Making a Difference

The Pennsylvania Bar News column that highlights Pennsylvania attorneys who make a difference in their communities by providing extraordinary pro bono service and/or other community services in the public interest.

Jeffrey M. Thompson, Butler County

Jeffrey M. Thompson is the owner of Jeffrey M. Thompson Law Offices PC in Butler and vice president and general counsel for Tom Rectenwald Construction Inc. in Harmony. Thompson helped develop and is the first coordinator of the Butler County Veterans Court.

How did you first become involved?
Butler County President Judge Thomas Doerr knows I am a veteran. He passed my name along to Judge Timothy McCune and others who were developing a list of people interested in exploring the need for a veterans court in Butler County in 2012. I attended the first few meetings and did some research in between the meetings. After that, Judge McCune and I met and he asked me to help develop the veterans court program and serve as its first coordinator.

Have your pro bono cases dealt with legal issues different from your regular practice areas? If so, how did you adapt?
I had not done much criminal law and I was never involved with treatment for substance abuse or mental health. In addition, having mainly a corporate and transactional practice, I was never a “courtroom insider.” I had no idea how the various groups such as the offices of the district attorney and public defender and clerk of courts, court administration, prison, mental health services, adult probation, county veterans’ services, domestic relations, protection-from-abuse court, magisterial district judges and the common pleas judges of the various divisions interacted with each other.

The task was to coordinate all those county offices with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Up to that point the county functions had had very little interaction and certainly no kind of formal, coordinated effort to work with the VA to address veterans’ criminal issues. Being a disabled veteran myself, I knew somewhat how things worked at the VA, but formally integrating what are normally voluntary VA services into the county’s criminal justice system and making the VA services mandatory via a non-federal, common pleas court order was quite the challenge.

I adapted by asking questions, making mistakes, looking at other programs across the nation, making more mistakes, apologizing but always pushing forward. Nothing would have been accomplished at all without the steady guidance and unwavering support I received from Judge McCune and all of the Butler County judges.

Also, we have members on the treatment team and other informal advisors from most of the offices and departments mentioned. I have the privilege of working with a team of the best public servants anyone could ever ask for.

What have been the personal rewards?
The people I have met have enriched my life. The people who work in the offices I named above have been patient and have taught me what I needed to know to make the program work. Early on we got the local veterans’ organizations involved. We have veteran volunteers who perform a range of functions. Two retired U.S. Army colonels serve on our treatment team and coordinate our veteran mentors. Many others act as mentors for the veterans we serve. I enjoy seeing these various groups interacting. For example, we have veterans’ groups that come to assist at veterans court sessions and we have non-veteran county employees who now attend veterans’ functions in their off time.

Modeling service to my two teenage children has instilled in them the desire to serve. They now volunteer at the VA medical center and help out at various veterans’ group functions.

Most gratifying, however, is seeing veterans turn their lives around. We have seen families reunited and people who had no hope once again become healthy, active and productive members of society. Seeing pride restored where before there was only despair: Priceless!

Describe your pro bono work.
Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and combat-related stress are ranked among the primary causes for substance abuse and addiction among our veterans. Many veterans also face other issues that compound their problems, including unemployment, strained relationships and homelessness, resulting in their ending up in the criminal justice system. The goal of veterans courts is to give each program participant the best possible chance of getting back on track as a healthy, productive veteran and citizen. We offer veterans access to needed services, an opportunity to address their justice-related issues and a chance to get “squared-away.”

Why do you participate in pro bono?
We all have gifts and talents. There are many people who need the gifts and talents that lawyers possess. It’s not always a question of providing free legal representation. In the case of veterans court, I am not anyone’s lawyer. My gifts and talents as a lawyer were needed to help get the program started and continue to be needed to move the program forward.

Describe your other community service:
About once a month I volunteer for an afternoon in Butler County’s award-winning Consumer Credit & Residential Mortgage Foreclosure Diversion Program. Butler County Bar Association attorneys specially appear to represent debtors facing mortgage foreclosure or lawsuits filed in connection with other debts. We work with the lenders’ counsel to try to keep people in their homes and settle the suits.

I usually have about six low-income clients that I work for at no charge doing various types of legal work.

I am a life member of the Disabled American Veterans and serve as treasurer of our local chapter.