

Statewide legal hotline debuts to aid veterans

Veterans and current service members can call (855) 452-3526 to find pro bono services

BY DAVID THOMAS
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U.S. service members and veterans who are dealing with legal problems in Illinois can now take advantage of a new statewide legal aid hotline and support network that is launching today.

Potential clients can call (855) 452-3526 to get in touch with attorneys affiliated with the Illinois Armed Forces Legal Aid Network, a collection of legal aid clinics that are receiving state funding to provide pro bono legal services to Illinois veterans, active duty military personnel, National Guard reservists and their dependents.

"Too many veterans find themselves in court. Too many veterans find themselves in jail. These are men and women who have worn the cloth of this nation," said Erica Jeffries, the director Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs, at a news conference today at the Union League Club of Chicago. "These people deserve every resource we can give them, especially when it comes to legal aid."

Jeffries was joined by 1st District Appellate Justice Mary K. Rochford, who chairs the Illinois Supreme Court's Commission on Access to Justice, and Trish McGill, the chair of the Illinois Access to Civil Justice Council, which oversees IL-AFLAN, at the news conference.

The hotline will be maintained by Coordinated Advice and Referral Program for Legal Service (CARPLS). Potential clients who call in will speak with one of the

three attorneys on staff. Hotline hours are 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday.

The IL-AFLAN hotline and associated clinics can only be used for civil claims, not criminal ones.

"We have a responsibility to protect their rights just as they fought

to protect ours," McGill said.

Zach Zarnow, the program director of the Illinois Equal Justice Foundation, which distributed the grants funding the legal aid clinics participating in IL-AFLAN, said he expected most callers' legal issues to be resolved at the phone stage.

"The phone hotline does such an amazing job of assisting people," Zarnow said, who added that CARPLS "say they solve 80 percent of their cases over the phone."

If the client's legal issue cannot be resolved over the phone, they'll be referred to one of the eight other IL-AFLAN participants — Prairie State Legal Services, Land of Lincoln Legal Assistance Foundation, LAF, Chicago Volunteer Legal Services, John Marshall Law School Veterans Legal Support Center and Clinic, Southern Illinois University School of Law Veterans Assistance Program, Loyola University of Chicago School of Law Veterans Legal Clinic and the Center for Disability and Elder Law.

The nine nonprofits received a total \$1,224,269 from Illinois Equal Justice Foundation and were selected by the Illinois Access to Civil Justice Council.

unable to tap into those funds for two years because of the budget stalemate between Republican Gov. Bruce Rauner and the Democratic-controlled legislature.

Zarnow said the \$1.2 million grant amount is due to the fact that these funds had been accruing for two years without being spent. Zarnow said he hoped IL-AFLAN will be able to distribute at least \$1 million next year.

Because of the realities of military service — coupled with the regional deployment of Veterans Affairs facilities — there are no real residency requirements for people to call in and be referred through the program, Zarnow said.

All that matters is whether the legal issue can be resolved in Illinois. For instance, a U.S. service member deployed in Germany can use the hotline if he or she is having a landlord dispute in Chicago.

The program has an income restriction at 80 percent of the Chicago-area median income. For a family of four, the threshold a caller's total household income cannot go above is \$63,400.

Zarnow said they would be taking people at their word they are eligible for legal assistance under the IL-AFLAN program if they call in. However, if they will need to provide documentation to back up their claims if they need to be referred to an agency.

Apart from the income requirements, IL-AFLAN will not assist veterans who have been dishonorably discharged from service or if a dependent of a veteran or service member is seeking legal help for an action that would harm that person.

To that latter restriction, the spouse of a service member could not be use the program for help with a divorce.

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IL-AFLAN was created when the Illinois General Assembly amended the state Access to Justice Act in 2015. The amendment enacted a \$2 filing fee on civil filings in the state until 2020.

However, Illinois Equal Justice Foundation and the council were

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