



St. John's Law Students Advocate for U.S. Military Veterans Over Spring Break



(L-R): Gina D'Amico, TVC Deputy Executive Director Courtney Smith, Suzanna Papastamatis, Kyle Hamlin, Katie Cresser-Di Salvi, Isaiah Romero, and TVC Executive Director Steve Jordan

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For the last several years, St. John's Law students have spent their spring break building practical knowledge and skills while advocating for U.S. military veterans in need through the [Veterans Consortium Pro Bono Program](#) (TVC). It's a singular hands-on learning experience made possible by the Law School's Spring Break Service Program.

“The Spring Break Service Program is one of the [DiMartino/Smith Public Interest Center's](#) core offerings,” says Center Director Jeanne Ortiz-Ortiz. “It creates opportunities for students—especially 1Ls—to apply what they're learning in the classroom. They're introduced to the

work of public interest organizations, see how the law operates in practice, and consider how they can use their legal training to uphold the principles of our legal system and serve the public good.”

The 60 students selected for this year’s Program collectively contributed about 1,500 pro bono hours, working in person and remotely in New York, Washington, D.C., and Missouri across a range of practice areas, including veterans’ rights, civil legal aid, agricultural law, criminal justice, consumer rights, elder law, tenant advocacy, and special education law. Program partners included TVC, Brooklyn Defender Services, Build Up Justice NYC, Legal Aid of Western Missouri, Mobilization for Justice, Nassau County District Attorney's Office, Volunteer Lawyers Project of CNY, Inc., the Long Island Advocacy Center, and others.

During their week on assignment in Washington, D.C., St. John’s Law students Katharine (Katie) Cresser-Di Salvi ’28, Kyle Hamlin ’28, Suzanna Papastamatis ’26, and Isaiah Romero ’28 assisted TVC’s litigation team. Working on screening memoranda, they helped identify meritorious arguments for case evaluation and client advocacy. They also prepared summaries of new precedential decisions in veterans law and of successful arguments made by TVC’s volunteer attorneys in active cases. The students gained additional insight by attending an appellate brief-writing workshop led by Hon. Michael P. Allen, Chief Judge of the Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims, as well as an event examining Court process.

“We really appreciated the students’ enthusiasm and professionalism” says Gina D’Amico, Deputy Director of Litigation for TVC’s U.S. Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims Practice. “They were always prompt, attentive to detail, and engaged with not only the work, but each member of our TVC team, which made for a constructive week. Our litigation team mentors TVC’s volunteer attorneys, so it also gave us the opportunity to do some mentoring of the students, which helps us better understand and support our volunteer attorneys.”

The appreciation is mutual, Katie Cresser-Di Salvi shares, reflecting on her time with TVC. “Veterans law is a rather niche area, so seeing how

it worked in practice was very interesting,” she says. “As a 1L, I also valued the opportunity to put my legal skills into real-life practice. But most meaningful for me was learning about the veterans TVC represents. These men and women served their country and are left with some of the most debilitating conditions and disabilities. They face an uphill battle in attempting to prove their condition is service related. Hearing about the sheer volume of cases TVC handles, as well as its success rate on appeal, made me realize that my contributions, even for one week, had a real impact on someone’s life. It’s an experience I’ll never forget.”