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Law School to Celebrate Creation of Veterans' Benefits Clinic on Nov. 11

By Jaime Welch-Donahue

November 6, 2008

On Veteran's Day, Nov. 11, Lynda L. Butler, Dean of William & Mary Law School, will host a ceremony to announce the creation of a new Veterans Benefits Clinic to assist veterans with the filing, adjudication and appeal of service-related disability compensation claims. The announcement will be made at 1 P.M. in the Law School's entrance hall and the public and press are invited to attend. Cider and cake will be served.

"The Law School can think of no better way to honor Veterans Day than to offer our assistance to those who have sacrificed so much for our country and our freedom," said Butler.

Patricia Roberts, Clinical Assistant Professor of Law and Director of Clinical Programs, said that there is a compelling need for the clinic given that Virginia has 28 military installations, 16 of which have medical treatment facilities. "The Commonwealth must be prepared as the soldiers deployed from these bases return to their families, often with injuries. In addition, as veterans of prior conflicts age, their service-related disabilities may become more pronounced or complicated, necessitating a review of their benefits and a consideration of whether additional benefit opportunities might exist."

In addition to offering help with disability claims, law students also will field phone and email inquiries from any veteran who has questions about the claims process. "We'll have individual representation," said Roberts, "but also, on a broader scale, the clinic is designed to provide guidance to veterans on how they can pursue their own claims and be their own best advocates." To that end, students in the clinic will do educational outreach to local veteran groups, advising them of their rights in the claims process.

The clinic will open in mid-January and will be staffed by eight law students working under the supervision of two adjunct law professors, Stacey-Rae Simcox and Mark Matthews. Simcox and Matthews met while earning their law degrees at William & Mary and married a year after their 1999 graduation. Both are veterans who served in the U.S. Army Judge Advocate General's Corps.



Roberts and Matthews credit Simcox as providing the primary impetus to create the clinic. Simcox, said Matthews, envisioned the clinic as a way to use her experience with the Army and the Department of Veterans Affairs on a pro bono basis to help veterans, while also providing law students at William & Mary a chance to gain practical experience working with clients. Clinic students will learn about veterans disability law and procedures and, under Matthews' and Simcox's supervision, will also hone their skills in client intake, client advocacy, priority management, records analysis, and expert witness interviews. Clinic students will also have the opportunity to learn from other disciplines, as they coordinate with graduate psychology and social work clinic students in assisting their veteran clients.

U.S. Army Captain Brian Kargus '09 is among the law students enrolled in the spring clinic. He said he was motivated to participate because he understood "how challenging it can be to access the important benefits our service members are entitled to." Kargus, who will enter the JAG Corps after his graduation in May, said that he hoped "to gain skills working with real clients while also making a difference in an oft-forgotten niche."

Roberts noted that the Law School hopes to inspire students to study the increasing needs of the disabled veteran population and the legal and policy implications for society, and to work towards developing solutions.

The Law School is seeking private funding to support its plan to expand the services of the Veterans' Benefits Clinic in fall 2009. In addition, through the clinic, the school is creating a network of attorneys who will be willing to assist veterans with other legal issues on a pro bono basis.

McGuireWoods LLP is the first law firm to commit its resources to the clinic. Their lawyers will accept referrals from the clinic, staff intake and assist with screening as necessary, and the firm will make their conference rooms available for clinic use in meeting with veteran clients unable to travel to Williamsburg. Given the firm's locations in Richmond and Norfolk, this will be especially helpful to disabled veterans in the heavily military populated Hampton Roads area, and the Commonwealth's capital. In addition, McGuireWoods Consulting will assist the clinic in reviewing, drafting and proposing state and federal legislation affecting the disabled veteran population and the benefits to which they are entitled.



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The clinic is the first service learning project of the Virginia Commonwealth University - William & Mary Health Policy and Law Initiative. William & Mary students and faculty will help veterans with their legal needs while students and faculty at VCU's Center for Psychological Services and Development will provide assessment, counseling and referrals to former service members in need of those services.

The clinic fits well with the Law School's philosophy of the citizen lawyer, said Butler. "I believe it is our duty to educate our students to be skilled and ethical practitioners of law and also to encourage them to find ways to use their skills to better the lives of others. I am proud that the Law School has this opportunity to serve our veterans."

Veterans or their families interested in learning more about assistance offered by the Veterans' Benefits Clinic may call (757)221-3780 or may write to veterans@wm.edu.