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A new place to help veterans

John Marshall legal aid effort began 7 years ago on a push cart, now has state-of-the-art facility

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It all started with a push cart that Michael E. Barnicle, Nicholas Henry and Ryan Coward would wheel around the law school to empty classrooms to provide training on advocacy for veterans.

Seven years later, that humble piece of equipment has evolved into a 5,300-square-foot space devoted to pro bono services for veterans. It is among the first pro bono veterans legal clinics and the largest facility of its kind in the U.S.

The John Marshall Law School Veterans Legal Support Center & Clinic celebrated the opening of its newly renovated facility at the corner of Jackson Boulevard and Plymouth Court on Thursday.

"It represents the commitment of John Marshall to the veterans community," said Brian E. Clauss, the clinic's executive director. "This is the first private space in the Midwest designed for people with PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder)."

With its muted colors, large windows that look out onto the street and a wide-open office area, the design by architectural firm Griskelis Young Harrell took into mind the needs of veterans living with PTSD.

The intake area of the clinic, for example, has one interview room with windows that face the street and one without, depending on the comfort level of the veteran. It also features state-of-the-art classroom space for the veterans legal advocacy

class component of the clinic.

The VLSC started in 2006 and began taking clients in 2007. More than 100 law school students have been trained by the clinic and students now assist with more than 1,000 calls a year from veterans.

Law school students involved in the clinic provide research and support to help veterans with their legal issues and build cases. The majority of cases that they handle are Veterans Benefits Administration claims.

"Most veterans have a viable claim, they just don't have the evidence as of yet, so we're helping them collect that evidence," said Yelena Duterte, a VLSC staff attorney.

Duterte said the veterans come from all generations, but currently most are from the Vietnam War era and are encountering more health problems as they age. The clinic has also handled cases for World War II veterans and has seen an increasing number of individuals who served in the Gulf War, she said.

Ashley Sloan, a recent graduate who worked at the clinic while she was a student and is now a staff member, said that the clinic also helps veterans with issues such as educational benefits, nonservice related pension, housing and family law issues.

Veterans with legal issues beyond the scope of the clinic, including criminal matters, are referred to a trained network of more than 350 volunteer attorneys who can represent veterans in their cases.



The John Marshall Law School's Veterans Legal Support Center & Clinic has a new home — 5,300 square feet of space at the corner of Jackson Boulevard and Plymouth Court. *Chandler West*



Joseph Butler (right), a former John Marshall Law School professor who was the first faculty sponsor of the Veterans Legal Support Center & Clinic, attended the grand opening event for the center's new facility Thursday. *Chandler West*

Sloan, who is a Marine Corps second lieutenant, said she knew she wanted to work with veterans and that it became her passion in law school.

"It's very humbling. I'm honored to be able to connect with some of these veterans who have served our country," she said. "It gives me a lot of meaning behind what I feel like my career could possibly be."

Along with serving the veterans community, Clauss said, the clinic is also part of the law school's mission to provide a

real-world experience for students and create practice-ready attorneys. The pro bono veterans legal clinic was among the first of its kind in a law school and has become a national model for other schools.

Joseph Butler, a former John Marshall professor and the clinic's faculty sponsor at its founding, said the clinic's model of mixing students and pro bono attorneys allows it to handle more cases than if it tried to do everything in-house.

There's no better feeling, he

said, than watching a law student help a veteran and to have it be his or her first experience with a case.

“That you can teach the young attorneys that they can make a huge difference in people’s lives with the skills they learned in law school is the best lesson they can learn,” he said.

Barnicle, Henry and Coward were all law students at John Marshall in 2006 when they came up with idea for the pro bono legal services clinic for veterans. There was no space for the clinic, so they used a push cart and set up the clinic wherever there was space in the law school.

Butler said the cart was loaded up with books, computers and other materials. Other law students who were veterans affectionately referred to the cart as the “TOC” — military slang for Tactical Operations Center.

While he was conducting research to develop curriculum on legal advocacy for veterans,

Barnicle said he had a hard time finding any treatises or hornbooks on the topic. That was bothersome, he said — it was a serious legal topic, yet it wasn’t even being addressed academically.

In 2010, the clinic received a \$350,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Justice to work with local, state and federal courts on a variety of veterans legal issues and programs such as the Veterans Treatment Court.

VLSC eventually received a closet space at the law school and continued to evolve into what it is today.

Barnicle, who graduated in 2008 and is now in the Army Judge Advocate General’s Corps based in Washington, D.C., said as an alumnus and active duty service member he is proud that students have continued the mission of helping veterans in the Chicago area.

He said the new facility is “absolutely amazing.”

“In the military when you’re promoted you get a rank and



Charlene Foss-Eggemann, corporate counsel consultant at LexisNexis, chats with Michael V. Favia, owner of Michael V. Favia & Associates, at the grand opening Thursday of The John Marshall Law School’s Veterans Legal Support Center & Clinic.

Chandler West

everyone always says your new rank doesn’t symbolize what you’ve done, it symbolizes what we expect you to do,” Barnicle said.

“So to see this ... I look at this and I expect great things. I expect this clinic to really be the nation’s leading clinic on this issue.”