Director’s Message

Welcome to our second annual edition of VLC Dispatch. As many of you know, Ann Zimmerman left her position as Pro Bono Director in August of 2014. I am delighted and humbled to be her successor and very excited to be a part of the University of Wisconsin Law School Pro Bono Program. In just a few months it has become clear to me that the Veterans Law Center (VLC), the result of inspired initiative and a great deal of work and collaboration, is a treasured resource within our community. Veterans in our community are accessing our services at both locations (the City-County Building at 210 Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd., and Porchlight, Inc. at 306 North Brooks Street) and local attorneys and law students are eager to be of help. As I consider the success of this model – I wonder if there isn’t a value to initiating a conversation about increasing access to legal resources for our veterans who live across the state and especially for our veterans who live in smaller communities with limited access to transportation. The length of time our veterans wait for access to services has been widely covered in the news. They are waiting not only for medical services – but – for help in a wide variety of service areas. We know that there are many valuable organizations serving our veterans in the state of Wisconsin. We also know that access to assistance with legal questions and the provision of some basic legal advice, as well as guidance and referrals to additional resources, continues to be a largely-unmet need. If you are aware of a community that would benefit from a VLC (or VLC services) similar to the one we run – please contact me. Similarly, if you are interested in being part of an exploratory committee to consider how to build on this model – please contact me. I think the subject merits consideration and I look forward to the conversation.

Contact Us!

Laura Smythe, M.A., M.A., J.D.
Pro Bono Director, UW Law School
probonodirector@law.wisc.edu

Amanda Meyers
Pro Bono Coordinator, UW Law School
probonoprogram@law.wisc.edu

Carolyn Staats
VLC Administrator, UW Law School
officecoordinator.vlc@gmail.com

Andrew Brooks and Jake Blair
VLC Student Coordinators
studentcoordinator.vlc@gmail.com

Table of Contents

1 – Director’s Message
2 – Advisory Board and Two-Year Update
3 – Interview with New Administrator
4 – Attorney Training
5 – Community Partner Highlight
6 – Student Coordinator Corner
The VLC Advisory Board met in May 2014 to discuss a variety of matters. As a result of advisory board discussions, a few changes in VLC administration have been put into place. One of these changes is a more rigorous student volunteer substitution policy. Students who do not show up to their scheduled volunteer session will have a chance to provide an acceptable excuse for their absence. If they do not provide one, they will no longer be able to volunteer with the VLC. We have also incorporated Family Court Clinic students as subject-matter resources at two VLC sessions each semester. This latter change was made in response to the need for family law related advice and assistance that many of our clients have. In addition, in response to requests for assistance with wills, our VLC clinics will soon have will-creation software available for interested clients. This software has been graciously donated by Jeff Brown at the WI State Bar. We are in the process of planning a training for our volunteers to become familiar with this software.

As of May 2014, the VLC has helped over 130 veterans over the course of just under two years. The majority of these clients needed assistance with family law matters, housing, small claims, bankruptcy and employment concerns. As of November 2014, we have over 50 trained attorney volunteers and 92 trained law students! 17 of these students were trained in September 2014. Our volunteers have donated over 90 hours of service during session times alone, and many more for training and other assistance. Thank you!

A huge congratulations goes out to the Veterans Law Center and Student Coordinator Andrew Brooks for their awards from the WI State Bar! The VLC received the Pro Bono Organization of the Year Award, and Andrew received the Public Interest Student of the Year Award. Both awards were presented at the State Bar Annual Convention in June.
Interview with the New VLC Administrator, Carolyn Staats

1. Tell us a little bit about yourself.
I’m currently a senior undergraduate student at UW-Madison, studying psychology and social welfare. I’m actively involved in my sorority (Kappa Alpha Theta), the Lutheran Campus Center (where I am Worship and Vice Chair), and the Wisconsin International Scholars (WISc) program. Prior to starting my work at the Law School, I worked in the UW Office of the Secretary of the Faculty and interned at Bethel Lutheran Church.

2. How did you hear about the Administrator position? What is new about the position?
I received notice of the position through the School of Social Work’s email listserv, and it seemed like a great fit for me. The position is now a combination of the previous VLC Administrator’s role, as well as an intern component with the Pro Bono Program. I assist Laura and Amanda with other Pro Bono Program events, as well as keeping the VLC running smoothly. I work 15 hours per week.

3. Why were you interested in this position?
I was interested in the position because when I applied, I was planning on attending law school after graduation. There are not many positions available to undergraduates that provide this sort of hands-on legal work, and I am grateful to be able to take advantage of this unique opportunity. This position calls upon a lot of the skills I have cultivated through my previous professional experiences, and I am glad to be putting them to use for such a good cause.

4. What has your experience with the VLC been like so far?
I have really enjoyed my position with the VLC, and appreciate the experience of meeting an unmet social need in the community. My worst moments are probably the frantic scrambles to find volunteer substitutes when people cancel at the last minute. I appreciate those who respond quickly and are proactive about this. My best moments, though, are when I see how grateful our clients are after meeting with the volunteers. Whether the assistance provided is help preparing legal documents, or much-needed information that has been given, it is wonderful to see all of that work so deeply appreciated.

5. What are your plans after your time as administrator is done?
I am planning to spend the summer working in Madison, and then attend graduate school full-time in the Twin Cities. I will be working towards either a Master of Social Work or Master of Divinity (ordained ministry) degree.

6. What are some of your interests/hobbies?
In my rare but coveted free time, I enjoy practicing yoga, attending Badger sports events and spending time with loved ones. I am also a huge foodie, and love cooking, baking and visiting local restaurants, breweries/wineries and the farmers’ market.
Attorney Training Update

The model for attorney training has undergone a change due to the fact that we have roughly 50 trained volunteers who regularly give their time to the VLC. Training will now take place on an individual basis in one of two formats, selected by the attorney volunteer. Both formats are a shift from the original model of a CLE-credit, formal-training format. The first option available to attorney volunteers is to attend one of the twice-yearly student volunteer trainings, supplemented with attorney-specific materials, with a brief follow-up meeting with Laura and Carolyn. The second option available to attorney volunteers is to receive all of the attorney training materials, VLC forms, and an outline of resources and referrals available at each session. These attorneys then attend a VLC clinic, shadow one of the attorneys and then follow that experience with a brief meeting with Laura and Carolyn.

Attorney Chad Lawler is one of the first VLC attorney volunteers to be trained utilizing one of the new formats, and commented, “...I was comfortable and felt prepared to work with the veterans and to assist in resolving the veterans issues.” He also stated, “The training that VLC provides is essential to working with our nation’s veterans, especially for volunteer attorneys who do not regularly work with Veterans. The training focuses on the processes and procedures of the center, but more importantly provides the volunteer attorney with the skills to work with our veterans and an understanding of the issues that they deal with following their service.” As many of our volunteers would agree, Attorney Lawler says, “There is no question that I would recommend other attorneys to volunteer at the VLC. The VLC provides a needed service to veterans in our area and... I look forward to volunteering in the future!” If you have questions about attorney training or becoming a volunteer, please contact Carolyn, VLC Administrator.

Staffing Change:

Karen McKenzie resigned as VLC Attorney/Paralegal Coordinator in August 2014 to focus on her law school education and paralegal work. Her hard work and dedication to invigorating attorney and paralegal participation in VLC clinics were invaluable. Her efforts were honored by Marsha Mansfield at the 2014 Celebrate Pro Bono Reception on October 21. Carolyn Staats, VLC Administrator, has assumed the role of coordinator for attorneys and paralegals in addition to administering the clinics.
Community Partner Highlight

The VLC is continually strengthened by our relationships with a wide array of community partners. We are so grateful for all the services and support our partners provide, and would this year like to highlight the contributions of the Dane County Veterans Service Office. They provide many services in the realm of veterans’ benefits and support, and graciously host the VLC at our City-County Building location. Jenn Sluga, an Assistant Veterans Service Officer, has also assisted the VLC outside of the City County Building, by giving a lively and informative presentation on military culture at the Fall 2014 Student Training Session. She notes:

The relationship that has developed between the Dane County Veterans Service Office and the Veterans Law Center (VLC) has been a resourceful collaboration built on sharing knowledge and making appropriate referrals to one another. By having the VLC work in such a close relation to our office, we have been able to provide convenient and accessible services to our area’s veterans. Most importantly, the VLC has provided expert legal advice far beyond what our office staff is capable of providing. It is also important to note that VLC services are free of charge, a critical consideration for those who are most in need of these services. Furthermore, giving veterans access to the resources they need to address legal issues provides their lives with more stability, thereby freeing them to work more effectively with our office on other benefit concerns. It is also noteworthy that the VLC is one of the few veteran services available to ALL veterans, including veterans who might barred from access to other resources due to insufficient length of service, other than honorable character of service, and other issues. It has been a privilege to work with the VLC, whose staff understands the importance of providing critical legal advice to veterans. Our office appreciates their service to the veterans in our area.

Did you know?

The American Bar Association (ABA) recently adopted a resolution that “encourages all law schools to create veterans law clinics to ensure that all veterans who cannot afford legal services can access them.” Way to go VLC, 2+ years ahead of the game!

Happy Veterans Day 2014!

Thank you to all who have served, and to all who have supported service members!
Student Coordinator Corner

Andrew Brooks, 3L:

Volunteering with the Veterans Law Center has been the most personally significant and meaningful work I have done through my entire time in Law School. I would like to take this time to thank everyone who has so generously supported VLC. I would like to especially thank our volunteer attorneys, without whom we would be lost. I have no inspiring words to offer that have not already been said. However, I will say that it is has been my privilege and honor to have been involved with VLC.

Jake Blair, 2L:

My name is Jake Blair, and I am in my second year of law school here at Wisconsin. I am also a 2nd Lieutenant in the United States Marine Corps. I will be serving on active duty after graduation as a Judge Advocate officer for the Marine Corps.

I have been involved with the Veterans Law Center as a student coordinator since the beginning of 2014, and I have really enjoyed my time with the program. After volunteering several times, I have seen the importance of the service our program provides. The attorneys who volunteer their time are among the most genuine people I have had the pleasure to meet.

This year, we have made a few changes to improve the performance of our program. We are now scheduling three students for every volunteer session. We feel that the extra pair of eyes and ears helps our attorneys to focus more on understanding the client’s issues and background. Meanwhile, our students are able to handle the paperwork and research. Together, we are able to provide even better assistance to the veterans who are seeking assistance.

As the program develops, we are constantly looking for ways to improve our methodology. We encourage any and all feedback from the friends of the Veterans Law Center so that we might continue to provide excellent service to our Nation’s veterans.

Thank You VLC Volunteers!