

Editors: With Veterans Day approaching, this new partnership between OMVLAP and Capital University Law School would make an excellent and timely story. There is a tremendous need among low-income veterans and active duty service personnel for legal assistance, and this new call center will make a tremendous difference in their lives.

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Call center to connect low income veterans, active military with legal services

COLUMBUS, Ohio – The Ohio Military/Veterans Legal Assistance Project and Capital University Law School are partnering to make it easier for Central Ohio’s low income veterans and active military personal to get legal assistance they might not otherwise be able to afford.

The Military/Veterans Legal Assistance Call Center at Capital University Law School will open in early January as a partnership between the two organizations. The call center will provide referral information and brief legal advice and counseling when possible to low income veterans and active duty military personnel in Franklin, Delaware, Fairfield, Licking, Madison, Pickaway and Union counties.

OMVLAP was launched in June 2012 thanks to funding from the WalMart Foundation and the Ohio State Bar Foundation. It arose out of the Ohio Veterans WrapAround Project, created by Ohio Supreme Court Justice Evelyn Lundberg Stratton. The launch of Capital’s call center will be made possible in part through a \$25,000 grant from the William C. and Naoma W. Denison, Robert Bartels, Virginia Hall Beale and Robert B. Hurst funds of the Columbus Foundation. The grant will fund a position for a licensed attorney to staff the center on a part-time basis. That attorney will try to find an appropriate pro bono attorney to represent the caller.

Efforts to find funding for the call center began when Stratton, Judge Advocate for the Ohio National Guard Colonel Duncan D. Aukland, and OMVLAP Director Michael J. Renner presented Capital with information about the existing need among veterans and service personnel. They suggested there should be ways to assist lower income veterans and active duty service personnel, many of whom face a range of legal issues.

“These are men and women who have willingly joined America’s armed forces on our behalf, and during their service to our country they have encountered situations at home that require legal assistance,” Stratton said. “For many of these service members, this is a significant unmet need. The call center is an important step toward helping them resolve these problems.”

The call center will attempt to help OMVLAP connect financially strapped veterans and active duty service members with legal representation in areas of dispute spelled out in the Service Members Civil Relief Act, including debtor and creditor matters, domestic relations and tenant rights.

“The need for financially accessible legal assistance exists for many veterans, military personnel and their families,” said Rich Simpson, Capital University Law School’s dean. “Fortunately, Capital University Law School is in a position to work with OMVLAP and the Columbus Foundation to help these men and women find legal assistance with licensed, volunteer Ohio attorneys.”

The center will screen phone calls from veterans and military personnel, assess their legal issues and determine whether the callers are financially eligible for OMVLAP assistance. OMVLAP will then attempt to pair specially trained pro bono attorneys with qualified low-income veterans and active duty military. The lawyers will handle the clients’ specific legal issues. The call center and OMVLAP will track data about the referrals to facilitate successful pro bono representation for veterans in the future.

The call center also will refer some matters each semester to Capital University Law School’s Legal Clinic, which has provided a variety of legal assistance services to low income individuals since 1971. In the clinic, Capital students who hold intern licenses and applicable legal skills work under the direct supervision of licensed practicing attorneys, including those who manage the clinic. The Legal Clinic staff anticipates being able to help up to 25 veterans and active duty military personnel per semester beginning in January.

“We believe the call center is another step toward helping many more Ohio veterans receive their legal rights,” Stratton said. “There is a tremendous unmet need for legal assistance for veterans and active duty service personnel.”

The Law School and OMVLAP currently are working to identify financial supporters for continuing and expanding the program, with OMVLAP’s eventual goal being to serve low income veterans and active duty military personnel across Ohio.

“If this pilot program is successful, and if additional funding can be acquired, we believe there is sufficient need statewide to justify creating a more expansive program, perhaps involving some of Ohio’s other law schools,” said Aukland, a 1982 Capital University Law School graduate. “The need will not be going away. For example, the National Guard has personnel deployed somewhere every day. These men and women will continue to need legal assistance they may not be able to afford.”

Approximately 29,000 people in Central Ohio are active military, including the National Guard and Reserve, and their dependents. Statewide, that number is more than 115,000. According to the Department of Veterans Affairs, there are also approximately 867,000 veterans in Ohio.

Those seeking assistance through the program may call 614-236-6394 [or 614-752-2124](tel:614-752-2124). Information about the call center can be found at www.law.capital.edu/Veterans_Clinic/.