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BigLaw Attys Help Veterans Who Risked Their Lives For US

By Kevin Penton

Law360 (November 10, 2022, 4:29 PM EST) -- Vincent Chiappini knows he is fortunate: While other U.S. Army veterans struggle to readjust to civilian life, he is a Harvard University and Boston College Law School graduate who works as a litigator at Skadden Arps Slate Meagher & Flom LLP.

Chiappini uses his litigation skills to assist other veterans struggling with issues such as receiving the government benefits they deserve or with obtaining the correct discharge classification. As the co-chair of SkadVets, the firm's affinity network for military veterans, Chiappini helps lead Skadden's efforts to make a positive difference in the worlds of those who risked their lives for their country.

"To be able to hear them out and give them the assistance that's going to get them on the right path to moving forward with their lives is really important," Chiappini said. "I think we owe that to them for their service."

For many law firms, providing legal assistance to the nation's veterans is an integral part of the pro bono work they perform each year. The need for help certainly exists, even if many veterans aren't always aware that they don't have to tackle a complex system by themselves, said Joseph J. Cherico, a partner with McCarter & English LLP who regularly works on pro bono cases.

"Making veterans aware that help is available to them — they don't always know that's the case," Cherico said. "Maybe they didn't know who to ask, or maybe were too proud to ask. There are plenty of lawyers who are willing to help."

McCarter & English was recognized for its pro bono efforts last year by the Veterans Consortium Pro Bono Program, a national nonprofit organization that provides free legal services to veterans in need, in part by connecting those in need of legal assistance with law firms eager to provide it.

The program on Tuesday gave one of its Pro Bono Mission Partner Awards for 2022 to Shook Hardy & Bacon LLP, which launched a firmwide advocacy team just one year ago.

Led by the firm's pro bono director, Scot H. Fishman, senior counsel Norma Bennett and partner Michael Zito, Shook's effort quickly mushroomed, with nearly 70 attorneys working on nearly 30 matters related to veterans, such as military discharge upgrade bids and disability compensation appeals, he said.

Fishman, who began in the role last year, said he sought to shake up Shook's pro bono offerings by encouraging more work with veterans. That appeared to connect with lawyers, who can see the

concrete results of their pro bono efforts in the lives of the veterans they are assisting, he said.

"The system is so complex and is set up to be so difficult for them that it's almost like there's a threshold that they have to get beyond to prove that they've earned those benefits," Fishman said of veterans, "rather than the threshold being that they've earned the benefits and somebody has to prove that they don't deserve them."

This summer, five BigLaw firms teamed up to form a legal task force that in mid-August filed more than 50 asylum applications for female Afghan former soldiers, marking the latest example of industry competitors combining resources for a pro bono initiative.

Paul Hastings LLP and about 43 of its attorneys spearheaded the Afghan Legal Task Force, which also includes Gibson Dunn & Crutcher LLP, Pillsbury Winthrop Shaw Pittman LLP, McGuireWoods LLP and Vedder Price PC. Law360 in May initially covered Paul Hastings' efforts alongside an organization called Sisters of Service to support the women.

For some attorneys, their connection to working with veterans comes from family: Willkie Farr & Gallagher LLP's Weston T. Eguchi said his father served in the U.S. Air Force, his uncle served in the Army and his great-uncle, during World War II, served in a regiment composed of Japanese Americans who had been incarcerated in camps.

As a partner in Willkie's corporate and financial services department and a member of its finance department, Eguchi said his day-to-day work rarely, if ever, touches on legal issues related to clients' military service.

But he said he knows that his pro bono work makes a direct impact on the lives of the veterans the firm works with. Just in 2022, Willkie's attorneys have worked on 12 combat-related special compensation applications, one discharge upgrade bid and one medical retirement application, according to the firm.

"A lot of the same skills — attention to detail, being able to present a person's case logically and persuasively, the ability to tell a compelling story, to provide the best narrative in support of our client's case — we bring all of the same skills, all of the same dedication to these matters," Eguchi said.

Looking ahead, Skadden's Chiappini said he hopes the firm will soon be able to revive its monthly "Military Mondays," in which attorneys in New York go to a clinic and provide veterans with information on matters such as Social Security benefits and housing advice. The effort was halted due to the COVID-19 pandemic, he said.

"Connecting them with these benefits and knowing that you've helped those who have served our country so selflessly means a lot," Chiappini said.

--Additional reporting by Madeline Lyskawa. Editing by Robert Rudinger.