



NVLSP
NATIONAL VETERANS LEGAL SERVICES PROGRAM

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Justice for Warriors Newsletter



March 2026

Dear Friends,

Thanks to the continued engagement of our community, NVLSP is expanding its reach and strengthening the programs that make a meaningful difference for veterans, active-duty personnel, and their families.

As we close out the month following National Vietnam War Veterans Day (March 29), we are especially grateful for the exceptional valor of those who served and the fallen heroes who made the ultimate sacrifice for our nation and their families. Unfortunately, for many who served, the war did not end when they came home. NVLSP has worked tirelessly to ensure that Vietnam Veterans who became ill because of their exposure to Agent Orange during their military service receive the benefits they have earned. We strive to ensure that our nation upholds its promise to care for those who served our country.

Sincerely,



Paul Wright
Executive Director

NVLSP Establishes Partnership with Lorain County Veterans Service Commission in Ohio

On February 12, 2026, Lorain County Veterans Service Commission (LCVSC) in Ohio and the National Veterans Legal Services Program (NVLSP) established the first county level partnership for NVLSP accreditation to Lorain County Service Officers. This accreditation will improve access to legal assistance for veterans, particularly those navigating complex benefits and disability claims.

Through this agreement, NVLSP will provide specialized legal support, especially for appeals involving the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, while LCVSC will help identify veterans in need and facilitates outreach at the community level.

Together, the goal is to reduce barriers to benefits, ensure fair outcomes for veterans, and strengthen the local support network by combining grassroots with high-level legal advocacy.

NVLSP IN THE NEWS

[The Chronicle](#)

Reporter Garrett Looker covered the announcement of the Lorain County Veterans Service Commission partnership with the National Veterans Legal Services Program in a first-of-its-kind collaboration to expand legal support and training for assisting veterans with benefits claims. The article appeared on February 17, 2026.

[Stars and Stripes](#)

Reporter Linda F. Hersey interviewed NVLSP Director of Litigation, Renee Burbank, on the landmark federal court ruling in *Hamill v. Collins* that the Department of Veterans Affairs must provide veterans with explicit notice when it denies claims. The article appeared February 6, 2026.

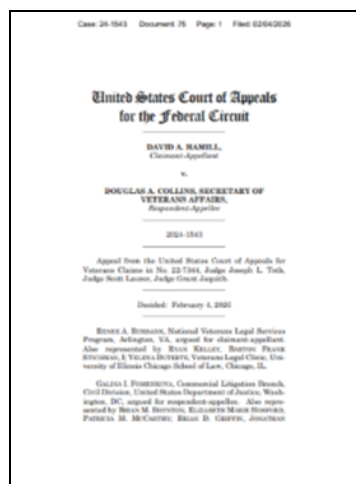
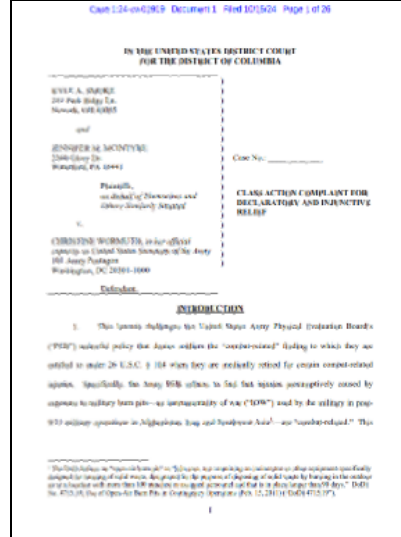
LITIGATION UPDATE

NVLSP and Sidley Settle Class Action Lawsuit with U.S. Army Designating Burn Pits as “Instrumentalities of War” for Medical Retirement Combat-Related Findings Pro Bono Counsel Sidley Austin LLP

On March 10, 2026, the National Veterans Legal Services Program ([NVLSP](#)) and Sidley Austin LLP reached a [settlement](#) in [Smoke et al. v. Driscoll](#), a class action lawsuit in the United States District Court for the District of Columbia.

The suit challenges the Army's denial of a combat-related designation during the Disability Evaluation System process for disabilities presumed to be caused by exposure to military burn pits under the Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics ("PACT") Act.

NVLSP also published a [Frequently Asked Questions](#) (FAQ) guide regarding the Smoke litigation.



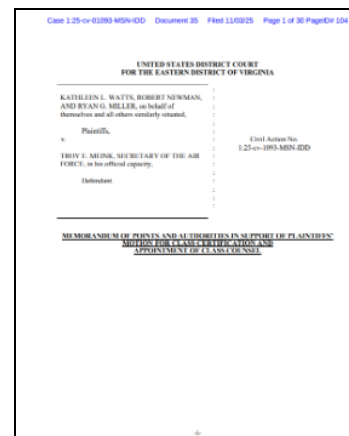
Federal Court Rules that the Department of Veterans Affairs Must Provide Veterans with Explicit Notice When It Denies Claims Pro Bono Counsel University of Illinois Chicago School of Law

On February 4, 2026, the United States Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit [held](#) that the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) can no longer deny a veteran's claim without explicitly telling the veteran. In its opinion in [Hamill v. Collins](#), the Federal court decided that a 2017 law, which added more notice requirements for VA's decisions, eliminated what is known as the implicit

denial doctrine. Mr. Hamill is represented by the Veterans Legal Clinic at the University of Illinois Chicago School of Law ([UIC Law](#)) and the National Veterans Legal Services Program ([NVLSP](#)).

Court Certifies Class Action in NVLSP Lawsuit Challenging Air Force's Denial of Integrated Disability Evaluation System (IDES) Rights and Process

On January 16, 2026, the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia [certified](#) a class action in *Watts v. Meink*, a [lawsuit](#) brought by the National Veterans Legal Services Program ([NVLSP](#)), on behalf of Ms. Kathleen Watts, Mr. Robert Newman, Mr. Ryan Miller, and a class of similarly situated Air Force servicemembers and veterans who were unlawfully denied access to the medical retirement process.



NVLSP STAFF ON THE MOVE

NVLSP Oral Arguments at Albany Law School
March 26, 2026

Albany, NY

NVLSP Director of CAVC Litigation Stacy Tromble, NVLSP Appellate Attorney Rebecca Pierce, and NVLSP Senior Managing Appellate Attorney Christopher Murray at Albany Law School for oral arguments in *Williams v. Collins* before U.S. Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims (CAVC) panel.



Pro Bono Institute 2026 Annual Conference

March 4-6, 2026
Washington, D.C.



NVLSP Senior Pro Bono Coordinating Attorney Erin Mee (center) joined the panel at 2026 Pro Bono Institute Annual Conference with Squire Patton Boggs, Corrine M. Williams (left) and Nika Cohen (right) for thoughtful discussion on pro bono work.



NVLSP Development Manager Masha Danilenko (center) and NVLSP Senior Pro Bono Coordinating Attorney Erin Mee (right) catch up with U.S. Pro Bono Counsel at Eversheds Sutherland, Harmony Jones (left), at the 2026 Pro Bono Institute Annual Conference Expo.

The National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs (NASDVA) Annual Midwinter Training Conference

Arlington, VA
March 1-4 2026



(Pictured left to right) Jeff King, Director, Pennsylvania Department of Military and Veterans Affairs, Bureau of Veterans Programs, NVLSP Of Counsel Tom Herthel, Brian Natali, Director, Pennsylvania Department of Military and Veterans Affairs, Bureau of Veterans Outreach and Reintegration, and NVLSP Special Counsel Louis George.

(Pictured left to right) NVLSP Special Counsel Louis George, and Janine Mahn, Business Manager, Montana Veterans Affairs Division.



George Washington University Law School for the Federal Circuit Bar Journal Symposium
Washington, D.C.
February 6, 2026

NVLSP Director of Litigation Renee Burbank participated in a veterans panel on "Executive Orders and Their Impact on Government Workers".

(Pictured left to right) Professor James D. Ridgway, Chief Judge Michael P. Allen, U.S. Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims (CAVC), and NVLSP Director of Litigation Renee Burbank.

STAFF PROFILE

Brandy Disbennett-Albrecht



Brandy Disbennett-Albrecht serves as an Appellate Attorney at NVLSP, where she represents veterans and survivors before the U.S. Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims and helps guide cases through the appeals process. A successful outcome at the Court level often means a remand, giving veterans another opportunity for a fair decision before the VA. She plays a key role in NVLSP's Board Remand Project, connecting veterans, many of whom feel exhausted and discouraged, with pro bono attorneys who step in to continue the fight. By mentoring these volunteer attorneys, Brandy helps ensure veterans receive dedicated representation and the reassurance that their case is not over.

Brandy's path to veterans law is deeply personal. Raised in a military family, with a father in the Coast Guard, a sister in the Air Force, and both grandfathers also with service in the military, she witnessed firsthand the challenges service members and veterans face. After navigating the VA claims process alongside her own family, she was inspired to find a way to help others in similar situations. Her career has spanned both public service and private practice, shaping her understanding of the significant barriers veterans encounter, from complex disabilities to limited access and communication within the VA system, and strengthening her commitment to advocating on their behalf.

Over more than a decade, Brandy has found the most meaningful part of her work to be validating veterans' experiences and helping them feel seen and

heard. One case that stands out involved a Korean War veteran who was experiencing homelessness when he sought help. Even after a successful outcome, he struggled to adjust, but over time built a stable life, forming a lasting friendship with Brandy along the way. Brandy is also passionate about teaching, having trained thousands of attorneys and law students, and values the ripple effect of expanding access to skilled advocates. Brandy also serves as Chair of the Board of Governors for the Virginia State Bar's Military and Veterans Law Section. Outside of work, she enjoys spending time with her husband and toddler, gardening, hiking, and reading. She is energized by the "thrill of the next case" and the opportunity to continue serving veterans and their families. Last, she asked us to give a special salute on her behalf to her source of wisdom, her father, "Thanks for always answering the phone, Dad."

WEBINARS

NVLSP continues its dedication to veteran law education by growing its webinar schedule in an effort to educate more veterans advocates on strategies for securing disability benefits for their clients. Experienced NVLSP attorneys will lead discussions on the following topic:



- Battle of the Medical Experts (May 12, May 13, May 14)

NVLSP also has a [comprehensive library](#) of over 20 previously recorded webinars that are available at your convenience.

Webinar topics include:

- VA Accreditation Training: Attorney and Agent Practice before the VA
- Navigating the VA's Modernized/AMA Review System
- VA Benefits Based on National Guard and Reserve Service
- How Involvement with the Criminal Justice System Impacts VA Benefits
- And many more!

NVLSP's Training & Publications program also offers: [in-person training](#), the [Online Basic Training Course](#), the [Veterans Benefits Manual](#), and the [VA Benefit Identifier App](#).

**WE'RE CELEBRATING OUR 45th ANNIVERSARY
THIS YEAR!
...MORE TO COME!**

WAYS YOU CAN HELP

We hope this newsletter inspires you to become more active with NVLSP. If you want to help NVLSP do more for our veterans, here are a few suggestions.



1. You can follow us on [X](#), connect with us on [LinkedIn](#), and like us on [Facebook](#).
2. Help us promote our free [App](#) for veterans.
3. Tell a friend about [NVLSP](#).

We look forward to connecting with you again soon!

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