

**VETERANS' RIGHTS
FELLOWSHIP**

**POST GRADUATE
ANNUAL REPORT**

EQUAL JUSTICE
A M E R I C A



**DENISE BENNETT
EJA FELLOW**

**RALEIGH, NC
FALL 2025**

**LEGAL AID OF
NORTH CAROLINA**



I. REFLECTIONS



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

The past year has been an incredible opportunity for personal and professional growth. Serving as a post-graduate fellow with Equal Justice America in Veterans' Rights has been deeply meaningful to me. This position has reinforced my passion for advocating on behalf of those who served our country while challenging me to grow in ways I did not anticipate.

One of my most significant realizations this year is the value of humility and adaptability. I tend to be a perfectionist and very hard on myself. While this drives me to excel, it also creates an internal pressure that can feel overwhelming at times. I know I can always do more, and I am committed to pushing myself even harder in the coming year.

Networking and outreach emerged as vital aspects of my role. I learned how to connect effectively with organizations and individuals

"THIS POSITION HAS REINFORCED MY PASSION FOR ADVOCATING ON BEHALF OF THOSE WHO SERVED OUR COUNTRY WHILE CHALLENGING ME TO GROW IN WAYS I DID NOT ANTICIPATE."

committed to serving veterans. There is a strong community of advocates and service providers eager to help, but engaging in those relationships requires balancing confidence with meekness. One challenge I faced was learning how not to come across as a "know-it-all" or leaning too heavily on my legal credentials. Many veterans—and even some community partners—are wary of attorneys because of stereotypes about greed or lack of compassion. My goal has been to break that stigma and demonstrate that lawyers can serve with integrity and genuine care.

This fellowship has also been a tremendous learning experience in terms of



technical skills. I developed an understanding of VA benefits applications and how to craft them in a way that draws attention to the critical details of a claim. I also gained experience writing discharge upgrade applications, specifically learning the strategy of addressing and strengthening the weakest point of an argument to create a more persuasive overall case. Despite this progress, I recognize I have much more to learn, particularly in legal research. When I encounter procedural or administrative barriers, I am learning how to navigate around those roadblocks creatively rather than feeling paralyzed by them.

II. INITIATIVES

The primary focus of the past year has been on professional development and direct service to veterans. Key milestones include passing the bar, securing VA accreditation, obtaining VBMS access, and refining my legal research and writing abilities.

Substantively, my legal work has encompassed VA benefits applications, discharge upgrade petitions, client intake, and training in driver's license restoration. I have also aided dependent benefit claims and drafted critical legal documents, such as lease termination letters for clients facing housing instability due to mental health crises.

Beyond casework, I have been deeply engaged in community outreach and systemic initiatives. One major project under development is a series of training courses for social workers at the local VA Medical Center as part of a medical-legal partnership. These sessions will focus on addressing the holistic needs of veterans and fostering collaboration between legal and medical professionals to provide comprehensive support.

In addition, we are planning a community education initiative for veterans in transitional housing, with particular emphasis on the importance of healthcare powers of attorneys. Our approach will include an initial educational session to explain the



benefits and implications of these documents, followed by a return visit to execute and notarize the powers of attorney for veterans who choose to proceed.

Additionally, outreach has been a cornerstone of my work. I regularly attend events targeting homeless and at-risk veterans, including Stand Downs and resource fairs. These efforts not only connect us with veterans in need but also strengthen partnerships with other service providers.

III. CLIENTS SERVED

The number of clients I have personally been assigned to this past year is 23. I am the primary advocate on 15 of those and have assisted on the other 8 in some capacity. Having the client's well-being in mind is paramount to maintaining a strong work ethic. Always remembering my why and that these are life changing decisions.

Besides the VA benefits applications and appeals or the discharge upgrade applications, I have been learning how to walk through a driver's license restoration, a TDIU claim, and family member/dependent claims.

The following are some of the clients and their stories that I have been a part of this last year.

- AW – is a veteran that is 100% service connected. He suffers from PTSD. He has a home, a wife, and kids. However, he had separated from his family and rented an apartment. He came to our attention from the regional VA office. Once contacted I found out that he wanted to break his lease and admit himself into a PTSD facility in TX. With the help of our housing attorney, I drafted a letter explaining the situation and asking for reasonable accommodation.
- HS – a homeless veteran when I met him at a shelter. He served in Vietnam, but remarkably he volunteered. They had consistently been denied a service-connected rating for PTSD. The denials of all of Mr. Smith's PTSD claims center around his



statement that he saw one explosion – which killed a fellow soldier. In April 2014, it was concluded that Mr.

“HAVING THE CLIENT’S WELL-BEING IN MIND IS PARAMOUNT TO MAINTAINING A STRONG WORK ETHIC.”

Smith’s PTSD was a result of a hard life (marital problems, health problems, and homelessness). VA acknowledged in the April 2014 decision that a provider had diagnosed him with PTSD in the past. While researching the supplemental claim appealing the denial of PTSD, I noticed the date of his 2014 denial was just days after a change in the procedures VA uses. Specifically, VA adopted the DSM-V which made the eligibility for a PTSD easier to obtain. DSM-V showed that the fear of enemy attack was enough.

- FR – a homeless veteran who is also an amputee and was found living in a park across the street from our office by VA. He had absolutely nothing when we met him at the shelter. His discharge disqualified him from VA benefits. A character of discharge is a way to request the VA to rule that the discharge is honorable for VA purposes. We use this in conjunction with requesting a discharge upgrade as homeless veterans need some sort of help ASAP. In this case, the reason for discharge was for two AWOLs, one of the AWOLs did have a very compelling reason, but the AWOLs combined did not meet the requirement of being over 180 days. This was my first character of discharge memo.
- LJ – a referral from Senator Tills. She is a former spouse whose ex-husband was a veteran and has recently died. They had divorced but remained friends and she was with him when he died. She had applied for the survivor benefits but was denied as she is a former spouse. During her divorce, however, the veteran was supposed to delegate those benefits to her. They were married over 40 years. There is a provision that if the former spouse was not at fault, they are eligible. However, unknown to her, him and myself, they had one year for one of them to fill



out the paperwork. We are going to argue that it was inequitable and unfair. Not only did a court order the veteran to fill out the papers, but he did also not, and it was unfair as who really would know the one-year deadline.

- JD – I was told a story about an Army Guardsman who “got a raw deal.” This man enlisted, made it through basic training, AIT, and into a unit. During the time with the unit, he needed new training. It became apparent to the unit that something was wrong with him. During this time, he was having some family issues. One day he finally told his unit he was on the autism spectrum. At this point, his unit gave him the only job they could – gopher. He does not blame his unit and does not want anyone to get into trouble, but we are certain that his entrance exam does not indicate any disability. If that is the case, we are going to argue aggravation. As someone on the spectrum, the extreme structure of training was an excellent environment for him. If given the few extra days needed, he may have been able to learn the new technology. He was in for so long and wanted to change his MOS to a cook or something so he could still serve. This also caused some mental health issues, and he tried to kill himself because “it feels awful to not deploy with your unit.” He is still young, and I would like to see him get back on his feet (he currently lives in a senior assisted living facility as it is the only place that would take him.

I did not list anyone with a driver’s license restoration issue as those things are very procedure and governed by statutes. First, we gather their driving record and dig into it to see what can be fixed. Once we have determined that then we send the memo to the client. The next steps the client determines because a hearing will need to be held. If, however, the client has not changed their behavior the hearing officer will usually deny the restoration. Not having a driver’s license is not something that is easy to deal with.



IV. SUCCESSES

We have had our share of denials, but the above clients have seen some success. Starting with AW, he decided to reach out to his apartment complex and told them to disregard the letter they were going to receive. I did not know this until the property called me and informed me. However, I do consider this as a success as the property is willing to allow the lease break with a forfeiture of his deposit. We have a verbal agreement that if something needs to happen for this veteran to get treatment, they are willing to work with him.

In HS's case, he went from 50% rating to 90% with a 70% rating for PTSD. He is now able to start getting on his feet. We are continuing his case with an argument for TDIU. As the VA did not answer the CUE argument, I am going to send it for a higher-level review. If that is denied, I may continue to appeal. That veteran could have had a different decade than the one he had.

FR received a favorable decision from VA, and he is now service connected and has moved into stable housing!

LJ, JD, and the driver's license restorations are still works in progress. However, it is a work I am excited to be learning and look forward to the mistakes that will be made so that I can grow stronger in the advocacy.

V. CHALLENGES

One of the greatest obstacles was internal—adjusting to a new professional identity while balancing family responsibilities. Transitioning from full-time motherhood to a structured 9-to-5 legal role brought unexpected difficulties in motivation and mental load. Additionally, learning to manage the emotional weight of veterans' stories and legal struggles has been an ongoing process.



Another challenge is the procedural challenges. Even though VA processes are similar, each story is different, and they could be in different places in the process. Being brand new at representing veterans is so much more than knowing where to look for the answers. It is knowing which form to use, when, and why. Knowing what type of memo might be helpful. It is knowing when to ask the client for documents, and when not to. I have found it challenging as I have tried to follow what those who are doing this job well do but also find who I am and what type of advocate I would like to be.

Externally, administrative hurdles such as the PIV card process presented practical barriers to efficiency. These delays reinforced the need for systemic improvements, and I hope to contribute to streamlining this process, at least for the Winston-Salem Regional Office.

VI. GOALS FOR THE NEXT YEAR

My overarching personal goal is to “feel more”—to embrace the full spectrum of experiences, both good and bad, without self-criticism. This approach will enable me to sustain compassion for my clients and resilience in the face of challenges.

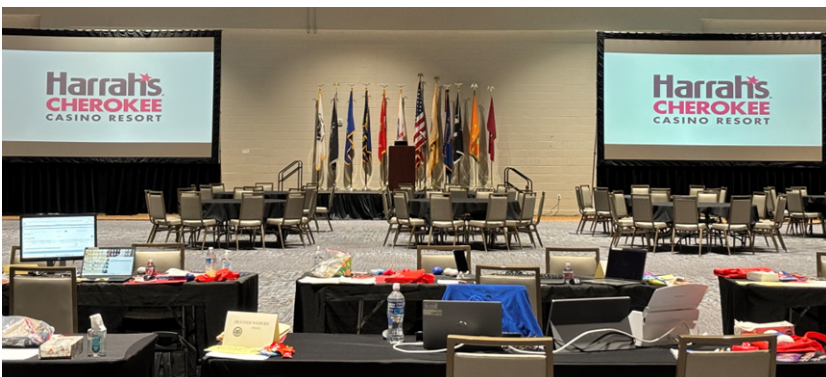
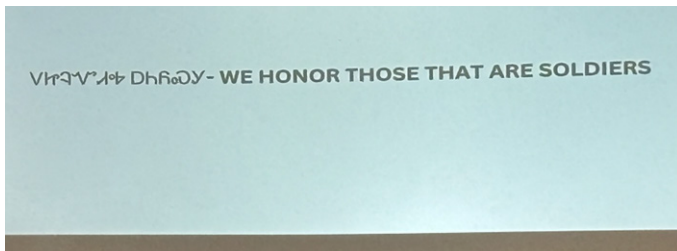
Professionally, I aim to successfully advance the CUE case and secure full back pay for HS. I want to expand my expertise to include criminal record expungements and streamline my approach to driver’s license restorations. I want to become proficient in drafting and executing powers of attorneys because these are particularly needful for homeless veterans.

Before my time is done in this fellowship, I would like to create written guides and resources that are easy for the team to maintain continuity for years to come. The team has interns and, hopefully, will gain new staff and having stream-lined processes will only make transitions and expectations easier.



VII. MEDIA

These pictures are from the last outreach event I attended. VA's PACT Act Event. It was designed to have veterans come and sit with VA adjudicators to file their benefits. Vendors attended to provide multiple services including mental health, clean water, publishers, the Red Cross, legal assistance, and a traveling pharmacy. Going into the western side of the state is beautiful. I included a picture of my favorite swag and have had my organization order some. How perfect for homeless veterans.





SUPERVISOR EVALUATION FALL 2025



August 25, 2025

Dan Ruben
Executive Director
Equal Justice America
3007 East Boundary Terrace
Suite 201
Midlothian, VA 23112

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

Dear Mr. Ruben,

Denise Bennett joined the Veterans Law Project (VLP) of Legal Aid of North Carolina as an EJA Post-Graduate Veterans' Rights Fellow in August 2024. Over the past year, she has continued to grow into an invaluable member of our team and has made a measurable impact on the lives of veterans across the state.

Denise has consistently demonstrated a strong commitment to veterans' advocacy. As a now fully accredited VA representative, she continues to represent veterans in VA disability matters, including by interviewing clients, reviewing service and medical records, conducting legal research, and drafting memoranda. She has also expanded her expertise into other areas such as housing, discharge upgrades, driver's license restoration, and dependent claims.

In addition to her casework, Denise has been actively engaged in statewide outreach and advocacy efforts. In April, she attended both the Cherokee, NC Veterans Stand Down and the Alleghany County, NC Veterans Stand Down. In July, she participated in the PACT Act Benefits and Resource Claims Event in Cherokee, NC. Denise has also maintained a consistent presence at the Veterans Life Center in Butner, where she continues to build trust and strengthen relationships with residents.

Beyond direct outreach, she has engaged with The Joel Fund Homeless Veterans Coalition and contributed to initiatives through UniteUs and with social workers at the Durham VA Medical Center. Her advocacy has also extended to legislative spaces, including a visit to the North Carolina General Assembly to elevate veterans' legal needs. Notably, in May 2025, Denise presented at the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans (NCHV) Conference, where she highlighted the work of the Veterans Law Project and fostered connections with national partners. Her ability to take initiative, develop strong relationships, and contribute meaningfully to both individual cases and systemic efforts makes her an outstanding fellow. She is both respected by her colleagues and trusted by our clients.

Looking forward, Denise will continue to play a central role in our upcoming clinics for veterans' wills and healthcare powers of attorney, our expanded outreach efforts, and hopefully, in the development of a Medical-Legal Partnership with the Durham NC VA Medical Center.

I am proud of Denise's growth and accomplishments over the past year and look forward to her continued success. Thank you again for supporting this fellowship opportunity through Equal Justice America—it is making a tangible difference in the lives of North Carolina veterans.

Thank you,



Charlisa M. Powell
Project Director

Veterans Law Project

122 N. Elm St., Suite 700 ■ Greensboro, NC 27401

Phone: 336-398-1712 ■ Fax: 919-714-6586 ■ Email: charlisap@legalaidnc.org

