



SOUTHEAST LOUISIANA
LEGAL SERVICES

VETERANS JUSTICE FELLOWSHIP

Q3 PROGRESS REPORT
2020
JULY, AUGUST, SEPTEMBER

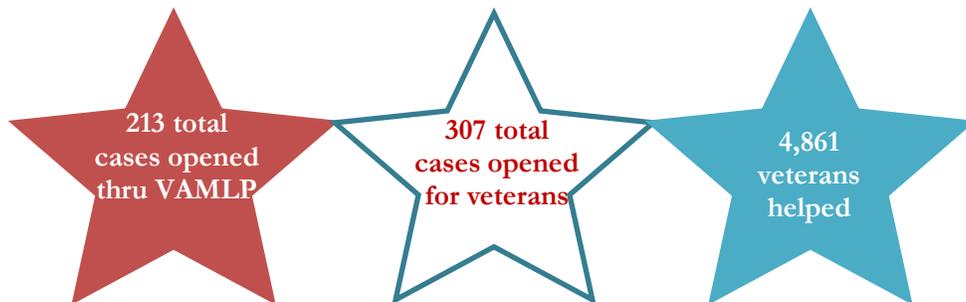


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INTRODUCTION

In the third quarter of its fourth year, the Veterans Justice Fellowship continue strengthen its partnerships with the VA Medical Center and serve veterans in the community.

In the 2020 third quarter, SLLS accepted **23** new cases for veterans needing civil legal services. SLLS fielded **126** phone calls from veterans inquiring about legal services and completed **22** cases for veterans this quarter. Successes included the award of disability benefits, non-service connected VA pension, and the reinstatement of food stamp benefits.



Overall, the VJF has reached **4,861** veterans, veterans' family members, veterans' caseworkers, and veterans' advocates since its inception and SLLS opened **307** cases for veterans through September 30, 2020.

PARTNERSHIP PROJECT UPDATES

MEDICAL LEGAL PARTNERSHIP (MLP) WITH THE VA MEDICAL CENTER

SLLS has provided direct legal services to 213 veterans through the MLP at the VA medical center. During this year's third quarter, 7 new cases were opened for veterans. Due to the COVID-19 crisis, in person outreach at the VA Medical Center is suspended for the safety of our veterans and staff. However, SLLS continues to provide legal services through our VA Veterans Intake line and referrals from the VA Medical Center staff. SLLS and VA Medical Center staff participated in a collaborative brainstorming virtual meeting to discuss the future of the Medical Legal Partnership. During this meeting, staff discussed ways SLLS can continue outreach at the VA Medical Center through virtual meetings coordinate with the veteran's social worker or case manager. SLLS continues to receive direct referrals from VA staff social workers on the Mental Health Inpatient Unit at the hospital as well as the social workers on the Homeless Outreach team.

VETERANS TREATMENT COURT IN SECTION K OF OLREANS PARISH CRIMINAL COURT

SLLS continues to attend Veterans Treatment Court in Section C of Criminal Court. Due to COVID-19 and the courthouse closure, treatment court has been moved to weekly phone calls. SLLS participates in these calls once a month. Every month we meet with new court participants, provide legal screenings, and schedule intake interviews. Participants are given information on how to contact SLLS if they have civil legal needs in the future or know of other low-income veterans who need legal assistance. SLLS also checks-in with current clients.

BASTION LIVING COMMUNITY FOR VETERANS

The Bastion is a mixed-income apartment complex in Gentilly with all the low-income units targeted to veterans with traumatic brain injury or other serious disabilities. SLLS has previously provided residents and staff with information on legal services available to them at SLLS and how to make referrals after Bastion completed each phase of their apartment buildings.

COVID-19 AND VETERANS

This quarter, SLLS continued to face unique challenges in providing services to low-income veterans due to the COVID-19 public health crisis and government required stay at home orders. SLLS staff fielded calls through both the veteran's intake line and a new COVID hotline to provide those affected by COVID with legal assistance.

This quarter, SLLS opened a new case for a veteran who was diagnosed with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease among other debilitating physical disabilities. Mr. S was chronically homeless until recently when he was placed into permanent supportive housing through UNITY of Greater New Orleans. After SLLS staff assisted Mr. S. with his Social Security Disability, Mr. S. received a summons to appear at New Orleans Municipal Court for a charge of disturbing the peace. His court date was set for the end of July 2020. SLLS staff took the initiative to advocate for Mr. S. due to his severe health concerns amidst the pandemic and wrote a letter advocating for reasonable accommodation due to Mr. S.' disability. We asked for his court appearance to be either postponed or scheduled virtually. Judge Jupiter in Division G granted the reasonable accommodation request and Mr. S' court appearance was postponed until the end of November 2020.

VOLUNTEERS OF AMERICA VETERANS HOME

SLLS continues to work directly with the Volunteers of America Grant Per Diem (GPD) Transitional home by field calls from residents and social work staff. Veterans residing in the VOA home have a unique of issues, specifically surrounding obtaining permanent housing. This includes assistance with veterans benefits, identification (including naturalization certificates), and credit and criminal background issues. SLLS opened 3 cases this quarter for homeless veterans residing in the VOA home.

SPOTLIGHT ON SUCCESS

VJF HELPS VETERAN OBTAIN SOCIAL SECURITY BENEFITS

Mr. T is a 66-year old Navy Veteran who found himself facing a \$15,854 debt incurred with the VA because he started receiving his VA pension at the same time he received his Social Security Retirement. In addition to suffering from chronic pain, diabetes and hypertension, Mr. T also takes care of his 95-year old disabled father who recently had a stroke.

Mr. T began collecting \$1046 from Social Security disability insurance for his physical disabilities in 2019. His treating physician at the VA told him to apply for a VA pension. In April 2020, Mr. T received a notice from the VA Debt Management Center that he had been overpaid because he was collecting both social security disability and VA pension. He was informed not only that the VA would stop paying him his pension, but they were going to attempt to collect money from the overpayment by garnishing his disability income to recoup.

SLLS staff worked with Mr. T to file a formal waiver request of the debt owed to the VA. In the waiver of debt, SLLS and Mr. T argued that collection of the debt would cause Mr. T undue hardship. Specifically, that he needed his full disability benefit to pay for necessities. In addition, SLLS stressed Mr. T's need for his full disability benefits to continue to make payments on his car so he could travel to his father's home in St. Charles Parish and attend his medical appointments at the VA.

In July 2020, SLLS contacted the VA debt management center and was informed that Mr. T's request for a waiver had been granted. Therefore, Mr. T would not be responsible for paying any of the \$15,854 back. He is now able to sleep at night and continue to receive his full \$1,046 from social security disability and focus on his health and his elderly father's health.