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Salute to Veterans 2025

From classroom to command: How law students are helping veterans plan for life and legacy

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SHUTTERSTOCK

I was three months into teaching my first Estate Planning course at the University of San Francisco School of Law when my student and Navy veteran John Nelson approached me after class. He had a simple but powerful question: Could our course actually serve veterans?

He was absolutely right to ask. Estate planning is an ideal way to provide meaningful legal support to veterans, offering them legal protection during their lifetimes and effectuating their testamentary intent. It's also a tremendous learning opportunity for our students, who can gain practical experience drafting advanced health care directives, powers of attorney and wills under the guidance of practicing attorneys.

It was time to take Nelson's idea and make it a reality. Thankfully, the law school's leadership shared our vision. Senior Associate Dean for Academic Affairs Amy Flynn connected me with the school's Veterans Oriented Law Society and the Students of Tax and Estate Planning Society to build student interest in holding one-day practicums in support of veterans. Dean Johanna Kalb, drawing on her experience supporting similar programs during her tenure at the University of Idaho, identified contacts and resources to make our plans feasible.

Next, I reached out to Swords to Plowshares, a Bay Area nonprofit organization that has been supporting veterans since 1974. Their legal director, Mo Siedor, was instrumental in identifying locations, dates and times that would best meet veterans where they are. We want the one-day practicums to be accessible, welcoming and free of unnecessary barriers to maximize participation and impact. The result: Two one-day practicums scheduled for early 2026: The advanced healthcare directive practicum will be held on Presidents' Day, Feb. 16, 2026, from 12 p.m. to 4 p.m. at Swords to Plowshares' Veterans Community Center at1060 Howard Street, San Francisco.

The second, more comprehensive estate planning practicum will offer advanced health care directives, powers of attorney and statutory wills. It will take place on Saturday, April 11, 2026, from 12 p.m. to 4 p.m. at the Swords to Plowshares' John W. Paulson Veterans Community in the Presidio at1030 Girard Road, San Francisco.

Our goal is simple: to help as many veterans as possible put essential estate plans in place.

As an estate planning attorney myself, I stress to every client, as well as every student, the importance of having an advanced health-

care directive, a power of attorney and a will.

An advanced healthcare directive allows a veteran to appoint a trusted individual to make medical decisions on their behalf if they are unable to do so themselves, and to record their preferences on issues like pain management, resuscitation, artificial nutrition or hydration, life support, religious care considerations, end of life planning and funeral arrangements.

A power of attorney for finances designates a trusted individual to manage financial affairs in the event the veteran cannot do so themselves. Tasks could include things such as managing bank accounts, paying bills or taxes, managing investments, handling real estate transactions, operating a business or managing insurance policies.

A will allows a veteran to nominate an individual, called an executor, who would petition a court for a process called probate. The executor would then collect all the veteran's assets, pay any last expenses, and then distribute the assets to all beneficiaries that the veteran names in their will. A veteran can name family, friends or charities as beneficiaries in their will. But without a will, the veteran's beneficiaries under the default California law, called intestacy, will almost always be their closest relatives.

Each of these documents tells a story about dignity, trust and legacy. They empower veterans to make their voices heard, both now and in the future.

I and the University of San Francisco School of Law hope that these two practicums are only the beginning. By bringing together students, faculty, practitioners and community partners, we can continue to build our connections with the veteran community while also providing our students with hands-on legal experience.

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