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The Puller Clinic

Mission:

We are *dedicated* to helping our wounded military heroes navigate the legal system to obtain the benefits they earned, and training tomorrow's attorneys to advocate beyond the legal issues by collaborating with other professionals to meet the full spectrum of a veteran's needs.

Give Back to the Clinic!

The clinic is continually working to help our veterans. If you would like to your time, talent, or treasure to help our veterans receive assessments and claims assistance, call us at (757) 221-7443 or email us at veterans@wm.edu



(L-R) Dr. Leticia Flores, Prof. Patty Roberts, Dean Davison Douglas, Prof. Stacey-Rae Simcox, Student Kevin Barrett, John Paul Cimino

The Puller Clinic Visits the White House

By: Stacey-Rae Simcox

On September 27th, 2012, the Lewis B. Puller, Jr. Veterans Benefits Clinic hosted a team from the White House to discuss the Clinic's program and its Helping Military Veterans through Higher Education consortium, which now includes more than a dozen universities in Virginia.

This White House team included: Rosye Cloud, White House Director of Policy for Veterans, Wounded Warriors, and Military Families; Captain Todd Veazie, the Executive Director of "Joining Forces," the veterans initiative in the Office of the First Lady; and Kirsten White, Dr. Jill Biden's Policy Director who focuses on veterans' issues.

Clinic students, faculty, and administrators discussed the Puller Clinic's mission with the White House team and shared views on how the Department of Veterans Affairs could

improve its process of adjudicating veterans' disability claims.

The Puller Clinic was then invited to meet with Ms. Cloud and Captain Veazie on February 1, 2013, at the White House's Eisenhower Executive Office Building to discuss findings from a review of the Puller Clinic done by students in William & Mary's public policy program.

The White House visit signals the respect that our Puller Clinic has earned during its 4-year history. From the beginning, our clinic has sought not only to serve individual clients, but also to help positively shape the way in which veterans' disability claims are handled in the United States. This recent White House visit suggests that the "citizen lawyers" being trained at William & Mary Law School are making very positive strides in this direction.



Client Spotlight: Frank Cherry

By: Samantha Lovin



Mr. Cherry in Service

Mr. Frank Cherry answered his country's call to service and enlisted in the Army during World War II. He went overseas and served under General MacArthur in the Pacific Theater, participating in the invasions of Leyte Gulf and Okinawa. He and his fellow soldiers were responsible for offloading ships under fire in support of amphibious assaults.

Mr. Cherry seriously injured his knee while he was still in basic training, shortly after joining the Army at the age of 18. After years of living with the pain from this injury, Mr. Cherry filed his first claim for disability benefits with the VA in 1971. His claim was denied. In 1983, a friend encouraged Mr. Cherry to file again and told him what needed to be done. The claim was denied. He filed again in the 1990s, and was denied. After this third denial, Mr. Cherry went to talk with a veterans organization representative, who filed a claim for benefits on Mr. Cherry's behalf, but that claim was also denied.

After several of these disheartening denials, Mr. Cherry was referred to the Lewis B. Puller, Jr. Veterans Benefits Clinic. The Puller Clinic filed a claim, discovered new medical evidence, and analyzed the inconsistencies between two previous VA medical examinations Mr. Cherry had received. Mr. Cherry's knee condition was awarded service connection in 2011 – 40 years after his initial claim was filed.

Mr. Cherry really liked working with the Puller Clinic. He said "(t)he students take a keen interest in

the veterans' welfare and work hard to try to get their benefits approved through the regional office." Mr. Cherry remarked that he enjoyed the opportunity he had to work with the students in the Clinic because "they really took an interest in me and my case. They would always send letters to let me know about the progress they were making and what their future intentions were to get my compensation." Mr. Cherry said that he is "very glad that I hooked up with the clinic because I got to work with some nice people who had my interests at heart" and that he would "absolutely recommend the Clinic to other veterans."



Kristen Byers and Mr. Frank Cherry

A Student's perspective:
Captain Kristen Byers, US Coast Guard, JD '12

I'll never forget my first client, Mr. Cherry. Working with Mr. Cherry taught me how to be a counselor-at-law. Just like

my own grandfather, Mr. Cherry served in World War II. He had trouble proving his claim for benefits from the VA, but even after 40 years, Mr. Cherry did not lose hope. He taught me how to listen to his story and find the evidence necessary to prove his claim.

Working with him, I realized the significance of being a powerful advocate. After four decades, Mr. Cherry and I provided a new piece of evidence to win his case, and his VA claim was finally approved. Today, as I serve in the Judge Advocate General Corps and continue to represent the men and women that have served this great country, I keep his photo on the wall as a reminder to myself: I can change people's lives.

HMVHE Partner Spotlight

By: Samantha Lovin

Carl Sandburg, an American writer, poet and three time Pulitzer prize winner once made the statement that “nearly all the best things [...] in life have been unexpected, unplanned.” This idea perfectly describes the Helping Military Veterans through Higher Education (HMOVHE) consortium, a collaboration between the Puller Clinic and Virginia Commonwealth University’s (VCU) Center for Psychological Services and Development (CPSD). Though this partnership was “stumbled upon,” it has proven to be highly successful.



Dr. Leticia Flores

The Director of Virginia Commonwealth University’s Center for Psychological Services and Development (CPSD), Dr. Leticia Y. Flores, Ph.D. related that the partnership began when William & Mary and VCU were “trying to find a way to combine

public policy work with health services.” This desire fortuitously brought the Puller Clinic and CPSD together in 2009 because, in many cases, there was a “need for psychological expertise in assessing the needs of veterans.” Dr. Flores stated that working together immediately provided “good opportunities for students who were interested in veterans’ issues to gain important experience.” Though unexpected, the partnership has been “very successful for both organizations and the veterans we serve.”

Dr. Flores describes the CPSD as a training clinic for doctoral programs in advanced counseling and clinical psychology. The students are given the opportunity to work directly with the patients in their assessments and treatments. The students’ work is overseen closely by supervising professionals, all with several years of expertise. Among the services offered

by the center are psychiatric assessments, rehabilitative counseling, and psychotherapy.

Dr. Flores stated that the most common services that the CPSD provides for veterans are “diagnostic assessments for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or Traumatic Brain Injuries (TBI) to be used by the veterans in their claims to the Department of Veterans Affairs (in) seeking their benefits.” There are also some veterans who continue to come to the Center for psychotherapeutic treatment following this assessment.

When asked about her thoughts regarding the HMOVHE partnership and its future, Dr. Flores said that both organizations “saw a really natural marriage between higher education law clinics and psychological training centers” because both develop professionals that “have common interests and relationships with veterans. HMOVHE provides a great opportunity to join disciplines working with very deserving populations and to train professionals [in these disciplines].” Dr. Flores also said that she has found it to be a real joy working with both the faculty and students at the law clinic and that her students share her sentiments.

Dr. Flores and the Puller Clinic’s Managing Attorney Stacey-Rae Simcox often speak jointly at conferences and other events on the benefits, considerations and successes of this novel collaboration. They have also written articles and chapters of specialty books together on the subject. As to her thoughts for the future, she believes that the partnership between the Puller Clinic and CPSD will continue to be successful, and she would like to see this model of combining organizations for the benefit of our veterans to be used as a model for other higher education institutions.

The Puller Clinic and Public Policy

By: Ian Mahoney, MPP '13 and Jaclyn Petruzelli, MPP '13

One of the Puller Clinic's newest collaborations has brought a policy perspective to the clinic's operations. Over the course of the past academic year two Master of Public Policy (MPP) candidates from the Thomas Jefferson Program in Public Policy, Jaclyn Petruzelli and Ian Mahoney, along with joint MPP/JD candidate Kevin Barrett, have been applying their research and analytic skills to benefit the clinic and further its mission.

The team has been working with the Puller Clinic to assess the value of its services while streamlining the data management process and strengthening the clinic's ability to reach out to interested donors, policy makers, and future partners. Jaclyn, Ian, and Kevin have helped to quantify

something that can be difficult to grasp—just how much the clinic accomplishes for its clients. Along the way the team found that the clinic has secured nearly \$9 million in future benefits for its current clients, increasing the amount that their clients would have received by 143% due to the clinic's advocacy, and provided the equivalent of over \$400,000 in legal services just in the past calendar year.

"It's great to be able to put into practice the things that we have studied over the past two years," Ian said, "and to contribute as much as we can to the valuable services that the clinic is providing to veterans who often have nowhere else to turn."



Student Spotlight

By: Captain Travis Roberts, US Army, JD '13

Prior to beginning law school, I had the opportunity to serve as a Platoon Leader in the United States Army. In this role, I was able to assist several soldiers through the difficult process of medical separation from the military. This taught me a great deal including: how inexperienced I was, how complex the system currently is, and how frustrating it can be to soldiers who are transitioning back into civilian life.

While in law school, I learned of the Puller Clinic and its mission. This mission instantly reminded me of my experience as a Platoon Leader. As such, I decided to become involved with the clinic. I felt the clinic would be a good fit for me. It has been, but in ways beyond those I had anticipated.

From the outset, I hoped to gain a better understanding of military and Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) regulations that I could use in my future

career. The Clinic provided this. What I had not fully expected was the experience the Clinic would provide me in working with clients. This has been the most rewarding aspect of my time with the Puller Clinic.

In my time here, I have come to know several veterans who have sacrificed greatly for our country. The opportunity to help them navigate through their journey with the VA has been an honor and it has helped provide me with lessons and skills that have better prepared me to be a lawyer.

As I look forward to my career in the Army JAG Corps, I can look back on my time in the Puller Clinic as one of the most important facets of my preparation. In the clinic, I have gained knowledge in a field of law that will directly relate to my career. More importantly, though, I have gained a deeper appreciation for those who have served and a better understanding of how to serve them.



Puller Clinic faculty and students dropping Thanksgiving donations to SGT P.

Thanksgiving Food Drive

By: Stacey-Rae Simcox

For Thanksgiving 2012, the Puller Clinic spearheaded a food drive at William & Mary Law School for Sergeant P, a U.S. Marine Veteran and client of the Puller Clinic. This effort was co-sponsored by both William & Mary Law School's Clinical Programs and the Military and Veterans Law Society.

Sergeant P served on active duty with the Marines from 2001 until 2006. While deployed in Afghanistan (2005), Sergeant P served at the Bagram Airbase where he and fellow Marines were battered with rockets and mortars on a daily basis. One of Sergeant P's duties was to collect and transport wounded and injured civilians, children, and military members to the base's medical facilities. When Sergeant P left active duty service in 2006, he was diagnosed with severe Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

With the help of the Puller Clinic and its students, Sergeant P has been fighting to get the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to recognize and address his PTSD. Sergeant P is currently working to finish his certifications in aircraft maintenance so that

he can support his wife, three children, and teenage brother-in-law. While the Puller Clinic continues to work on the PTSD claims, Sergeant P and his family get by on very little financial support, with only the Post-911 GI Bill and small disability compensation benefits from the VA to support them until Sergeant P completes his education and is able to find employment.

Due to the generous donations from the law school community, the food drive received over \$400 in cash and four large packing boxes filled with food to give to this deserving family.

In response to the huge success of the food drive, Sergeant P's wife expressed her sincere gratitude. In an email to the sponsoring organizations, Mrs. P said, "Words alone cannot say enough. The help came at a time when we were really down and out and were not sure how we were going to make it through the holidays. We are truly overwhelmed with gratitude. It is great to know that the students, staff, and others who may have helped ... have such great hearts and look out for families and veterans (like) us. The food that was bought was outstanding and will help us out greatly."



Alumni Spotlight: Joelle Laszlo

By: Scott Dranoff

When Joelle Laszlo began working at Reed Smith in January of 2010, she was already prepared for the veterans' pro bono work the firm was beginning.

Immediately before she started, Joelle had been trained at the Lewis B. Puller, Jr. Veterans Benefits Clinic. That combination of training followed by jumping immediately into client contact was the best education in veterans benefits she could have received. "I felt like I had this wealth of knowledge. How did I develop that in such a short time?"

As pro bono work gained momentum at Reed Smith, Joelle was quickly pegged as the veterans benefits expert. As the main point of contact in a firm-wide effort, Joelle pairs attorneys with clients and works to answer initial substantive questions attorneys have about rating decisions. In 2012, alone, the firm spent five hundred hours, pro-bono, helping veterans.

Joelle draws regularly from her experiences with the Puller Clinic. The biggest lesson she relies on today is the importance of making direct, regular

contact with clients. Joelle reports that this lesson is applicable everywhere, but especially when the client is an individual. "Regular contact just lets them know that somebody cares." Even when she had nothing to report, Joelle recalls that her clinic clients were always happy to hear from her.

Joelle credits the Puller Clinic and Reed Smith for the opportunity she has to impact the lives of so many grateful veterans. Without her Puller Clinic training, Joelle would not have had the confidence to spearhead the pro bono initiative. "I never would have realized how much of a difference my efforts could make for an individual, until I actually worked with individuals who are benefitting from the program. I'm still surprised how grateful some clients are for our help."

The need for help among veterans continues to grow. Joelle implores her colleagues throughout the profession to make the effort to truly make a difference for an individual. The Lewis B. Puller Jr., Veterans Benefits Clinic is grateful to Joelle and Reed Smith for their continuing contribution to the lives of many veterans.

Puller Clinic Outreach: Freedom House

By: Evin Stovall

On November 15, 2012, the Lewis B. Puller, Jr., Veterans Benefits Clinic partnered with volunteer attorneys from McGuireWoods LLP's Richmond office to reach out to homeless veterans. They met with veterans living at the Freedom House in Richmond to discuss with them benefits they may be entitled to receive due to their service. Puller Clinic students provided an overview of the basic eligibility requirements for VA disability compensation and pension benefits. Students then partnered with McGuireWoods' attorneys and paralegals to meet individually with each veteran and answer his questions about the claims process.

The most powerful story from the event was from a veteran the students and attorneys met last year when an outreach was held at the same shelter. During that one-on-one meeting in 2011, the students and lawyers talked to him about benefits he might be entitled to, helped him fill out the claims paperwork, and mailed it in on his behalf. At this November 15th meeting, he told us he had just been awarded his benefits for those claims and was looking forward to moving out of the shelter! It is amazing what a veteran can do to transform his life when armed with some knowledge and offered a helping hand.



Book Review: Two Wars

By: Captain James Booth, US Army, JD '14

“A second RPG pierces the windshield glass, detonating inside and spraying hot metal throughout the cockpit. The helicopter falls with a queasy rush. In an instant, nearly fifty thousand pounds of rubber, steel, and American flesh crash to earth.... It was still 6:14 a.m., and the sun remained just below the horizon. My life had changed in twenty seconds.” -- Nate Self, Two Wars

During my sophomore year at West Point, my former roommate asked if I, along with several other friends, would be willing to sit down with a man named Nate Self. Nate was recently retired from the military and working on a project to help mentor and train young leaders at the United States Military Academy and across the country. As such, he wanted to elicit feedback for this new developmental program. We gathered in the basement of our barracks building where he proceeded to offer a few ideas for the program, walked us through several combat vignettes, and asked for our input and feedback.

Over the course of the next few years, Nate returned to West Point on several occasions, and I was able to hear more about his compelling life experiences. During the spring semester of my senior year at West Point, I was given the opportunity to take a class entitled *Battle Command*. One lecture remains seared in my memory, one that truly brought home the reality of the Army I was about to enter. Nate Self was the guest speaker that day. Nate told a story about Operation Anaconda and a platoon of Rangers, some of the Army's finest soldiers, who were sent on a rescue mission to the top of Takur Ghar, a mountain top in Afghanistan just miles from the Pakistan border.

The story was Nate's and is told in his fittingly titled autobiography *Two Wars*. The first “war” described is what most connotes with the word; it tracks Nate's early years, his decision to attend West Point, become an Infantry officer, and lead a platoon

of soldiers in the elite Ranger Regiment. These decisions led to one fateful fight in March 2002 during Operation Anaconda – a battle to destroy al-Qaeda and Taliban strongholds in the Shahi-Kot Valley of Afghanistan. After one member of a SEAL team fell out of a helicopter directly onto a heavily fortified enemy fighting position and another SEAL was killed in a failed rescue attempt, a story detailed by Malcolm MacPherson in *Robert's Ridge*, Nate's platoon of Rangers was sent as part of a Quick Reaction Force to make a second rescue attempt. As indicated by the quote above, the events that transpired during the next fifteen hours forever changed the lives of everyone involved, including Nate Self.

The second “war” is far different from the first but equally as personal. Nate shares his struggles with PTSD and the difficulty of returning home after a subsequent deployment to Iraq. Nate tells a compelling, honest, and intimate story that is raw at times but real and meaningful. People from all backgrounds and experiences can benefit from the context Nate offers, whether through personal struggles or from knowing someone who has experienced varying degrees of such. Nate's example possesses the ability to inspire others with PTSD and to offer encouragement and understanding to friends and family seeking answers.

Whether a veteran living with the realities of the *second war*, a current conflict soldier, an officer, a concerned citizen, or an advocate for veterans issues, Nate Self's book has plenty to offer.

HMVHE: Veterans Diversion Initiative

By: John Paul Cimino, Director of "Helping Military Veterans through Higher Education" (HMVHE)

In August, 2012, the HMVHE consortium, based at William & Mary Law School, participated in the launching of a pilot Veterans Diversion Initiative in the Federal District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia. In this program, William & Mary Law students, under the supervision of HMVHE attorneys, interview veterans who have been accused of committing a petty offense and who have been identified as a veteran in need of services. The students work with a Veterans Justice Outreach Coordinator from the VA and the Federal Public Defenders Office to determine whether the veteran is appropriate for the program and whether the veteran is eligible for care from the VA. Veterans who successfully complete the program and whatever treatment recommendations arise from it may have their charges dropped or reduced at the discretion of the court.

Thus far, eight veterans have been referred to the program with charges ranging from possession of alcohol on VA property to disorderly conduct, and six of these have been accepted. Two veterans have completed the program,

both of whose cases were subsequently dismissed. Four others continue to participate in the program. Students, under the supervision of an attorney, have assisted veterans obtain mental health evaluations and psychological treatment, identified VA benefits and services to which participants may be entitled, and followed veterans to ensure their compliance with whatever treatment recommendations have been made. The first veteran accepted into the program is now receiving mental health care that he was not previously receiving, has since obtained full time employment, and has improved his living situation. One recently accepted veteran who has been unemployed for years, is now receiving assistance applying for the Veterans Retraining Assistance Program, a benefit that will help this veteran obtain vocational skills, and about which the veteran was previously unaware.

This program is a great opportunity to identify those veterans who are suffering from remediable mental health issues, but who have fallen through the cracks. It helps to get these individuals linked up with the services that they need.

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