

# Veterans Advocate Training Program

Presented by the Thomas M. French Veterans Advocacy Fund

**Friday, July 26 • 8 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. ET**

Chase Community Center at VLGS  
or Watch Live at [vermontlaw.edu/live](https://vermontlaw.edu/live)



The South Royalton Legal Clinic's Veterans Legal Assistance Project, with the generous support of the Thomas M. French Veterans Advocacy Fund, is honored to provide this program which is open to attorneys and non-attorneys alike.

Attorneys and other advocates must be accredited to practice before Veterans Affairs (VA). Within 12 months after accreditation, you are required to complete three hours of qualifying CLE credits. This program is offered to satisfy that requirement. In addition, this program is an excellent primer for any attorney considering representing veterans before the VA.

Attorneys and other advocates who become accredited will be listed on a national VA list, and are entitled to represent veterans in their initial claims for VA benefits on a pro bono basis, and on VA benefits appeals for attorney's fees.

This program is being offered free of charge to attorneys and appointed representatives in exchange for their commitment to assist at least one pro bono VA benefits client in the year following the program.



Veterans Legal  
Assistance Project  
VERMONT LAW & GRADUATE SCHOOL

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Friday, July 26 • Agenda

**8 to 8:30 a.m.**

**In-Person Registration and Continental Breakfast**

**8:30 to 8:45 a.m.**

**Opening Remarks**

**8:45 to 9:55 a.m.**

**Introduction to VA Law and Benefits -  
Advocating for Veterans with Disabilities**

This segment provides an introduction to representation before the VA, starting with defining who qualifies as a “veteran” for the purposes of VA benefits. This segment will provide an overview of what benefits a veteran may be eligible for based on discharge status and an introduction to relief when discharge status is other than dishonorable. Finally, this segment will discuss the three elements necessary to prevail in a claim for service-connected disability compensation. The primary focus will be VA disability compensation benefits, including a discussion of the basic requirements for service connection and statutory amounts of monthly benefits.

**9:55 to 10 a.m. Break**

**10 to 11:10 a.m.**

**VA Benefits Appeals Process**

This segment provides an introduction to the VA benefits appeals process under the Veterans Appeals Improvement and Modernization Act of 2017 (AMA). Beginning with reviewing a benefits decision letter, this segment will review the three appeal lanes available to veterans and their advocates. This segment will also cover filing appeals with the Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims.

**11:10 to 11:15 a.m. Break**

**11:15 a.m. to 12:25 p.m.**

**Mental Health Claims and the VA**

Mental health claims are notoriously difficult to win at the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA). In this presentation, we will walk through hypotheticals from start to finish—from intake to victory—on how to determine whether or not something is a good mental health claim. From evidentiary burdens to client management, you will feel better prepared to handle a mental health claim.

**12:25 to 1:10 p.m.**

**Lunch and Learn - State of the VA**

Join us for a review of current developments at the VA, presented by Marcos Lugo Fontanez from the VBA.

**1:10 to 1:30 p.m.**

**Closing Remarks**

## Instructors

**Donald Hayes, Esq.**

**Director, Veterans Legal Assistance Project (VLAP) at the South Royalton Legal Clinic**

Attorney Hayes has been serving as the director of VLAP since 2018. Attorney Hayes is accredited to represent veterans before the VA and is a member of the National Organization of Veterans Advocates.

**Tim Mercer, Esq.**

**Partner, Bluestein Group**

Attorney Mercer served in the United States Marine Corps and joined the Bluestein Group in 2018. He presently handles an active docket of VA disability appeals and claims. Attorney Mercer is a member of the National Organization of Veterans Advocates.

**Eva Puorro, Esq.**

**Attorney, VA Benefits, Connecticut Veterans Legal Center (CVLC)**

Eva Puorro has had helping veterans on her radar for quite some time. She is an experienced litigator, having practiced in New York and Connecticut for many years in securities arbitration and litigation, labor and employment law, and general civil litigation. She learned the basics of VA benefits practice when she began working with CVLC in 2014 as a pro bono attorney. When she was offered a chance to work at CVLC as a staff attorney, she jumped at the opportunity. Her work with CVLC initially involved exposure cases and most recently involves helping veterans with PTSD and other mental health conditions, and military sexual trauma. Her experience with CVLC has provided her with a deep understanding of the unique challenges that veterans face. Eva is admitted to practice in Connecticut and New York, and she resides on the shoreline with her husband and son. She received her JD from New York Law School and her BA from Fordham University's Rose Hill campus.