. The suicide rate for veterans is fifty percent higher than it is for the general population. Although veterans in VA care have a 30% lower rate of suicide, the VA systematically excludes veterans from care at a rate unseen in prior generations – twice what it was in the Vietnam era and four times what it was during World War 2. The veterans excluded from VA care are often discharged with “bad paper,” discharges that put them at a greater risk to be homeless, involved in the criminal justice system, and at a higher rate for suicide.

Significant issues of structural injustice lie beneath these statistics. Bad paper discharges disproportionately impact veterans who are people of color, LGBTQ, survivors of sexual assault, and those recovering from mental illness, barring them from VA health care and other benefits. Similarly, black and Latinx veterans are three times as likely to be homeless as veterans in general. The injustices that drive this disparate impact at the systemic level often result in the need for legal services at the individual level.

Accordingly, with this Strategic Plan, CVLC intends to engage in a focused expansion of its work to address the recurring needs facing low-income veterans as well as to address systemic issues that create barriers that prevent veterans from accessing benefits. Addressing unjust benefit denials has grown to be 36% of CVLC's caseload and we see a need to both expand this capacity and an urgent need to address the policies and practices that create the alarming statistics outlined above. Through legal representation and systemic change, CVLC will work to ensure that all veterans have access to the resources and healthcare they need to live with adequate means and life-saving healthcare.

## **STRATEGIC GOALS**

CVLC has established four interrelated-goals to address the legal needs of veterans described above:

1. Strengthen CVLC's ability to provide high quality legal services to low-income veterans;
2. Expand access to legal services for low-income veterans nationwide, with a particular emphasis on access to representation in VA benefits and discharge upgrade cases;
3. Advocate on behalf of veterans to eliminate practices and policies at the state and federal level that cause unjust exclusion from veterans' benefits;
4. Strengthen CVLC's financial position to ensure full implementation of strategic plan.

## **STRATEGIC GOAL #1:**

### **STRENGTHEN CVLC'S ABILITY TO PROVIDE HIGH QUALITY LEGAL SERVICES TO LOW-INCOME VETERANS**

*Purpose: Ensure that CVLC maintains its high quality and standards of care while increasing capacity to meet a growing need for legal representation.*

The medical-legal partnership with the VA remains at the heart of CVLC. The organization is committed to maintaining its core services of providing legal representation to low income veterans recovering from homelessness and mental illness, in partnership with the clinicians at the VA.

Over the past decade CVLC has grown from a one-person operation to a team of thirteen employees and a network of over 960 pro bono attorneys. This rapid growth is a direct response to the needs of low-income veterans recovering from homelessness and mental illness in Connecticut and the success CVLC has had in obtaining access to justice for its clients.

However, the needs of a 1-person organization and that of a nationally-recognized 13-member organization are vastly different. In order to continue to provide CVLC's level of service, the organization must make key investments in institutional infrastructure to maintain and update its systems and to recruit and retain counsel for CVLC's clients.

*Outcome 1:* Ensure CVLC continues to enjoy a team that is highly skilled in the legal issues facing veterans and a dedicated workforce by offering competitive compensation and benefits and positive work culture.

*Outcome 2:* Update case management & IT systems to increase efficiencies and improve outcome measurements.

*Outcome 3:* Expand and strengthen CVLC's Pro Bono network to fill unmet legal needs and increase CVLC's caseload capacity.

## **STRATEGIC GOAL #2**

### **EXPAND ACCESS TO HIGH-QUALITY LEGAL SERVICES FOR LOW-INCOME VETERANS NATIONWIDE: (“The Veterans Legal Centers Initiative”)**

*Purpose: To build institutional capacity in veterans legal centers nationwide so that all veterans have access to the high-quality legal services they need to overcome barriers to housing, healthcare, and income.*

When CVLC began, it was the first medical-legal partnership to provide free legal services to veterans at a VA facility. Today, there are currently 160 legal clinics that work out of VA locations, thirty of which are medical-legal partnerships. However, the breadth of the work conducted at these facilities varies greatly. According to the VA’s information, less than forty of the legal clinics provide representation in discharge upgrade cases and less than 60 provide representation in VA benefits cases. Moreover, many of the clinics are sparsely staffed and large swaths of veterans across the country go without access to any representation at all, let alone access to an attorney for specialized veterans-law cases.

CVLC has historically supported other legal services organizations in building capacity to create similar outcomes for veterans across the country. Over the last two years, CVLC has expanded this work by drafting a manual on how to handle discharge upgrade cases. To formalize and build on this area of work, CVLC plans to launch the *Veterans Legal Centers Initiative*. This initiative is aimed at sharpening the power of legal services providers across the country to provide high-quality legal services to low-income veterans.

This initiative is aligned with CVLC’s mission of reducing the legal barriers to housing, healthcare, and income for veterans recovering from mental illness and homelessness by building the capacity of other organizations to do the same work in other states. To effect this initiative, CVLC will draw on its expertise not only as the first VA MLP but also as a leader in discharge upgrades and VA benefits.

The *Veterans Legal Centers Initiative* will:

*Outcome 1:* Build on CVLC’s work drafting the manual on discharge upgrade practice to train attorneys on VA benefits and discharge upgrade practices.

*Outcome 2:* Assist other legal aid organizations and others to launch and improve veteran legal services programs.

*Outcome 3:* Support a network of veteran legal service providers across the country to increase and strengthen their ability to handle VA benefits and discharge upgrade cases.

### **STRATEGIC GOAL #3**

#### **ADVOCATE ON BEHALF OF VETERANS TO ELIMINATE PRACTICES AND POLICIES AT THE STATE AND FEDERAL LEVEL THAT CAUSE UNJUST EXCLUSION FROM VETERANS' BENEFITS: ("The Veterans Inclusion Project")**

*Purpose: To address the legal and policy structures that create systemic barriers to Veterans Administration benefits for low-income veterans, including housing, healthcare, and disability income.*

In using the honorable/OTH framework to discharge veterans and then determine their eligibility for life-saving care, the Department of Defense (DoD) and the Veterans Administration (VA) have created a system of exclusion from benefits that disproportionately impacts our most vulnerable veterans. The scope of this exclusion is large, growing, and taking place without significant legal protections for service members. There is a significant need to reform the VA's benefit eligibility framework to end shaming practices and to create more inclusive eligibility policy for all veterans seeking mental healthcare.

CVLC's expertise in overcoming the legal barriers to accessing VA benefits for veterans across the country provides a unique depth of knowledge and experience regarding how exclusionary policies disproportionately impact veterans along lines of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, psychiatric vulnerability, and other markers of structural discrimination. The experience of CVLC's VA benefits and discharge upgrade clients documents the impacts of these policies and practices.

CVLC sees its existing leadership and expertise in direct legal representation to veterans as highly interrelated with a role as a national policy advocate for low-income veterans. CVLC is well-positioned to leverage this insight to have an even greater mission-based impact by raising awareness of the systemic legal issues facing veterans and by working to improve the organizations and systems on which veterans rely.

*Outcome 1: Increase public awareness about the deleterious impacts of exclusion from the VA by publicizing veteran experiences.*

*Outcome 2:* Utilize CVLC and partner organizations' legal expertise, insight into veterans issues, and access to firsthand veteran accounts to produce policy documents that shed light on the scope and depth of the VA benefit denial problems.

*Outcome 3:* Collaborate with other veteran legal aid organizations, pro bono attorneys, and law schools to bring impact litigation cases or pursue other policy change initiatives to drive rule or procedural change at the VA.

## **STRATEGIC GOAL #4**

### **STRENGTHEN CVLC'S FINANCIAL POSITION TO ENSURE FULL IMPLEMENTATION OF STRATEGIC PLAN**

*Purpose: Strengthen CVLC's financial position to ensure full implementation of strategic plan.*

To meet its other strategic goals, CVLC must expand capacity to bring on new skill sets, such as communications. Additionally, a stronger support system for our legal and policy staff will allow CVLC attorneys to serve more clients and to devote time to impact litigation and policy work.

Accordingly, CVLC also needs more organizational depth to its development department to truly maximize its fundraising potential. Expanding development staff to include an event and communications coordinator will allow the development director and the executive director to focus on relationship fundraising, foundation relations, and increasing CVLC's visibility through expanded communications.

Increased development capacity will also allow CVLC to analyze each income stream to maximize potential income. For example, CVLC's main fundraiser, The Ride For Our Vets, has appeared to plateau in ridership and it is not reaching its full fundraising potential. CVLC and our event partners will assess how best to restructure this event to allow for growth.

The Board is an integral part of CVLC's governance and fundraising structure. CVLC needs to prepare for potential vacancies on the Board by engaging in continual Board recruitment. CVLC also needs to grow Board membership that better reflects the racial and ethnic diversity of its clientele and represents the potential for fundraising from different industries.

*Outcome 1: Analyze and update CVLC fundraising event strategy to a stronger mission connection and to increase return on investment.*

*Outcome 2: Expand CVLC's Board to garner additional skills, increased diversity, and expand access to funders at the state and national level, while*

providing training and support to fully access the board's thought leadership and resource acquisition.

*Outcome 3:* Increase capacity on the development team to allow CVLC to devote resources to creating new income streams that include national foundations, research grants, and individual donors.

*Outcome 4:* Increase CVLC stability and ability to pilot new programs by increasing and maintaining a 4-6 month reserve.