

VETERANS ASSISTANCE PROJECT

2023 REPORT

WHO WE ARE

The Veterans Assistance Project (VAP) provides veterans living at or below the poverty line in New York City with pro bono legal assistance on issues related to their claims for disability benefits from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). VAP is one of twelve projects at the City Bar Justice Center (CBJC) which furthers access to justice by addressing unmet civil legal needs of New Yorkers struggling with poverty and other systemic socioeconomic barriers. Through VAP's partnership with over 50 law firms and corporate legal departments, almost 390 trained pro bono attorneys have provided counsel and representation to veterans. In recent years, VAP has provided legal assistance to more than 3,000 veterans and secured approximately \$8.9 million in retroactive benefits in addition to more than \$280,000 in ongoing monthly benefits.

CRITICAL NEED FOR PRO BONO ADVOCACY

According to data from the VA, approximately 302,175 claims for VA disability compensation and pension claims are backlogged as of June 2023 and will not be addressed until late 2024. At the New York Regional Office, 15,590 claims are waiting for decisions. A claim will take up to 135 days for an initial decision to be issued by the regional offices. For veterans living on scarce income, access to high-quality legal assistance could mean the difference between continued years of poverty or a hopeful future of financial stability and vital medical aid. VAP believes there is no substitute for the assistance of a qualified, accredited attorney in the claims or appeals process.

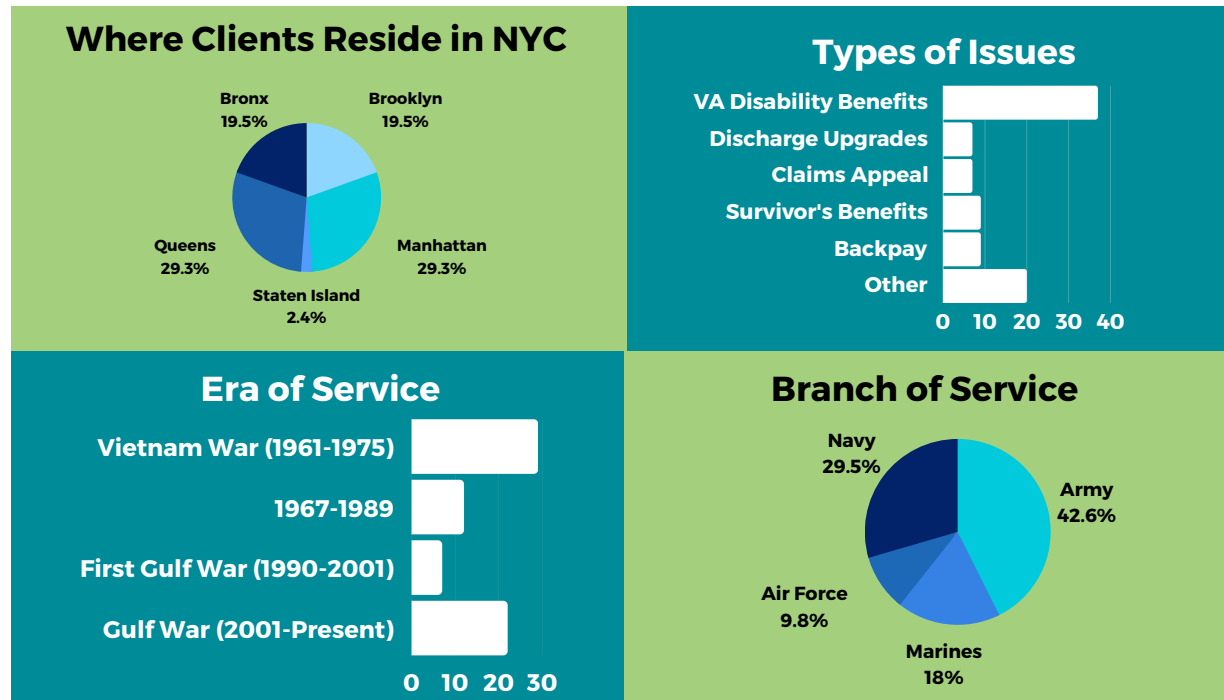
PRO BONO OPPORTUNITIES

VAP staff interview each veteran to ascertain the scope of their legal needs and eligibility for pro bono services. If the veteran is approved for services, VAP staff will connect the client with a pro bono attorney who will meet with the client at our clinics or in some cases for full-representation. The volunteer attorney then works with the individual to help them apply for benefits for the first time, increase a disability rating, or appeal the denial of a claim. Other issues covered include cases of overpayment, survivors' benefits, and terminated or reduced benefits.

VAP's director is available to guide pro bono attorneys on-site during legal clinics and provide mentoring throughout the representation on topics such as: veteran law, navigating the VA system and processes, and engaging in effective pro bono advocacy. In addition, VAP provides CLE credit for attending a training or for providing pro bono legal services.



ABOUT THE CLIENTS WE SERVE



EMERGING ISSUES WE ASSIST WITH

RACIAL DISCRIMINATION LEADING TO DISHONORABLE DISCHARGES

VAP assists veterans who are barred from receiving essential benefits, including medical benefits and service-connected disability compensation, because of their discharge status. When a service member is discharged from the military, they receive a separation document that certifies their military service and characterizes their service. VAP has assisted many veterans who received discharges that were not Honorable after experiencing discrimination. Many veterans experienced racist discrimination and abuse, even from their own supervisors. The Veterans Assistance Project is committed to advocating for all veterans, regardless of discharge status.

SURVIVING SPOUSES

VAP assists a number of surviving spouses and children of veterans who passed away due to their military service. The VA vows to assist surviving family members and provide them with support. However, for many, the VA implements substantial bars to receiving essential benefits. In recent months, VAP has seen increased numbers of surviving family members coming for help—not just with receiving benefits, but with waiving substantial debt that the VA forces them to incur when they decide to stop giving them benefits but keep sending them. For many families already dealing with tragedy and financial loss, legal support is essential as the department that is meant to support them, instead requests retroactive payment.

CLIENT QUOTE

"My experience working with the City Bar Justice center has been reinvigorating. The assistance and support they have and continue to offer is a shift in perspective. I knew there would come a time when I would be able to contend with my legal issues. I had no idea when or how much it would cost... Having access to free legal assistance will allow me to focus my resources elsewhere.... It would be easy to say there involvement in my life is greatly appreciated. However, it's my family that they are helping the most...The experience I have had with the attorneys has been amazing. It has been clear from the very beginning they love what they are doing. They have been upfront, forthright and honest. Quality's that my previous interactions with lawyers has lacked. They have been assisting me with both an upgrade of my military chapter as well as a VA disability claim. To have four attorneys on one zoom call is an amazing site. The idea that that much brain power is being applied to my needs is reassuring to say the least. I have looked into getting one lawyer to assist me. I could not afford it. To have four give me there extremely valuable time is an amazing feeling....They have a real desire to help others. That is a force that almost nothing can stop."



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