

Maryland Lawyer

News and analysis of legal matters in Maryland

Pro bono

Rallying behind homeless veterans

BY DANNY JACOBS

Danny.Jacobs@TheDailyRecord.com

The story of how **Goodell, DeVries, Leech & Dann LLP** came to be honored last month for its pro bono work with military veterans begins with an email.

Craig B. Merkle read a story two years ago in The Daily Record about lawyers helping veterans obtain benefits through a program based at the **Homeless Persons Representation Project Inc.** Merkle is a partner in the Baltimore firm, the son of a veteran and nephew of a retired military man.

"I just felt that we should be doing something in an organizational way," he said.

So Merkle sent an email to all of the lawyers at Goodell DeVries, asking if they were interested in volunteering their time. A dozen responded.

"It's really phenomenal," said Antonia K. Fasanelli, executive director of HPRP. "We don't have representation in that number from other law firms."

The lawyers underwent training through HPRP's Veterans Benefits Project, which educates lawyers in the veterans' claims process in exchange for helping at least one veteran through it. Nine of the Goodell DeVries lawyers have handled five cases so far, according to HPRP. The program aims to help homeless veterans obtain housing as well as pensions, disability compensation and any other payments from the federal government to which they are entitled.

"It's a nice way to work together with people you might not otherwise work together with," Merkle said.

The biggest challenge, according to Merkle, has been the pace of the benefits process, which typically takes at least a year to complete. The application is lengthy and requires thorough documentation. A mistake in the application moves the case to an appeals process that can take even longer to complete.

"We're used to being able to make things move faster in our world," Merkle said.



RICH DENNISON

From left, Erica W. Magliocca, Craig B. Merkle, Aaron L. Moore, Sidney G. Leech and Deborah C. Parraz are some of the lawyers at Goodell DeVries whose pro bono work benefits homeless military veterans.

Adding to the challenge, HPRP has given the firm some of its more complex cases, including claims of sexual trauma and terminal illness.

"These are the claims the military and the [U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs] don't necessarily jump to recognize," Fasanelli said.

But Merkle thought when first emailing his colleagues that veterans' benefits would be a good fit for the firm because of its medical malpractice defense work.

"They're used to and comfortable reading medical files, so it's a huge step up because the cases are so document-heavy," said Danielle Cover, HPRP's director of pro bono programs. "Being able to read through and understand the choices made and the clients' history is critical to building a solid case."

Merkle said he wished the firm "could

claim greater success" in their cases. Some cases do not advance very far and sometimes there turns out not be a claim at all, just a person with a grievance, he said.

"I felt we were given too much credit for what we've done," he said of the Outstanding Volunteer Law Firm of the Year award from HPRP.

But the firm continues to take cases, and four more lawyers are undergoing training, according to Merkle.

"You can get people more interested and willing to participate if you have a dedicated project you're working on," he said. "It's something we can rally around."

Much to the delight of Fasanelli.

"Their commitment means a great deal to us and our clients," she said.