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PERSPECTIVE

Operation Iraqi Freedom Is Not Over for Veterans

By Hernán D. Vera

On Aug. 31, 2010, a few weeks after the last combat brigades shipped out, President Barack Obama announced the formal end to Operation Iraqi Freedom. Over the course of America's nine-year war in Iraq and Afghanistan, over 2,052,000 service members have been deployed in the region, with over 40.5 percent experiencing two or more deployments.

Now that the headlines have changed, and America's attention has turned elsewhere, tens of thousands of our veterans are returning to their local communities here in Southern California. By all accounts, the physical and psychological wounds they have suffered are staggering. According to official statistics from the Department of Defense, there have been 31,929 military personnel wounded in action. The Rand Corp. estimates that one-third of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans have suffered post-traumatic stress disorder, major depression, or traumatic brain injury. Most of these men and women in uniform will live with these disabilities for years.

But it gets worse. Consider that only 27 of the Department of Veteran Affairs' (VA) 1,400 hospitals around the county have in-patient PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) programs. And even those who receive treatment must contend with a 23-page standard form that they must fill out to receive any assistance.

Not surprisingly, the path to homelessness for many of these veterans - once thought to take an



President Barack Obama reads his speech to photographers after delivering a primetime televised address marking the end of the combat mission in Iraq from the Oval Office of the White House in Washington, Aug. 31, 2010.

average of 10 years for veterans of the Vietnam War - has now accelerated significantly, and by many accounts is down to 18 months for many returning veterans. Part of the rapid increase in the homelessness rate is attributable to the high cost of housing and the inability of the returnees to access needed services and/or employment that might provide stability. A recent study conducted by the American Community Survey shows that 8 percent of all returnees are paying more than 50 percent of their income post discharge on rent. Public Counsel has already started to see these returning veterans on our streets in Los Angeles.

So what can the legal community do to fight for those who have so bravely fought for us?

One critical way that concerned attorneys can get involved is by providing *pro bono* assistance to wounded veterans. In 2009, Public Counsel launched a new legal project - the Center for Veterans Advancement (CVA) - to do just that. Among its various services, the CVA trains *pro bono* attorneys to handle benefits cases for veterans at the initial petition stage, or on appeal to either the Board of Veterans' Appeals or U.S. Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims. CVA *pro bono* attorneys have also represented veterans in family and civil law matters. Indeed, volunteer attorneys from over 25 states have already signed on to take our cases, and we have a very active docket of over 200 clients. The assistance makes a real difference: veterans represented by Public Counsel and its volunteers have seen their monthly income go up from an average of \$554 to \$1419. Please contact us to get involved.

Another way that lawyers and bar associations can make a difference is by supporting the creation of veterans courts. Veterans courts are specialized criminal courts that aim to connect veterans with desperately needed treatment and services as opposed to incarceration. They are a response to the failed criminal justice policies of the post-Vietnam era that caused thousands of mentally ill and addicted veterans to suffer through lifetime cycles of crime, arrest, court proceedings, incarceration, release, and more crime. Veterans courts are collaborative efforts in which the judiciary, district attorney, and public defender work hand in hand with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and community-based organizations. California judicial pioneers like Judge Wendy Lindley of Orange County and Judge Stephen Manley of Santa Clara are already proving in their veterans courts that intensive social services have the power to address the underlying mental health problems that cause our veterans to become entangled in the criminal justice system. Veterans courts are gaining momentum in California and across the nation, and have now also

captured the attention of many policy makers. In California, for example, state legislation that would help promote the growth of veterans courts has recently been sent to the governor.

Public Counsel, through a partnership with veteran housing provider New Directions Inc., has played an active role in advocating for the creation of veterans courts across California and the nation. However, there is still a tremendous amount of work to be done to create a justice system that effectively engages veterans, and Public Counsel is looking for committed volunteers to assist in this ongoing effort. Various statutes already provide alternative sentencing guidelines for veterans, and broad education efforts are necessary so that our courts don't just throw away the key.

Future generations will look back and judge our society by the level of compassion with which we respond to the most vulnerable. It is the height of irony (and heartbreak) that this group today, as in past generations, includes our country's most invulnerable fighting force. Patriotism must, of necessity, include not only a commitment to the troops on the ground, but an equal dedication to the well-being and care of these same troops in civilian clothes who will suffer silently on our streets. Our social compact can mean nothing less.

So the next time a homeless person asks you for help, think about Operation Iraqi Freedom. It is far from over for our veterans.

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