William and Mary hosts military veterans conference in Washington
School shares model used to help with disability claims

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A project that began in 2008 at the College of William and Mary law school took a large step forward Thursday, and disabled veterans around the country stand to benefit.

W&M officials hosted a national conference in Washington, D.C. to discuss how law school clinics can help veterans process their disability claims. It shared the model developed by the college's Puller Clinic, where law school students help veterans with their cases.

Since 2008, more than 140 law school students working under the supervision of attorneys have assisted hundreds of veterans. The clinic tackles particularly complex cases, the sort that contribute the backlog of claims.

More than 140 participants were expected to attend the conference, representing 40 different law schools and universities. Representatives of law firms interested in pro bono work also attended.

Patricia Roberts, who chaired the conference and directs clinical programs at the law school, said she was optimistic that the Puller example could be replicated around the country.

"There is so much energy and enthusiasm and excitement in this room," she said in a phone interview. "It really has surpassed my expectations."

The conference also brought together proponents of other approaches to share their stories.

The conference offered some personal satisfaction for Sen. Mark R. Warner, who has championed the clinic's case, who is pressing his fellow senators and Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary Eric Shinseki to take notice.

"I'm, at heart, still an entrepreneur," said Warner, a former tech executive who traces his business experience to the early days of the cell phone industry. "And this was a real group of people doing a real fix."

The clinic's work and the senator's attention has paid off.

Last August, Puller became the first law school clinic in the nation to join a select VA group dedicated to preparing fully developed claims, joining the American Legion and Disabled American Veterans. The clinic works in tandem with Virginia Commonwealth University's Center for Psychological Services and Development, which provides counseling and assessments.
Backlog

Meanwhile, the VA is reporting progress on reducing the disability claims backlog, but it has more work to do. This week, the VA said it has reduced the backlog by 44 percent from about one year ago.

The number of pending backlogged claims peaked at more than 611,000 in March 2013. It is down to about 344,000, the VA said. The VA defines a backlogged claim as one that is pending more than 125 days.

The number of delayed claims spiked with the influx of veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan, plus a decision to link a new list of health problems to exposure from Agent Orange, the defoliant used during the Vietnam War. It prompted the VA to reconsider 150,000 previously decided cases. The agency also processed more than 100,000 new claims related to Agent Orange.

"We knew taking care of this 'unfinished business' for veterans of previous wars would initially drive up the number of claims in our system," Shinseki said. "But it was the right thing to do."

Of the overall backlog, he said, "We still have more work to do."

A leading veterans group credits Shinseki with working to modernize the agency's outdated, paper-based system and working to end the backlog by 2015. However, it sees problems on the horizon.

Nothing indicates which of the current reforms are working and which aren't, nor is there evidence of planning beyond 2015, said Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America.

IAVA calls on the agency "to create an infrastructure that allows the disability compensation system to project future needs and adapt to a growing population of new veterans and even more complex injuries."

Warner agreed that the VA's job is not done, and he hopes the conference participants go home and lobby their senators to start efforts in their states, giving the effort its own momentum.

"It can be their own project. We've got the template now," he said."It's kind of like the old venture capital days."

For all the optimism, the conference got off to a sobering start, convening the day after a soldier who reportedly suffered from psychological problems went on a shooting rampage at Fort Hood in Texas, killing three before shooting himself.

Warner said the emotional and psychological toll of war's invisible wounds is "going to be with us for a long, long time."

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