By Dr. Cecilia M. Cardesa-Lusardi

It is no secret that lawyers’ services are expensive and there is a crisis among those living at or near poverty who need quality legal representation. According to the 2016 Justice Index there is less than one attorney available to provide pro-bono representation for every 10,000 poor Americans. Within this demographic are veterans. According to the latest Community Homeless Assessment, Local Education and Networking Groups Report, eight of the top 10 unmet needs facing homeless veterans are legal in nature.

Military Assistance Project is a non-profit organization that helps to fill that need. Headquartered in Philadelphia, but serving veterans from across the nation, we provide free legal services for active duty, reserve component or veteran military personnel and their widows/spouses in the form of consumer and veterans’ administrative law services.

Rightfully, many are becoming more attuned to the physical and psychological trauma members of our military face. What many do not know is that, simultaneously, veterans and current service members can find their financial situation in shambles owing to their time while serving abroad. Lawyers play a crucial role in helping veterans navigate applicable financial laws and, when appropriate, file bankruptcy to get a fresh start.

In 2017, MAP helped discharge $2.25 million in debt on behalf of veterans. Since 2011, we have helped more than 1,500 veterans discharged over $15 million in debt.

Furthermore, weaving a trauma-informed approach to MAP’s service-delivery model enables us to provide legal services thoughtfully and compassionately across a spectrum of client needs. The hallmarks of trauma-informed practice are when the legal practitioner puts the realities of the client’s trauma experiences at the forefront in engaging with the client and adjusts the relationship by that experience.

For those veterans whose discharges disqualify them for VA benefits, the administrative system can seem an un navigable maze of paper, rules and policies. And, it takes forever. For a veteran who must appeal an adverse decision from the original VA intake system, it takes an average of 1,878 days to have that decision reversed. The daunting task of fighting through this agency turns so many people away, especially when they do not have the assistance of an advocate, which, unsurprisingly, includes those without financial resources who need benefits the most. For many in the veteran community, particularly those already suffering from severe trauma, frustration with the system can lead to a deterioration of mental health and even suicidal ideation.

One of our clients provides an example. Tommy* is a Purple Heart recipient, with severe injuries resulting from an injury he suffered in Afghanistan, and suffers from a traumatic brain injury, PTSD and Major Depression Disorder all stemming from his service, which led to periods of self-harm/suicidal ideation.

A few weeks ago, Tommy was suicidal and when he sought treatment at VA he was turned away.

Tommy, a MAP attorney and I personally witnessed the exhausting and exorbitant wait times veterans face at VA every single day. We were with Tommy for 12 hours, including being with him in the emergency department at the VAMC for five of those long and dark hours; writing letters and literally knocking on doors for assistance. After all this, he was admitted into the VAMC and is now receiving the treatment he deserves.

Unfortunately, Tommy’s story is not unique. Twenty-two veterans kill themselves every day; unemployment, debt, income insecurity and struggles with VA pose significant challenges to mental health.

Our vets deserve better, and you can help. MAP provides training and mentoring for all attorneys interested in volunteering to assist our clients in all or one of the many services we provide to serve those who signed that blank check on our behalf.

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*Names changed to protect privacy.