

**LOCAL ATTORNEYS PROVIDE PRO BONO LEGAL COUNSEL TO
RETURNING SOLDIERS AND MARINES**

Organizers Already Eyeing Expansion

LANSING, MICH. (May 22, 2007) – As young men from Charlie Company, a Lansing-based Marine reserve unit, returned home from Iraq in late April, many were welcomed by friends and family cheering loudly. Unbeknownst to the Marines, many also were greeted by a potpourri of non-military legal issues ranging from child custody rights to cell phone charge disputes.

“It’s a difficult situation for many of these Marines,” Lansing attorney Clifford Knaggs said.

Knaggs should know. In his former role as Judge Advocate General (JAG) in the Michigan Army National Guard, he offered legal services to returning reserve units in military matters, but did not consult on non-military issues.

“They were on their own,” Knaggs said.

Now the president of Knaggs, Harter, Brake and Schneider P.C. in Lansing, Knaggs jumped at the chance to be part of *Service to Soldiers: Legal Assistance Referral Program*, a pilot community outreach effort orchestrated by the Thomas M. Cooley Law School. The program offers one-on-one consultations between military personnel and Cooley professors to discuss non-military legal issues. Should legal services be needed, the Cooley professor matches the individual with local attorneys - mostly Cooley graduates who are volunteering their time to help these soldiers - who specialize in the areas of law required. Then, the selected attorney(s) provide counsel concerning all aspects of a legal issue, including possible representation in court, all free of charge.

“We’re excited to team with local attorneys and the Thomas M. Cooley Law School to offer this service to our returning Marines,” Charlie Company Capt. Mabel Balduf said. “Legal issues of non-military matters have been a glaring need for returning reservists. This program helps reduce the burden of any non-military legal issues so reservists can move on in their lives.”

For instance, some reservists return home to grapple with employment and/or custody issues while others find that their homes are empty and their mates have taken everything. “They need some legal representation – plain and simple,” said Cooley Professor Charles A. Palmer.

Cooley eventually hopes to involve law students in assisting in the initial consultations and to allow for student “shadows” on referred cases. The volunteer opportunity will allow students a chance to learn the ins-and-outs of the unique issues facing returning military reservists.

“It is great to see the Lansing legal community come together to support these great Americans who have put themselves at risk to protect the freedoms afforded to us,” Cooley Professor Pat Kruse said. “I was pleased to explain this program to the Marines in the Charlie Company and I’m glad that this service is already being used by some of them. They deserve it.”

Knaggs agrees. “If I can help and ease the transition back home in some small way, it is all worth it. It is the least that we can do for them.”

Cooley Law School is seeking additional attorneys to grow the program for reservists from Saginaw and Grand Rapids who returned home at the same time as the Marines in Charlie Company. Many of the issues faced by reservists in Charlie Company are common to returning reservists, including those from Saginaw and Grand Rapids.

“Attorneys from the Saginaw and Grand Rapids areas are needed to volunteer so that we can expand the program in these areas,” said Heather Spielmaker, Cooley Law School’s Assistant Director of Service and Professionalism Programs, who put the program together. “Returning Marine reservists throughout Michigan need our help and we’re trying to bring our program to them. Our ultimate goal is to ensure that all returning Michigan Marines and soldiers have access to appropriate legal counsel for the issues that affect them.” As the daughter of a disabled Vietnam veteran, Spielmaker was especially gratified by the interest and support of Cooley Law School in making this program a reality. “I am grateful to work for an institution that cares so much about helping our enlisted men and women,” Spielmaker said.

Attorneys willing to volunteer their time to the *Service to Soldiers: Legal Assistance Referral Program* can contact Heather Spielmaker at (517) 371-5140 ext. 4112.