

**VETERANS' RIGHTS  
FELLOWSHIP**

**POST GRADUATE  
ANNUAL REPORT**

**EQUAL JUSTICE  
A M E R I C A**



**DENISE BENNETT  
EJA FELLOW**

**RALEIGH, NC  
AUGUST 2026**

**LEGAL AID OF  
NORTH CAROLINA**



## I. REFLECTIONS



Denise Bennett, J.D. 2024  
North Carolina Central University

My time as an Equal Justice America fellow has been full of learning and growth. I am deeply grateful to the donors who have invested in EJA and made opportunities like this available to law students and postgraduate fellows. This fellowship has meant the world to me—literally.

I graduated from law school with a desire to learn more about veterans law. Little did I realize just how great the need for legal assistance is or how limited the amount of legal help available to veterans can be. At the same time, North Carolina has a substantial number of organizations providing non-legal assistance to veterans. Bringing these two worlds together is essential. Veterans often need more than legal representation; they need a network of people and organizations that can address the legal, financial, housing, employment, and other challenges they face.

When I started this fellowship, I assumed I would work in a traditional law firm assisting veterans with their benefits applications and appeals.

*"The goal is not simply to resolve one legal problem. It is to help a veteran regain stability and move forward."*

Legal Aid, although it is the third-largest law firm in North Carolina, is not traditional in the way I envisioned a law firm when I was in law school. The more I have worked with Legal Aid through this fellowship, however, the more I have considered whether it might be a better use of the calling God has given me to open my own firm or partner with a nonprofit that needs a legal component to provide a more holistic approach to serving veterans.

If we can address the legal needs veterans have—including evictions, criminal record expunctions, driver's license restorations, and benefits issues—and partner



with organizations that can address their non-legal needs, the veteran is more likely to emerge in a better position, with the ability to begin recovering and standing on their own. The goal is not simply to resolve one legal problem. It is to help a veteran regain stability and move forward.

## **II. INITIATIVES**

My work during this fellowship has included outreach, meeting veterans at the Veterans Life Center, and filing and appealing veterans' benefits claims. Throughout the fellowship, I have met individuals and organizations committed to reaching veterans where they are and helping them move toward a better position than the one in which we initially found them.

The fellowship has also helped me remember one of my "whys." I want to see a Veterans Treatment Court in my area. I have met many people involved in treatment courts in other communities, and I have been invited to sit in on several sessions. I plan to accept those invitations and continue learning what it would take to bring a Veterans Treatment Court to my community.

Another initiative I have begun exploring is a partnership with a nonprofit organization. The Joel Fund has spent the last decade helping veterans address financial issues, including assistance with utilities, rent, furnishings, and other needs. However, they do not have an attorney as part of their organization.

My hope is to start Operation Gavel, a group of attorneys who have agreed to represent veterans at low-bono or pro-bono rates. I intend to move slowly, but I want to build it correctly. Hopefully, within a few years, a reliable legal resource network will be developed, along with a managing attorney who can coordinate veterans' legal needs with attorneys in the surrounding communities.

This idea was born out of a clear need. There are veterans who need legal assistance



but cannot afford a private attorney and do not qualify for Legal Aid. Operation Gavel could help fill that gap by connecting those veterans with attorneys willing to provide affordable or pro bono representation.

### **III. CLIENTS SERVED**

During the fellowship, I have closed or transferred twenty-four cases and currently have fourteen open cases.

Although I have not yet had the opportunity to complete a discharge upgrade case independently from beginning to end, I have edited and discussed several potential theories for discharge upgrades. One of my current cases involves a discharge upgrade that is presently in the research phase.

My open cases include criminal record expunctions, initial benefits applications, appeals, Total Disability based on Individual Unemployability (TDIU) applications, and a case that is expected to proceed to the U.S. Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims, most likely in February 2027. Many of the initial benefits applications involve a Character of Discharge determination because the veteran received an Other Than Honorable or Bad Conduct discharge, or because the individual does not meet the statutory definition of a “veteran.”

I also assisted a veteran with a child support hearing. Through that experience, I learned that the Department of Social Services in my county can be both reasonable and fair. The veteran petitioned for a change in his child support obligation and, under the applicable law, was entitled to the modification. I am now working on appealing several benefits denials on his behalf. In this case, VA appears to have made a medical determination without obtaining the necessary medical opinion.

We see all kinds of veterans. Most are grateful for the assistance they receive, although there are some who will not be satisfied regardless of the outcome. In one



case, we were able to obtain benefits for a veteran that resulted in a significant amount of back pay. Unfortunately, the veteran decided that continuing to work with us was not worth the effort, and we closed the case.

One particularly unique case involves a veteran who received an Other Than Honorable discharge from the Marine Corps but subsequently enlisted in the Army National Guard/Reserves several times and attained the rank of E-4. The case is unusual because the periods of honorable service fall between the beginning and ending dates associated with the Other Than Honorable period. Because of these circumstances, I plan to conduct additional research into whether a discharge upgrade petition to the Navy may be appropriate.

## **IV. SUCCESSES**

I have experienced several significant successes during the last several weeks of my fellowship.

In one case, I filed an aggravation claim involving a veteran with autism. The veteran had been allowed to enlist and remained in service for nearly seven years. During that period, traits associated with autism were aggravated and manifested in depression and suicidal ideation, particularly when the veteran believed they were failing the unit. The successful outcome was unexpected and reinforced the importance of carefully examining the circumstances surrounding a veteran's service and the development or aggravation of a condition during that service.

Another significant success was obtaining a 100% disability rating for a veteran without relying on the TDIU route. Both outcomes were particularly meaningful because they demonstrated the practical impact that careful advocacy and persistence can have on a veteran's life.



## **V. WRAP UP**

One of the greatest challenges I encountered during the fellowship was understanding and managing the timing requirements in veterans law. On paper, the process appears simple. A veteran files an intent to file and has one year to submit the claim. After receiving a decision, the veteran has one year to appeal. If the veteran is dissatisfied with the result of that appeal, another avenue of review may be available, again subject to specific deadlines. Simple, right?

In practice, it is much more complicated.

When we receive a new client, we submit an intent to file. Because of the volume of work involved, it can be easy to move on to the next matter once that intent has been filed, particularly when another deadline is approaching. However, an intent to file can create a false sense of security for a representative, particularly when a veteran has previously filed claims for benefits.

If the representative does not take the time to thoroughly review the veteran's file once access is obtained, an existing appeal deadline can be missed. The expiration of that deadline cannot be cured by a subsequent intent to file. I learned this lesson the hard way. I submitted an intent to file and assumed that date was the date from which I could proceed. However, VA had issued a decision before we became the veteran's representative, and the actual appeal period was already running.

When you learn a lesson the hard way, it is one you are unlikely to forget. I have since adjusted my approach to reviewing files and strengthened my internal procedures to ensure that existing deadlines are identified before relying on a new intent to file.

My supervisor was kind and supportive throughout the experience. However, because I tend to hold myself to an extremely high standard, I struggle to regain my confidence after making the mistake. I questioned whether I was truly supposed to be doing this work. That experience forced me to confront my own perfectionism and



reminded me that becoming a competent advocate requires not only knowledge of the law but also the ability to learn from mistakes.

Another challenge is waiting.

Although the procedures for pursuing VA benefits are established, the process itself can take considerable time. The wait increases as the claim moves through successive levels of review. An advocate must carefully review Compensation and Pension examinations, the evidence of record, and VA's reasoning for denying the claim before determining the appropriate next step.

Often, the first appeal may be straightforward because it asks VA to reconsider information already in the record. A subsequent appeal may require more extensive research into the veteran's particular circumstances and the relevant decisions of the Board of Veterans' Appeals and, when appropriate, the U.S. Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims.

Once additional evidence or argument is submitted, VA may obtain additional medical examinations or opinions and conduct another review before issuing a decision. If a veteran has a meritorious claim, the process of obtaining the benefits to which the veteran is entitled can still take years.

Throughout that process, the advocate must keep the veteran informed and help the veteran understand why preserving appeal rights and maintaining the claim is worth the wait and frustration. There are also situations in which one representative begins the process, and another must step in later. When a case reaches the Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims, the veteran will need an attorney who is authorized to practice before the Court. Many veterans service organizations and service officers do not represent veterans before the Court, which can leave veterans searching for new representation at a critical stage of their case.

Finally, veterans with complex or serious conditions often have multiple appointments that must be scheduled and attended so that VA can properly evaluate their claims.



*"I leave the fellowship with more knowledge, more humility, and an even stronger commitment to advocating for veterans."*

Helping a veteran understand the importance of attending those appointments—even when the veteran understandably says, “They already have all my information” is an important part of advocacy.

The fellowship has taught me that veterans law is about much more than filing forms and arguing claims. It requires patience, attention to detail, persistence, compassion, and the willingness to meet veterans where they are. Most importantly, it has reinforced for me that there is a significant need for attorneys who are willing to serve veterans who fall through the gaps between the resources that exist and the assistance they can access.

This fellowship has given me more than experience. It has given me a clearer understanding of the kind of attorney I want to become and the kind of service I hope to provide. I leave the fellowship with more knowledge, more humility, and an even stronger commitment to advocating for veterans.



## VII. MEDIA





# **SUPERVISOR EVALUATION**

## **AUGUST 2026**



August 17, 2026

Dan Ruben  
Executive Director  
Equal Justice America  
Building II, Suite 201  
13540 East Boundary Road

RE: Final Supervisor's Report for Denise Bennett, EJA Post-Graduate Veterans' Rights Fellow

Dear Mr. Ruben,

Denise Bennett joined Legal Aid of North Carolina's Veterans Law Project as an Equal Justice America Post-Graduate Veterans' Rights Fellow in August 2024. As her two-year fellowship comes to an end, I am pleased to report that Denise has become an invaluable member of our team and an outstanding advocate for North Carolina veterans.

The Veterans Law Project provides holistic civil legal services to veterans who are experiencing homelessness or are at risk of homelessness throughout North Carolina. Our work includes VA disability compensation and pension matters, military discharge upgrades and records corrections, housing matters, public benefits, and other civil legal issues that affect a veteran's housing and financial stability.

During her fellowship, Denise developed substantial knowledge across virtually every aspect of the Project's work. Her key contributions included:

- Developing and advocating VA benefits claims;
- Interviewing clients and reviewing complex medical and military records;
- Conducting legal research and drafting persuasive arguments;
- Managing an active caseload and guiding veterans through the VA claims and appeals process;
- Assisting veterans with criminal record expunctions and driver's license restoration; and
- Supporting intake, outreach, intern supervision, and administrative work.

Denise's casework reflects both her growth as an attorney and her commitment to the veterans she serves. During her fellowship personally handled approximately 40 cases for veterans. In addition, she interviewed hundreds of veterans while conducting eligibility screenings of veterans who contacted the Veterans Law Project for assistance. She also spent countless hours providing veterans with resource information and materials and connecting them with community partners to help ensure that they received any needed wrap around services.

Denise has also represented the Veterans Law Project at numerous outreach events and maintained relationships with organizations serving veterans across the state. Her compassion, credibility as a fellow veteran, and ability to establish trust have made her especially effective when working with veterans who have experienced homelessness, trauma, or other significant barriers to accessing legal assistance.

In addition, Denise is establishing a relationship with The Joel Fund to develop a network of pro-bono attorneys who can assist veterans who come to that organization with legal needs. This effort demonstrates her initiative, her understanding of the need to expand the available network of veterans' legal services, and her commitment to building lasting community partnerships.

Denise's fellowship has provided her with the opportunity to learn the many substantive, procedural, and practical aspects of veterans' advocacy. Just as importantly, her work has expanded the Veterans Law Project's capacity and strengthened the quality of service we are able to provide. She approaches her work with initiative, sound judgment, compassion, and a genuine desire to help veterans achieve greater stability.

Because of Denise's outstanding performance and the value she brings to the Project, Legal Aid of North Carolina has retained her as a Staff Attorney with the Veterans Law Project. This is a well-deserved next step, and we are delighted that she will continue serving North Carolina veterans. Her retention is also a meaningful reflection of the lasting impact of Equal Justice America's investment in her fellowship.

Thank you for making it possible for Denise to spend these two years working with Legal Aid of North Carolina's Veterans Law Project. Equal Justice America's support allowed Denise to develop into a skilled veterans' law attorney while providing critically needed legal services to veterans across our state. We are sincerely grateful for your partnership and for the opportunity you provided to Denise and to the veterans we serve.

Thank you,



Charlisa M. Powell  
Project Director

Enclosure:  
Denise Outreach Collage

**Veterans Law Project**

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