

## WIF Grant Helps Launch Veterans Legal Services Program

By Katie Hallaway



Ask Ken Schorr how his agency's Veterans Legal Services program got started and he'll quickly credit the Women's Impact Fund.

Schorr is executive director of Legal Services of Southern Piedmont (LSSP). At this year's Wine & Wisdom event, Schorr said an \$80,000 WIF grant launched the program that provides legal assistance at little to no cost to low-income veterans.

"This initiative is assisting Charlotte area veterans with disability compensation, discharge upgrades and other complex issues related to their service," said Schorr, speaking at this year's Wine and Wisdom. "With the support of the Women's Impact Fund, we are able to provide the legal counsel and system expertise to help individuals successfully resolve cases that have major implications for their lives."

Prior to applying for the grant and establishing the program, Legal Services had seen the number of veterans requests needing assistance growing. Schorr said that was due to both an aging population of veterans as well as an influx of veterans of recent wars, particularly those being discharged from military bases in eastern North Carolina.

Legal Services estimates about 55,000 veterans live in Mecklenburg County, with 8,000 having a service-related disability. More veterans -- younger and senior -- face challenges like unemployment and homelessness.

Sharing the story of Earl, a former Marine, Schorr illustrated the real-life impact of the program. Earl was on a promising path in the Marine Corps, moving up in rank and landing an important job as the driver for a general. After opting to not re-enlist, Earl struggled back at home with many changes in his family, including the death of his mother. Earl eventually became homeless and was diagnosed with schizophrenia by a VA medical center. But with no diagnosis of his condition during his military service, he was denied VA disability compensation.

Through the Veterans Legal Services program, Legal Services was able to help Earl demonstrate that the disease began during his service and assist him with getting the benefits he needs. Now, Earl has the security of sufficient income to provide for himself and medical care to treat his condition.

The WIF grant made it possible for Legal Services to establish a program now served by a full-time staff attorney and paralegal services. Combined with the efforts of more than 50 pro-bono attorneys and legal staff, the program has handled 376 cases since 2012, with an average of 60 to 80 cases open at a time.

"Having the support of the Women's Impact Fund also has been instrumental in helping us bring other partners on board and expand our reach," said Schorr, referencing funding from the

Mecklenburg County government that continued after the WIF funding was completed and the involvement of other local agencies and nonprofits. With funding from the United Way, services are now also available to veterans in Cabarrus and Union Counties.

A recent [Charlotte Observer article](#) said Charlotte is considered by veterans advocates as a “magnet city” for former service members attracted by job opportunities and lower cost of living, with up to 10,000 newcomers arriving in the Charlotte area between 2013 and 2014. According to Schorr, the Veterans Legal Services program is focused on and well-positioned to meet the challenges and needs of this growing population in our community.