

PRO BONO SPOTLIGHT: HOMELESS ADVOCACY PROJECT

Vet with PTSD Finally Gets Benefits He's Owed

By Michael Taub

HOMELESS ADVOCACY PROJECT (HAP) volunteer Eric Henry of DLA Piper LLP was introduced to a homeless Iraq and Afghanistan combat veteran in January 2012. The veteran was actively suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which included severe symptoms of isolation, hypervigilance, nightmares, insomnia and flashbacks of his time in war zones.

After interviewing the veteran extensively, Eric, himself a Marine Corps and Operation Iraqi Freedom veteran, agreed to work on the veteran's claim for service-connected benefits. Initially, the veteran was hesitant to file a claim, as many proud veterans are, but after meeting with the veteran in person, and observing firsthand the mental toll that his exposure to real life combat had caused, Eric convinced the veteran that he was entitled to compensation for any work-related limitations he was now experiencing. Eric also learned that the veteran had a baby on the way, and that compensation would help

support the veteran's newborn child.

In support of the claim, Eric gathered all of the veteran's service personnel and medical records, which traced his service from enlistment to discharge, from the United States to Iraq and Afghanistan and back home again. Once armed with this information, Eric filed a claim and supporting memo for service-connected benefits. In the memo, Eric painstakingly detailed the veteran's military service, proving beyond any doubt that he was exposed to hostile enemy fire and combat action, which is required in any PTSD claim for benefits.

In response to Eric's memo, the VA scheduled the veteran for a mental health evaluation. This was a positive development, but Eric knew that the veteran



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would likely avoid sharing with the examining psychologist much of what he participated in and witnessed during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Eric also knew that the veteran would downplay the severity and range of his symptoms, which Eric was in a unique position to understand. As a

result, Eric had several long and emotional conversations with the veteran. In the end, Eric once again convinced the veteran that honesty with the psychologist was essential for establishing his entitlement to benefits.

Although it didn't happen overnight, Eric's commitment to the veteran undoubtedly paid off, as the VA responded to his memo and the evaluation by granting the veteran a 50 percent service connected disability rating, at \$810 per month. It also awarded the veteran

more than \$12,000 in back benefits. The veteran was stunned at the award and continued to downplay his right to benefits. However, he couldn't have been more appreciative of Eric's help. He told Eric of his plans to go back to school using the GI Bill, and of his intention to continue in treatment for PTSD. In addition, Eric could sense in the veteran a significant change. Even before treatment, the process of working together had allowed the veteran to trust again, both in others and in a system that he felt had abandoned him.

Since Eric first took on this engagement, DLA Piper's Philadelphia office expanded its veterans outreach initiatives by joining the firm's national signature project, Serving Those Who Serve Our Country. DLA's partnership with the Homeless Advocacy Project is at the center of the initiative, and together they have continued to meet and represent homeless veterans desperately in need of quality legal assistance.

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