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Army veteran draws on personal struggles to help fellow service members

Greenberg Traurig attorney Adam Siegler, a retired Army colonel who once faced financial hardship after returning from Iraq, leads a pro bono effort to help veterans secure housing, benefits and legal protections.

By Douglas Saunders Sr.
Daily Journal Staff Writer

When Adam Siegler returned from Iraq in 2008, the Army colonel and experienced attorney found himself facing financial ruin. His law practice had closed, he could not find work and he was struggling to pay his mortgage.

"I know what it's like to be at the edge of the abyss," said Siegler, now of counsel at Greenberg Traurig.

That experience helped shape his commitment to providing free legal assistance to veterans and active-duty service members, particularly those at risk of homelessness.

"If I could be at risk, as a seasoned lawyer and a colonel, think about someone with a traumatic brain injury or PTSD sitting in a cardboard box somewhere," he said. "He needs help. He deserves that help."

Siegler leads a multifaceted pro bono effort at Greenberg Traurig that helps deployed service members avoid default judgments, assists veterans seeking discharge upgrades and disability benefits, and represents former service members victimized by consumer fraud.

He describes the work as a continuum of care, aimed at preventing veterans from losing their homes and helping those already struggling regain financial stability.



ADAM SIEGLER

Siegler received a direct commission into the Army's Judge Advocate General's Corps in 1996. Following the Sept. 11 attacks, he deployed to Egypt for a joint exercise with Arab coalition partners before transferring units to serve in Iraq. He was stationed at Camp Victory in 2008 and 2009 during the transition of authority to Iraqi forces.

After returning home, he joined Greenberg Traurig, where he works with fellow veterans and other attorneys through the firm's global pro bono program.

One focus is the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act, which provides legal protections to active-duty military personnel, including safeguards against default judgments, lease termination rights and limits on certain loan interest rates.

Siegler said the law creates a need for legal representation when deployed service members face civil litigation, but generally provides no funding for attorneys.

To address that gap, Greenberg Traurig established a program with Los Angeles Superior Court. When the court identifies cases involving active-duty defendants, Siegler's office recruits volunteer attorneys.

The firm has three such cases pending and has handled approximately a dozen others over the past year.

Another priority is helping veterans upgrade unfavorable military discharges that can restrict access to education and health care benefits.

"You have to go back and look at the root cause," Siegler said, noting that misconduct sometimes reflects underlying problems that deserve closer examination.

The firm works with the Veterans Legal Institute in Orange County and The Veterans Consortium in Washington, D.C., to train attorneys in discharge upgrade proceedings. Three cases are pending, with more expected.

Greenberg Traurig also assists veterans pursuing benefits for service-connected conditions, an administrative process Siegler said can be daunting even for experienced attorneys.

"I find the benefits system difficult, and I'm a lawyer," he said.

The firm has handled approximately six benefits cases over the past year, and dozens of attorneys have volunteered for training.

Siegler frequently takes cases himself.

"It's hard for me to turn anyone away," he said.

The firm's work extends to consumer fraud, including cases in which veterans have lost substantial savings.

In one matter, Greenberg Traurig represented an older former Marine who lost the equity in her home to a real estate broker. After years of litigation, she recovered a substantial lump-sum payment.

In another, a sergeant commuting roughly 100 miles each way purchased a used car whose warning light illuminated as he drove off the lot. Rather than repair the problem, the dealership disconnected the light, Siegler said. The engine eventually failed.

A jury awarded punitive damages and attorney fees, which Siegler said were donated to a military chaplain's relief fund for soldiers in need.

Such cases can require legal expenditures far exceeding the amount in dispute.

"As a business model, that makes no sense. As a model for helping veterans, it makes perfect sense," Siegler said. "We are talking about veterans' lives, not money."

Greenberg Traurig covers expenses including mental health evaluations and court filing fees. About two dozen people in its Los Angeles office participate in veterans-related cases.

The firm also collaborates with the Los Angeles County Bar Association and its Counsel for Justice program, which operates a veterans' legal clinic. Siegler chairs the bar association's Armed Forces Committee, whose volunteers help veterans resolve tickets, warrants and other legal problems that can interfere with employment and housing.

Despite the firm's efforts, Siegler said the demand for assistance remains overwhelming.

"I never feel like I'm doing enough."

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