

Greenberg Traurig's Adam Siegler On Legal Aid For Veterans

By **Natalie Rodriguez** | November 4, 2018, 8:02 PM EST



Greenberg Traurig partner Adam Siegler is working with the firm on an initiative specific to military members and veterans that was launched this year.

Greenberg Traurig LLP partner Adam Siegler last year retired from active military service with the rank of colonel and more than two decades working as a judge advocate in the military legal system. His work with armed forces members and veterans, however, is far from over.

Siegler, who works on complex real estate and corporate litigation in his day job, has seen firsthand how repeated deployment, mental health issues stemming from service, and homelessness can make accessing legal aid a problem for both current and former military members. Too often, an outstanding warrant or unsettled domestic dispute can snowball into larger issues, he said.

As chair of the Armed Forces Committee for the Los Angeles County Bar Association, Siegler helped create the Valor Guide, a comprehensive guide of local legal aid resources and lawyers for veterans confronting such problems.

His work is also taking an increasingly national scope. Last year, he joined the [American Bar Association's Legal Assistance for Military Personnel Committee](#), which fosters growing legal aid initiatives for armed forces members and veterans. He's also working with Greenberg Traurig on an initiative specific to military members and veterans that was launched this year.

While the initiative within the global firm's pro bono program is still being developed, it will include providing assistance to the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans and guiding veterans on appeals to upgrade their discharge status.

"It is a tremendous need across the country," Siegler said.

Here, Siegler talks to Law360 about some of the biggest access to justice issues facing veterans and what he wishes lawyers knew about serving current and former military members.

What do you think is the biggest access to justice issue for veterans?

There are so many. I can tell you for serving members, the dislocation from repeated deployments and moves and the stresses that you get from deployment, including injuries, are very difficult issues. And then in addition to all of the problems that everybody else faces, many female veterans have experienced military-related sexual trauma or harassment of some kind or another. Also, our LGBT veterans have similarly faced a number of challenges.

So everybody who's deployed or served has issues related to that service, and in particular, certain groups have been more heavily impacted because of their vulnerability.

In your pro bono work, are you focusing on any particular issues with veterans?

Our firm as a whole covers almost every kind of legal issue that a veteran would likely come across. But I can give you some examples of the range of the things that we do. We frequently help veterans with their businesses and transactional related issues. For example, because these service members often have to move every three years or they deploy, they are sometimes taken advantage of by car dealers who know that they have a regular paycheck — and maybe not a lot of experience in automobile transactions. I've personally handled a number of cases involving those transactional matters, particularly with automobiles and also landlords when it comes to deployments. That's one issue.

The next issue, which I think is a very difficult one, is family law. Again, because military members move every few years or often deploy — and because veterans often have gone through the stress of deployments and separation — it creates tremendous stress on families.

We've just recently handled a very difficult case in that field. I can say in general terms that it involved a custody dispute that spanned literally across the globe. The soldier was deployed in one country and moved to another. The ex-spouse was in yet a different state. There were issues involving which jurisdiction would control the case. These are difficult cases even in a local setting, then much more difficult when the service member and the ex-spouse are separated into different states because of deployment.

You chair the Armed Forces Committee of the Los Angeles County Bar Association, which focuses much of its work on clearing outstanding tickets and warrants and having misdemeanors expunged for veterans. Why are these such important issues for veterans?

Many of our homeless veterans are homeless because they have difficulty getting employment. Having a bad discharge or a misdemeanor conviction or not having a vehicle or a driver's license can be tremendous obstacles to employment. Part of our job is to help these veterans get back on the road to full employment. And with that comes a home and dignity.

Are there any cases that stand out as illustrative of the work that you're trying to do with veterans?

I don't want to be one of those guys who keeps telling the same war story over and over, but I'll give you an example of a recent case. We were trying to help a transgender person who's a former military service member fight discrimination in her current situation. And it just astounds me that someone who has served this country could be mistreated and discriminated against because of her gender orientation.

That's an example where I think that someone who was served deserves to be treated very well and they deserve our legal support to correct any wrongs that have been inflicted on them.

Where do you think Los Angeles stands in the national landscape of access to justice issues for veterans?

I think Los Angeles is a leader in providing legal services for veterans. And I think the LA County Bar Association's project is a great example of that. Also, there are many law firms, including Greenberg Traurig, that work together to help veterans here.

But I would also say we have a lot more to do yet, because according to the Los Angeles homeless count, we currently have approximately 2,700 unsheltered veterans living on the street. And we have another 1,000 or so at least who are in shelters, and of these, many of them have mental illness, brain injuries and other disabilities and disorders.

All of those people need a tremendous amount of legal help, and I think there's so much more to do. The scale of the need is such that I would encourage every law firm, every court, every governmental agency to be engaged in this work together.

Is there anything that you wish the legal community knew about veterans and the legal issues they face?

I would hope that the legal community would appreciate how difficult it is to serve in the military in today's operational tempo. The likelihood of being deployed now, and for the past 17 years, has been fairly high, and many of those deployments have created legal challenges for our veterans who are dealing with them now.

I would hope the legal community would appreciate how difficult and challenging military service can be and how much we owe the men and women who do serve.

What's the toughest part of representing veterans?

One challenge is often just staying in touch with them because, sadly, many of our veterans are homeless or under difficult circumstances. Our veterans are deployed overseas, engaged in a very difficult and challenging job and often aren't free to meet with us. So it is a challenge just to connect

with them.

Also, the military service has its own unique rules, regulations and jargon. So it's sometimes a challenge for people who haven't served to undertake all of that. But I really want to commend the lawyers who don't have any prior service and nevertheless undertake these cases and figure it out. I think everybody who is helping a veteran is serving in their own way.

Greenberg Traurig is starting a veterans-focused initiative within its pro bono program. Could you tell me more about that?

We are working to identify legal needs for veterans and service members near all of our Greenberg Traurig offices across the country. Then we're identifying legal skills and interest in veterans within the Greenberg Traurig organization. We have more than 100 lawyers and staff members who are veterans. We have a tremendous cadre of people who really understand what military service means and are willing to help.

Given the Los Angeles numbers of homeless, I can't imagine what they might be nationally for veterans.

It is a tremendous need across the country. I feel very passionately about it. I always feel guilty that I'm not doing more every single day, but we have a fantastic team at Greenberg Traurig. They're fully committed to this effort and all of our lawyers and staff members participating in doing something about it and making a difference.

All Access is a series of discussions with leaders in the access to justice field. Questions and answers have been edited for length and clarity.

Editing by Katherine Rautenberg.