I really wanted to thank you for expanding access to justice for our nation’s military servicemembers and veterans. Our heroes have heroes of their own—you who are here for two days to learn how to improve lives and make a difference for those who have served our country. You can be proud that the ABA and the rest of the nation so highly regard the North Carolina Bar Association’s efforts on behalf of servicemembers and veterans, and the ABA is grateful for our long history of collaboration on these issues.

Before I started my term in August 2016, I thought a lot about the things that unite our nation and bring our profession together. I thought back to grade school, where every morning we pledged allegiance to the flag and affirmed that our country stood for liberty and justice for all. In high school, when we studied the Constitution, right there at the beginning, in the Preamble, we read that We the People … would form a more perfect union … to establish justice.

It’s only when we attend law school that we realize that justice for all is a dream that we must continue to work on—cause by cause, case by case, client by client.

I recalled the time when lawyers at my firm, Baker Donelson, did pro bono work at a local homeless shelter, where sadly many of the clients were military veterans. Our pro bono work was, among other things, to help them get ID cards so that they could receive the government benefits they were due. It was so simple for a lawyer or paralegal to help. Twenty minutes of time changed a life. I was hooked.

Something occurred to me, as I’m sure it has occurred to many of you—that it’s natural for lawyers to be indebted to those who served our country. Our profession and the ABA embody the rule of law—and without veterans who protected our freedoms, there would be no rule of law.

Something else I thought long and hard about: Of the nearly 22 million military veterans in the U.S., one and a half million live below the poverty line. Another one and a half million live just above it. And the fastest growing homeless population? Women veterans.

Many veterans continue to make sacrifices long after they’ve come home. Service-connected injuries and conditions can be debilitating. This makes it nearly impossible for them and their families and caregivers to navigate the system that stands between veterans and their care. Untreated, these wounds can lead to the loss of a job or housing. For some, it can lead to an encounter with the criminal justice system. According to the Department of Veterans Affairs, at least half of the top 10 problems leading to homelessness among veterans cannot be solved without a lawyer’s help.

It’s encouraging to be here with so many experts on the range of legal issues that face veterans and their caregivers. I congratulate the organizers for pulling together such an impressive and wide-ranging corps of speakers, many of whom have been very supportive of our efforts at the ABA on behalf of active-duty servicemembers and veterans. And I salute all of you for committing your service to the servicemembers and veterans who need our help.

As we recognized not only the magnitude of the need but also the enthusiasm lawyers have for working on these issues, we launched a major initiative at the beginning of my ABA presidential term to mobilize lawyers to ensure that veterans receive the legal assistance they deserve. For decades we have led with our standing committee on legal assistance for military personnel, and we wanted
to greatly expand our efforts for veterans.

Our Veterans Legal Services Initiative is multifaceted and holistic, involving many areas of law and practice. Our effort has been led by a distinguished commission of experts in the field chaired by Nan DeRenzi, a retired three-star vice admiral who served as the Navy’s TJAG, its chief military lawyer.

The solutions we’re promoting include veterans treatment courts and their possible expansion to the civil matters that bring veterans to criminal court such as debt collection and domestic relations. We’re engaging law schools and bar associations to promote more pro bono assistance for veterans and their caregivers. And we’re expanding medical-legal partnerships that pair VA medical facilities with lawyers to solve clients’ legal problems.

Our initiative made valuable contributions to ABA policy. Thanks to its research, legwork, and successful advocacy, the ABA is promoting a bipartisan bill in Congress that would allow the VA to use some small portion of its existing appropriations to pay for legal services for veterans who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. And thanks to another policy the ABA adopted at the initiative’s behest, we’re also urging the government to correct records and discharges for veterans who have suffered from post-traumatic stress, traumatic brain injury and military sexual trauma. This is the first step in broadening access to services for veterans.

In just the first year of its operation, the Veterans Legal Services Initiative launched valuable resources. We’ve produced an online legal check-up tool for veterans and their families and caregivers because many don’t know the problem they have is a legal one. Topics now cover family law, employment law, and housing/landlord-tenant law. More areas of law are being developed, including VA benefits and discharge upgrades. I encourage you to share this checkup tool at veteranslegalcheckup.com.

We’re also implementing an online pro bono network, with support from the Jones Day law firm, called VetLex. The platform will make it easy for lawyers and law firms to sign up for, and be placed with, volunteer opportunities on behalf of veterans with civil legal needs.

And Fastcase has volunteered to create an app that will help lawyers who represent veterans in VA claims matters. The app will guide the lawyer through the process of assembling and developing a claim for disability compensation.

To help lawyers prepare to represent veterans, our website links to some great free CLE webinar recordings produced by the initiative. All of these and more are at the website, ambar.org/veterans. Please spread the word to your colleagues and networks.

Clearly, there’s a lot to be done, and that’s why we’re continuing our veterans legal services initiative for the long haul.

The need for an ABA leadership role in this space was underscored back in June 2016, when the Bob Woodruff Foundation and others held a National Summit on Creating a National Military and Veterans Legal Network. The Summit brought together expert stakeholders from more than 100 organizations representing 30 different sectors at the national, state, and local levels. Attendees came together to establish a collaborative vision for overcoming chronic legal challenges faced by servicemembers, veterans, their families, caregivers and survivors.

Summit attendees called for national leadership to make their recommendations a reality. The ABA was credited for being sufficiently comprehensive and inclusive to take on this challenge. The group unanimously chose the ABA to lead the effort. Establishing the Center for Military and Veterans Access to Justice will enable the ABA to answer this leadership call.

The Center we envision, and hope you can support, will serve as the national hub amid the existing patchwork of veterans legal service networks and systems. It will do so by providing a collaborative environment where lawyers, judges, policymakers, and others can work together to achieve the best possible outcomes for military and veteran families. The leadership, advocacy, training, and capacity building provided through the Center will anchor efforts in all areas of military and veteran legal support.

Our initiative is drawing on and must continue to draw on the experiences and expertise of those who volunteer and work in this space. Please visit our website at ambar.org/veterans and let us know your thoughts on how to make this the best it can be.

Let me mention a few words about a related issue of access to justice for veterans and others in need, and that’s the administration’s zeroing out of funding for the Legal Services Corporation. Veterans constitute a major group of legal aid recipients, so it’s important that we advocate for legal services. I’m happy to say that the ABA with our state and local bar partners sprang to action immediately after learning of the budget proposal in March and we’re continuing to advocate.

Saving the Legal Services Corporation is a bipartisan battle we fight together. Through our social media campaign centered on the website DefendLegalAid.org, more than 20,000 lawyers, judges, and other citizens encouraged their elected representatives to properly fund legal services. During our annual ABA Day in Washington in April, we had a record turnout—more than 350 lawyers—who met with their congressional delegations to advocate for the Legal Services Corporation. We’re still fighting the fight, and there’s still time to reach out and educate your members of Congress on this issue.

Signing up at DefendLegalAid.org only takes a few minutes and is a great start. And, please, spread the word about our campaign. Again, that’s DefendLegalAid.org.

There’s a story that I’ve been thinking about a lot these days. A year ago this past August, I was fortunate to spend a week with the brave men and women who defend our country. I traveled from the Pentagon to military bases to ships at sea. It was impressive, to say the least.

One fine morning, I found myself in the Atlantic Ocean, on the flight deck of the USS George Washington, a 100,000-ton nuclear-powered aircraft carrier — all 100 pounds of me. But I was wearing about 30 pounds of safety gear plus goggles and a helmet, so let call it 135.

I was strapped into a tiny seat on the smallest, hottest, fastest plane I’d ever seen in my life. Ready to be blasted off the moving deck of the carrier by a steam powered catapult with 30,000 pounds of thrust. That means 0 to 170 miles per hour in about 2 seconds. So before I know what’s happening, I’m slammed back in the seat and the plane leaps toward the end of the ship and we’re off over the ocean. Now the trick is to climb fast enough so you don’t hit the water.

So that was how my year as ABA president began, and that’s pretty much what it was like the whole way through. When I launched off that deck I kept telling myself not to worry because I was not up there alone, that there were 6,000 people on that carrier I could rely on, and that made all the difference. And when I landed safely I got to thank some of them from the bottom of my heart.

So today I get to thank all of you who work to strengthen our profession and the promise we learned long ago, a promise of lib-
property and establishing justice for all. In wartime or peace, at home or abroad, veterans are the bright ribbon of honor that runs through our nation's history. Though we rightfully honor them regularly, our tributes will ring hollow if we fail to ensure that our veterans get the support – and specifically the legal help – they deserve.

As lawyers, we will make sure that happens. Just as veterans stepped forward and offered their lives for our nation, our profession must answer its own calls and step forward on their behalf. That's what you are doing. Thank you for being my heroes.

Linda Klein is the immediate past president for the American Bar Association (ABA). As ABA president, she led the association’s efforts to expand legal services for veterans, preserve federal funding for legal aid for the poor, and provide civics education through community Law Day events nationwide. She previously served as chair of the ABA’s House of Delegates, the association’s policymaking body. In 2009 Ms. Klein was honored with the Randolph Thrower Award for Lifetime Achievement and was named to the YWCA Academy of Women Achievers. In 2004 the American Bar Association honored Ms. Klein with the prestigious Margaret Brent Achievement Award. Ms. Klein has authored numerous published works. Her lecture schedule has included presentations in France, Sweden, Spain, Russia, Great Britain and Canada, but most extensively in the southeast United States. She is a member of the American Law Institute, and a mediator and arbitrator, frequently serving as a neutral as well as a client advocate. Her impressive professional biography can be viewed at https://www.bakerdonelson.com/linda-a-klein.

Award for Distinguished Service to the Military and Veterans

On Nov. 14, after the first day of the 2017 Military & Veterans Law Section CLE on Legal Assistance for Military Personnel, the Section awarded Council Member and Membership Co-Chair Kirk Warner, of Smith Anderson, its first distinction - the Award for Distinguished Service to the Military and Veterans. Section Chair Matt Wilcut presented the award to Warner.

The award was recently created to recognize a Section member who not only provides outstanding service to military members and veterans but who also, through selfless assistance, promotes the same in others. The Section will continue to honor members each year and the award’s title will officially carry Kirk’s name in memory of his contribution to the Section, it’s formation, and his time as Chair of the Section’s predecessor from 2013-2016, the NCBA Military & Veterans Affairs Committee.