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Changing Lives for Homeless Veterans

Thirteen percent of those currently in our military are women. Inner City Law Center's Homeless Veterans Project specializes in representing homeless women veterans struggling with post traumatic stress disorders (PTSD). Unfortunately, women veterans are four times more likely to develop PTSD from sexual assault than from combat. By the Department of Defense's own estimate almost one-third of all US women veterans experience rape or sexual assault while in service. You read that right: one-third! And that is DOD's own estimate. Survivors are often scarred for life with invisible wounds. They're forced to live with the memory of their attack. That trauma can have lasting psychological consequences.

Ms. Jennifer Bell is one such veteran. Ms. Bell was sexually assaulted by multiple fellow service members while on active duty in 1979. As a result of the assault, Ms. Bell suffers from severe PTSD and experiences debilitating anxiety, depression and nightmares. She has been homeless for over twelve years, and for the last year and a half she has been living in her car. Recognizing that she needed help, Ms. Bell filed three requests with the VA for service connected benefits over the past twelve years. Each of these requests was denied.

In 2009, Ms. Bell came to Inner City Law Center's legal clinic for female veterans at the West Los Angeles VA Campus. There she met Melissa Tyner, a staff attorney in our Homeless Veterans Project. Melissa helped Ms. Bell to appeal the denial of her claim. Melissa gathered additional medical evidence and used Ms. Bell's service records to establish that the attack had likely happened. Melissa also asserted Ms. Bell's right to a hearing. At the hearing, Melissa established that the VA had been applying an incorrect standard to assess Ms. Bell's claim. This past week, Melissa received notification that Ms. Bell's claim was granted.

Ms. Bell will receive almost \$80,000 in retroactive benefits and \$2,632.00 every month for the rest of her life. She will also receive increased access to the VA health care that she desperately needs. Ms. Bell cried "tears of joy and relief" when Melissa called her with the news. Then she stepped out of the car where she has been living and "danced a little jig." Ms. Bell plans to use the money to find a place to live and have some dental work done. She expressed tremendous gratitude to Melissa and everyone at Inner City Law Center for their assistance. Her resiliency is inspiring to us all.

Ms. Bell's case highlights the need for attorneys to help homeless veterans apply for benefits that they are entitled to because of their service. If you would like to become trained and certified to volunteer on these cases, please contact Inner City Law Center for more information about the project, available cases, and upcoming trainings.