

Giving Thanks

During this season of thanksgiving, it is fitting to reflect on our nation's history, our democratic system of government and those who have sacrificed to preserve and protect it. As attorneys, we are mindful of the importance of our justice system and the rule of law, and grateful for our ongoing American experiment.

It is due to our appreciation of the rule of law that our Association has taken vocal positions on sequestration and other issues that can have an enormous impact on our judicial system and access to justice. We have joined with leaders in the bar and the business community to bring our message about the negative consequences of sequestration to many audiences. In November 2012, we issued a joint letter with 15 local bar leaders from across New York State urging our congressional delegation to take action to avoid sequestration. We have issued press statements and coordinated lobby visits in Washington, D.C., to call on Congress to fund the federal courts and the Legal Services Corporation at levels that are adequate for them to function effectively.

Last month, we joined with six bar associations from other states to ask our respective members of Congress to remain mindful of the negative impact of sequestration as they sought a resolution to the federal budget stalemate. In our recent letter to Congress, we emphasized that the fair administration of justice provides the cornerstone of our free and democratic society. Cuts in funding for our judiciary can

result in slower processing of cases and even threaten the constitutional right to effective assistance of counsel and a speedy trial. In order to preserve the public trust and maintain the rule of law, we must have an adequately funded and properly functioning justice system.

As we observe Veterans Day, we are especially thankful to the millions of men and women who have served our nation. Too many veterans and active duty members of the military face unique challenges that are related to their military service. They may have trouble accessing their benefits or struggle with consumer debt, housing, or unemployment. These and other relatively routine legal issues can be complicated by combat-related injuries or disability and extended periods of time away from home. In 2011, the Association established the Special Committee on Veterans to assess the legal needs of past and present military members and their families and to recommend strategies to meet those needs. The committee, chaired by Michael Lancer and Karen Hennigan, issued a report in 2012 and has since been designated a standing committee of the Association.

The committee has focused on three key areas: legal education, legal services and veterans courts. It has held numerous trainings to familiarize attorneys with the issues commonly faced by veterans and to encourage pro bono service to veterans. Last month, the Committee on Veterans held a CLE program designed to assist attorneys in meeting the qualifications for Vet-



erans Administration certification. The committee has also worked to develop legal education materials for veterans in need of assistance to connect them with free or affordable legal representation and other resources.

In its report, the Committee on Veterans also recommended the expansion of special problem-solving veterans courts throughout New York State. Veterans courts take a constructive approach with veterans who become involved in the criminal justice system, engaging them in a non-adversarial way to better address the unique issues they face. These courts currently exist in several counties throughout the state, and they have had excellent results. It is our hope that one day, every veteran eligible to have his or her charges transferred to this type of problem-solving court will have access to one. It is vitally important that we as a nation support the veterans who have sacrificed so much to defend our national security and the rule of law. If you would like to get involved, visit the Pro Bono Opportunities Guide on our website at www.probono.net/ny/nysba_oppsguide. ■

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