

Lawyers join forces to aid disabled veterans

BY CHRIS STURGIS
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

Three lawyers, two of whom are disabled, are joining forces to help veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars get what is due them from the Veterans Administration.

To that end, Lawyers C. Patterson McKenna, Melissa A. Gertz and Lisa A. Turowski last week held an open house at the Community Justice Center, their new non-profit organization at 310 W. State St., Trenton.

"There is a backlog of 750,000 cases before the VA of people seeking disability benefits, primarily for post traumatic stress disorder or traumatic brain injury," said McKenna, who has been blind since age 5.

And the problem is likely to grow, McKenna said.

Gertz said post-traumatic stress disorder cases are complicated by the fact that seeking treatment carries a stigma in the military.

"Patients don't want to seek treatment for fear of the stigma in case they want to re-enlist," she said.

Often they apply after several years have passed and they have had trouble functioning in civilian life, she said.

More veterans are surviving traumatic brain injuries than ever before because of life-saving advances in medicine, she said. However, they need assistance in living with the resulting disabilities, she said.

Gertz herself is disabled. She suffered a head injury in a car accident in 2004, when she was a student at Rutgers Law School in Newark.

For a time, Gertz was severely impaired and blind, but now the greatest lingering injury is tunnel vision, despite seven eye surgeries.

Gertz said her original plan was to practice civil rights law, an area she is very much interested in.

Turowski brings a wide variety of experience to the Community Justice Center. She has a law degree from Boston University and work experience in writing grants and raising money, followed by a stint as staff advocate for the Community Health Law Project, where

she assisted clients with mental illness as they applied for Social Security and other benefits.

The deadlines and paperwork to obtain benefits can be daunting, she said.

"If someone is disabled, they are already having a hard time in the world," she said.

Turowski is in the process of getting licensed to practice law in New Jersey and getting certified to represent veterans before the VA.

She said potential clients with

physical disabilities should not be discouraged that the Community Justice Center is on the third floor of a building with no elevator. The group chose the office because it has privacy for client interviews, but they envision themselves meeting clients at the offices of other agencies.

"If someone can't get to us, we will get to them," Turowski said. More information about Community Justice Center is available at nj-communityjusticecenter.org.

Trenton Times, March 22, 2009