

# Trenton firm serves disabled vets and nonvets

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Serendipity

Paperwork. Isn't it great? Which form now? Do not fold. Sign this. Notarize that. Dot those i's. Cross those t's. Do this online. Make an appointment. Stand in line. Go away and bring back with the original.

And so on. It's hard enough applying for financial aid for college, a federal grant or insurance payment when you understand the system.

But what if you have no help or money and are out of the loop because you have a mental illness and can't get a job? Or you have recently had your legs blasted off by an IED in Kandahar? Or have lost your sight to diabetes? Or suffer from a debilitating case of post-traumatic stress disorder?

A disabled person is eligible for benefits from the Social Security Administration and, if a veteran, from the Veterans Affairs as well. For people whose income is at or just over the federal poverty line, these benefits can make the difference between being homeless and having an apartment, a healthy lifestyle and access to good support.

But the process required to receive Social Security benefits can take three years, and Veterans Affairs benefits, up to 10 years. And that's if you have dotted all your i's and crossed all your t's. And haven't been rejected along the way.

Few law firms help disabled people with this paperwork. Last year, however, lawyers Melissa Gertz and C. Patterson McKenna (soon joined by part-timer Lisa Turowsky) opened the Community Justice Center in downtown Trenton. It is the only law firm in New Jersey qualified to work with both Social Security and Veterans Affairs issues. The goal of CJC is to provide free and low-cost legal services, statewide, to eligible disabled veterans and nonveterans.

"We're very good at legal matters," says Gertz, "We can help our clients with the maze of paperwork to get through the system. They need to concentrate on what's really important -- struggle towards improved health, well-being, recovery and stability."

Gertz and McKenna know firsthand about disabilities. McKenna, a Rutgers Law School graduate, has been blind since age 5. Gertz, also a graduate of Rutgers Law School, suffers from traumatic brain injury and post-traumatic stress disorder, the two most common disabilities afflicting soldiers returning from Afghanistan and Iraq.

In 2004, during her third year of law school, a truck collided with the car she was driving. The side mirror careened into her head, smashing her face, playing havoc with her brain and blinding her.

She spent that year enduring terrible pain, endless surgeries on her eyes and face, reconstruction and rehabilitation. "I spent months in a dark room, unable to move. The only thing I could do was listen -- to all seven of the "Harry Potter" books." Today she can see with her right eye, and her face appears normal. "I still have many things wrong, but the legal side of me is strong and healthy." Surprisingly, she graduated with her class at Rutgers.

She is particularly aware of the difficulties of applying for help. "After the accident, I spent two-thirds of my time working with insurance companies. I had all kinds of problems -- and I was in law school with access to the best legal support."

For disabled individuals, many of whom have previously been denied benefits and know the stigma of a disability, CJC is a blessing. To date, 20 cases have been successfully resolved, and 120 clients have open cases. "We're confident that we can get eligible clients the benefits they deserve," says Gertz. "Our ultimate goal is to help them achieve decent, healthy lives."

For more information, to volunteer or to contribute, contact CJC at 310 West State St., Trenton, NJ 08618; 609-218-5120; [www.nj-communityjusticecenter.org](http://www.nj-communityjusticecenter.org).

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