

# Multiplying Impact through Partnership: One Nonprofit's Model of Collaboration



Veterans Legal Institute (VLI), is a unique nonprofit law firm whose mission is to provide free legal services to homeless, low income, at risk, disabled and mentally ill veterans. With a handful of attorneys and a heartfelt of passion, VLI leverages its staff and hundreds of volunteers each year serving an

incredible 2,000+ veterans in need. While demand for attorney advocates to empower veterans into accessing housing, navigating healthcare, being found eligible for employment and navigating education benefits is rising, available resources fall short. In an effort to scale back demand and reach

veterans that otherwise have no recourse, VLI has built collaboration into its strategy by leveraging partnerships. As a result, this creative nonprofit grassroots effort is a national model for how nonprofit collaboration leads to greater social returns, and ultimately, saves lives.

Social impact warriors

claim having a zealous legal advocate can prevent homelessness and even deter suicide. According to Antoinette Balta, Executive Director and Co-Founder of VLI, "Access to justice should not be predicated on one's wealth. Our nation's heroes deserve an advocate to defend the very rights they fight

to protect." However, with limited government funding, legal aids around the nation spend time and effort raising money through benefits and private donors, but nonetheless remain generally underfunded and overworked. Legal aid attorneys, like many social workers, suffer burnout after a few years. Recognizing this national epidemic with little funding to compensate those who serve a greater good, VLI has strayed from the traditional nonprofit fundraising model and is "resource raising" by leveraging the strengths of partners in the community to multiply impact. The resulting collaborations described below are directly responsible for creating greater service efficiency and holistic services.

Orange County, California, boasts a number of veteran-serving nonprofits



providing a variety of resources. Quick to realize that to maximize impact, the right hand should talk to the left, leaders in the community banded together and created an unincorporated association calling it the Orange County Veterans and Military Families Collaborative (OCVMFC). Seven years in the works, the OCVMFC now boasts over 100 organizations and meets quarterly to provide a breeding ground for partnership. Veterans Legal Institute, one of the early adopting members, runs the Legal-Re-Entry Working Group, a subset of the OCVMFC, designed to educate the community on legal issues and remedies affecting veterans. The OCVMFC has been able to leverage funding as a group, and now has a full-time paid staff member to keep it organized and maintained.

With affordable housing being a major issue nationwide, VLI has partnered with Volunteers of America Los Angeles (VOALA), a grant recipient

of Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) funds from the Department of Veterans Affairs. While in the past, defending veterans from evictions for nonpayment of rent was a losing battle because a private landlord has no fiduciary duty to house a veteran for free—even if the veteran lost his or her job, has children, is disabled, has a service dog, or has nowhere else to go. As a result, in the last 5 years, empowered by a partnership where VOA provides emergency grant funding for housing stability and VLI takes the legal reigns, hundreds of veterans and their families have remained safely housed. This means that family units stay together, children can stay in the same school district, and stability is maintained—a far greater outcome than an eviction on the record making it harder to find housing in a county where housing is in demand, and where veterans living month to month will not have money for first, last, and security deposit, or to move their belongings.



As we learn to understand more about mental health and the invisible wounds of war, it has become clear that sometimes those in need struggle to navigate complex bureaucratic systems. Recognizing this barrier to success, the Tierney Veteran Center of Orange County Goodwill, funded by the Orange County Community Foundation in partnership with the OC Realtors, built out a massive one-stop veteran hub where veterans can access multiple types of services. An early adopter, VLI branched out its offices and is now co-

locating at OC Goodwill so they can share clients and resources. Retired Army Colonel E. Denton Knapp, who is presently a Brigadier General in the California State Guard, sums it up: “When we are housed together, we are stronger. When we are stronger, our veterans thrive.”

Veterans Legal Institute is now expanding into San Bernardino County and Riverside County—collectively known as the Inland Empire. Historically under-resourced and under-served, the Inland Empire is home to tens of thousands of low-income veterans. In

collaboration with the both counties and the California Department of Veterans Affairs, VLI leveraged Prop 63 funding to expand its geographic reach. Monthly mobile legal clinics have been established onsite at each county’s veteran service office—the first of its kind at these locations. As a direct result, veteran clients in those areas now have legal resource to assist them in removing barriers to their housing, healthcare, education and employment. A passion project of the VLI team, Deputy Executive Director of Veterans Legal Institute KellyAnn Romanych describes their collective mindspace: “The reason we work so hard is because we are veterans, military spouses, military children, social justice warriors, patriots and Americans—and we recognize that our brothers and sisters in the Inland Empire will grow and thrive with our support.”

The collaborations illustrated above are just a few creative ways that resource driven nonprofits are creatively multiplying their impact and reducing duplication. Want to join forces? Learn more at [vetslegal.org](http://vetslegal.org) or contact Antoinette Balta at [abalta@vetslegal.com](mailto:abalta@vetslegal.com).

