

# Cozen O'Connor Attorneys Reflect on Serving Veterans

Friday, November 11, 2022

Cozen O'Connor is proud of its pro bono work representing veterans and assisting veterans with obtaining the benefits they are entitled to in partnership with the National Veterans Legal Services Program (NVLSP), the Veterans Consortium, and other organizations.

Our attorneys regularly represent veterans who have experienced service-related harms, including combat injuries and military sexual trauma, to apply for benefits and to appeal the denial of benefits under many different circumstances. We have also assisted individual veterans with other matters related to their service.

Since the beginning of 2021, Cozen O'Connor has assisted 144 veterans, with two hundred lawyers and paralegals collectively contributing nearly 4,000 hours at a value of over two million dollars. About one in ten of our lawyers have represented veterans, and these representations are the plurality of the firm's pro bono work. This high level of commitment earned Cozen O'Connor the prestigious NVLSP Pro Bono Partner of the Year Award in 2021.

We are grateful to our clients for their service and for the trust they have placed in us to serve them. This work is an incredibly powerful and enriching experience for our attorneys. In honor of Veterans Day (Friday, November 11, 2022), our attorneys are pleased to share, in their own words, what serving the veteran community has meant to them.

## Reflections

**Marla Benedek:** Bankruptcy, Wilmington

"I got involved in pro bono work because I believe that those who have special training or skills have a moral and ethical duty to use their expertise to help people in need. I think pro bono work also keeps me aware of the larger community around me and how other people are suffering. In particular, the idea of veterans suffering and not receiving the benefits or care they need really troubles me. We could not have the America we have today without the sacrifices of those who served, continue to serve, and intend to serve. Yet, depending on where you live in the country, you might not personally know any veterans at all. And many Americans have no concept at all of the vast array of symptoms and conditions veterans suffer as a result of their service.

It has been very rewarding to speak with veterans and their family members personally, listen to their stories and work to get them fairly compensated. I think about each of my veteran clients every Veterans Day, and I now associate the holiday with real people I know personally, real faces I have seen, real stories I have heard directly, and real losses suffered by people I know. Truly, I think that if everyone in this country served in the military or personally knew someone who did, our conduct in wars, our management, training, and protection of active military personnel, and our treatment of and care for our veterans would change dramatically."

**Michael Connolly:** Utility & Energy, Cherry Hill

"My first veteran's case was very interesting, challenging, and very rewarding. I have made it my first choice for providing pro bono assistance. Veterans earned their benefits through their service to the country, and they are entitled, in my view, to know that they can have assistance and support in pursuing their claims to a full and fair resolution. The positive attitude and gratitude of the veterans I have been privileged to work with for the help they receive is so rewarding. In my experience, they are

looking for a hand-up to work through a complex system. Their appreciation for the assistance is very rewarding, as is the process of finding the law and/or evidence to support their claims and best present their arguments."

**Jesse Keene:** Construction, Washington, D.C.

"When I joined the firm in 2019, I was thrilled to learn of its commitment to pro bono service and its engagement with various veteran organizations whose missions include ensuring that society fulfills its obligations to those who sacrificed to protect us. My father is a Vietnam veteran with a service disability. For decades, he hid his service in Vietnam from his family and friends – scared of how he would be perceived, given societal attitudes and opposition to Vietnam at the time he served. What he also hid (and did not know for years) was that he suffered not just from a physical disability but also from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder related to his service. Over the last two decades, my father has embraced his fellow veterans. Both through my Dad and the community I live in, I've witnessed the impact that access to veterans' benefits has on those who've served in uniform.

The Armed Forces and Veterans' Administration (VA) don't always make the right decision when it comes to our veterans. Whether it's a denial of benefits or an incorrect discharge status, veterans are often left fighting their service branch or the VA for what they were promised when they signed up to serve. Those fights can be time-consuming and costly. And, when a veteran is in need of medical or mental health benefits, a long, drawn-out, and expensive battle only exacerbates the challenges they face. A lawyer can't solve everything, but I think we can provide invaluable services – helping our veterans navigate the various appeals processes, taking some stress off of their shoulders, helping them position their appeal for success, and letting them know that someone has their back, much like they had ours while they were in uniform."

**Aaron Lukas:** Intellectual Property, Washington D.C.

"My family and my wife's family have a long history of service in the armed forces—primarily in the Air Force and Army. While I am not a veteran myself, I got involved with this work because of my interest in assisting veterans and also because VA claims (like patents) are appealed to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit, of which I am a member.

The veterans we assist deal on a daily basis with physical and/or mental injuries that began during their service, and I'm grateful for the opportunity to assist them in receiving the VA benefits they should be getting. Many cases we handle have been pending for ten or even 15 years. Being able to convince the VA that there is a service connection with a disability can make a financial difference in veterans' day-to-day lives. Most of our clients are happy to know someone is there to help them navigate the VA's legal progress and ensure their case is heard."

**Vincent Pozzuto:** Construction, New York City

"Working on behalf of Veterans appealed to me because I have so much respect for the men and women of the military who literally put their lives on the line to serve their country. When they sustain service-connected disabilities, I feel that they deserve zealous representation to maximize the benefits they are entitled to because their injuries arose out of protecting our country. Working with veterans has been very impactful for me. The level of gratitude they express is amazing, and my response is always that whatever I did for them cannot in any way be compared to the sacrifice they have made in service to the nation. I always tell them that I should be thanking them, not the other way around."

**Neil Quartaro:** Transportation & Trade, Washington D.C.

"My experience with NVLSP has shown how important it is for disabled veterans to have legal

assistance. Dealing with the VA is a challenge, and it often takes years for a veteran to receive the benefits to which they are entitled. These benefits, which are usually disability ratings for service-connected injury, may include retroactive payments and increased disability payments in the future. In our usual high-pressure legal environment, it can be easy to forget about smaller cases, but when the NVLSP appeals are successful, the results can be life-changing for the men and women in uniform that we are helping. In a recent case, for example, we were able to obtain over \$43,000 in retroactive benefits and a sufficiently high disability rating going forward that the client can finally enjoy some financial stability.

Working with veterans has been very rewarding for me. I enjoy the chance to use my skills to help those who have served. Interacting with our clients and learning about their service and lives is wonderful. Many of the files I usually work on are not life-changing for those involved, but the NVLSP files often are. While I know we all enjoy success; there is nothing like winning a case for a veteran and knowing that you have made a lasting positive impact in their lives."

**Caitlin Trevillyan:** Commercial Litigation, Washington D.C.

"One of the great benefits of working at Cozen O'Connor is that the firm culture and values promote and encourage attorneys to get involved and give back by doing pro bono work every year. Working on behalf of veterans to help them obtain disability benefits resonated with me because I have family who have worked as research scientists and volunteers for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and have served veterans for many years, but I also have veteran family members that are the recipients of such care and benefits.

You would be surprised at how complicated the process is to obtain disability benefits for service-connected injuries, etc. (in addition to other health and life benefits). Honestly, I cannot imagine how a non-lawyer successfully navigates the system. For those veterans among us that unselfishly give life and limb and bravely put themselves in harm's way to defend our country and to protect the freedoms that are so important in this country, helping them obtain disability benefits from ailments, injuries, and diagnoses incurred as a result of their service is the least we can do."

**Rachel Wenger:** Commercial Litigation, Pittsburgh

"My father is a veteran. Prior to law school, my brother and I stumbled through the VA system to help him receive the benefits he deserved. Upon joining Cozen, I realized I could use that knowledge and experience to help other veterans. It is truly just incredible to speak with the veterans we work with, hear their experiences, and be able to help. It takes a very small task to make a huge difference in their lives."