



LOS ANGELES

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Harkening to the Homeless

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Added by brain traumas or post-traumatic stress, veterans returning from tours of duty often cannot reclaim the lives they'd left. Many become chronically homeless.

A long-ago bequest was intended to prevent some of this hardship. In 1888, U.S. Senator John P. Jones and Arcadia B. de Baker donated more than 300 acres of land in Los Angeles to the federal government, earmarking it for permanent housing for disabled war veterans. For nearly 80 years, the Pacific Branch Soldier's Home housed tens of thousands of vets.

Then the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs stopped accepting new residents. In 1989, it began leasing parts of the property to private companies, currently including Marriott and Enterprise Rent-A-Car.

Now, eleven homeless veterans suffering from severe mental disabilities - joined by Carolina Winston Barrie, a descendant of the family that donated the land, and the Vietnam Veterans of America - have brought a class action alleging misappropriation of the land trust. They also complain that the VA is discriminating against the disabled vets by denying them housing vouchers and other supportive services required by the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.



Ronald L. Olson

The ACLU Foundation of Southern California and the Inner City Law Center, along with professors Laurence H. Tribe of Harvard and Gary Blasi of UCLA, are spearheading the litigation. Hundreds of pro bono hours have already been donated by Ronald L. Olson and John Rappaport of Munger, Tolles & Olson as well as John C. Ulin of Arnold & Porter in an effort to end VA policies they claim discriminate against veterans with severe disabilities. (See *Valentini v. Shinseki*, No. C11-04846 (C.D. Cal.))

"The psychiatric care provided to disabled vets requires something more than handing out vouchers on Skid Row and expecting them to find their way," says Olson, for whom the case is personal. "One of the most important people in my life was an uncle who went off to the war in early 1942 and didn't return until the war was over. In his company of approximately 300, all but 11 were killed or disabled. It took him a good number of years to recover from the trauma of that war. He eventually became my mentor."