



Melissa Tyner and Anequa Campbell help homeless female veterans obtain military benefits and safe, affordable housing.

Fighting for the Women Who Fought for Their Country

As the number of women in the military grows, so too does the number who come home in need. Meet the women who are lending female vets a helping hand.

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Kori LaVonda met a military couple in high school, and made up her mind: She wanted to join the Air Force. “It just seemed like a cool life,” she remembers. At age 17, she crammed for the armed services aptitude test, and barely passed it. She drained her bank account to pay for a trainer, who helped her lose 40 pounds to make weight. And she kept the whole thing a secret from her parents — until the day she left Southern California for southern Nevada, and a job at Nellis Air Force Base.

“What attracted me was ‘Aim High,’” she says, referring to an Air Force recruiting slogan in use when she enlisted back in 1997. “It just really inspired me to go for whatever I wanted to go for.”

But once in the service, her dream became a nightmare. “I was raped when I was overseas,” she says abruptly, describing an incident during a six-month deployment to Prince Sultan Air Base in Saudi Arabia where, at 19 years old, she was sexually assaulted by her supervisor, who then told her he had AIDS.

She left the service badly damaged by the experience, escaping the pain by turning to “alcohol and drugs and bad men.” The booze “made me blossom,” she says. “You know, it gave me courage, the strength to deal.” But before long, she was dating a meth addict. Her mother had LaVonda’s two young children taken away. Eventually, she found herself on the streets.

The Kleenex falls to pieces as LaVonda tearfully recalls her journey. She is perched atop a planter in Admiral Kidd Park in Long Beach, Calif., near the Villages at Cabrillo transitional housing and counseling facility. Next to LaVonda sits Melissa Tyner, senior staff attorney at the Inner City Law Center (ICLC), and Anequa Campbell, a recent Georgetown Law School graduate based at the ICLC as an attorney with the Equal Justice Works AmeriCorps Legal Fellowship program. They smile as LaVonda describes what a relief it is to have the support of these women — who gather materials for her claim for benefits from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), appear in court on her behalf and generally look out for her.

The ICLC has a broad mandate to end homelessness. Its staffers work to combat

slum housing, create safe and affordable housing, and develop strategies to prevent families from being forced into the streets in the first place. But the ICLC also has a more targeted goal: It is the first legal-services organization in the United States to focus on problems specific to homeless female veterans, like LaVonda.

The group has been a godsend to LaVonda and countless others who have fallen on hard times after fighting for their country. “ICLC’s mission is to serve the poorest and most vulnerable in Los Angeles,” Tyner says. “Here we are with the shameful title of not only being the homeless capital of the nation but also the homeless veterans’ capital of the nation.”

From 2006 to 2010, the number of homeless female veterans rose more than 140 percent in the U.S. even as the national rate of homelessness decreased. And in LA, the problem is magnified. The city’s Homeless Services Authority estimates that of the more than 12,000 chronically homeless people on the streets, 8,000 are veterans and 1,000 of those are women. That number is expected to rise both on the local and national level as women, who make up

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nearly 15 percent of the armed forces, return from service.

The attorneys at ICLC help their veteran clients access health care, compensation and other benefits from the VA. They specialize in psychological trauma claims, particularly military sexual trauma, which has been reported by 21 percent of female troops returning from Iraq and Afghanistan — a figure that is widely believed to be underreported. Part of what makes the ICLC's approach unique is that it appoints female attorneys to represent female veterans. "A lot of the existing advocates who do this work are men, and if you are a survivor of sexual trauma, it's going to be particularly challenging for you to go to someone and say, 'You know, this is what happened to me,'" says Tyner at ICLC's LA office, located in a converted produce warehouse in Skid Row.

Tyner, whose success at a high-school public speaking competition sponsored by the Veterans of Foreign Wars earned her a college scholarship, views her work with veterans not only as a way to serve those who serve our country, but also as a way to give back to a community that made her education possible. Since graduating from law school in 2009, and building up the Homeless Veterans Project at ICLC that same year, she has kept in mind something a veteran told her just after she won the competition: While veterans may be the most in need of your representation, they may also be the least likely to ask for your help. Based on her experience, Tyner says this seems especially true for female veterans.

The ICLC serves more than 400 veterans annually, according to Tyner. She adds

that in 2012, the VA denied only 8 percent of ICLC benefits cases. The poignant thing about the organization's 92 percent success rate is that it could so easily be replicated for many more veterans. Studies show the positive difference that simple representation can make. "When an attorney gets involved in a vet's benefits case, especially more complicated cases involving mental health, their likelihood of success goes up exponentially," she says.

For many female veterans who have experienced sexual assault, an attorney's help could mean the difference between life and death. Many of these women suffer silently and alone, finding other ways to cope that can lead them to the streets. "They self-medicate through drugs or alcohol, and their lives usually go on a downward spiral after that," says Campbell, her voice cracking.

Campbell helps the ICLC team of attorneys conduct monthly legal clinics at six area homeless shelters. Lawyers also donate considerable time to each client's individual case. Because homeless vets must focus on finding food, shelter and other essentials, it is nearly impossible for them to navigate "this paperwork jungle that is the VA," Tyner says. "We're combing through thousands and thousands of pages to pull out pertinent evidence that is used in a legal brief arguing why this person should be entitled to these benefits," Tyner says, explaining that the process can take between 40 and 200 hours per veteran, all done free of charge.

It's a slow pipeline. LaVonda first filed a claim for service-connected post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in 2007. She received her first denial from

the VA in 2008; the department argued that there was insufficient evidence of a link between her time in the Air Force and her PTSD. LaVonda appealed the decision and was denied again in 2009. She did not file again until September 2012. More than a year later, the ICLC is helping, but her case is still pending. "It's really troubling that this woman experienced an injustice in the military and she's being victimized again by having to wait for so long to get the benefits she deserves," Campbell says.



LaVonda had been on the streets for eight years before moving to Long Beach, into transitional housing provided by the nonprofit U.S. VETS, which has a program that provides homeless female veterans with a safe and sober living situation. She's been sober for almost two years. Now, having also connected with the ICLC, LaVonda says she feels like she finally has someone fighting for her.

"I'm a survivor, baby," LaVonda hollers, laughing. She closes her eyes, now dusted with white tissue, as she describes her new reality: She's back to school full time, living in an apartment with her children and free from some of the guilt that used to weigh her down.

Next up? A job in security, she says. "I aim high."