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Cover Story: Project SALUTE

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By Jeff Atkinson - [bio](#) | [email](#)

Posted by Sarah Hildmann - [email](#)



CHARLOTTE, NC (WBTV) - North Carolina has a large veteran population. Over 700,000 live in the state. And over 100,000 live in Charlotte alone. There are so many veterans here that need medical attention or legal help, but a lot of them don't know where to go.

Experts predict 35-percent of troops deployed to Iraq will ultimately suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.. and will need help after the war.

A half a million veterans eligible for disability benefits aren't receiving them because they didn't know they were entitled.

And almost 400-thousand vets have a compensation or pension claim pending.. average wait time 6 months.

PrimeTime's Jeff Atkinson shows us a group that's going to bat for veterans.

The idea is simple.

Take some willing law students..

Find an R-V.. convert it into an office.

And put it on the road.. invite veterans to come by.

It's called "Project Salute."

Touring the country right now.. in Charlotte for the next two days.

Driving the mobile law office.. Ohlen Baird and his wife Beverly.

"I do it because I do see the need to help veterans in this country," he says.

They've served their country..

But unfortunately when it's time for their country to serve them.. sometimes the U.S. lets them down.

"I get frustrated at watching them because they feel like they don't deserve number one. And number two the more I try the harder it seems I'm not getting anywhere," says Beverly Baird.

"You waited too long."

Tackling the maze of bureaucracy can be overwhelming at best.. just ask veteran Charles Locke who showed up when "Project Salute" went to Florida.

"He did not want to apply for the benefits because he didn't think that he was eligible," says Ohlen Baird.

Dealing with the federal government sometimes takes someone with a legal background..

That's where the law students come in..

"A lot of the times when the veteran is trying to do this on their own.. they don't understand the legal process that's involved," says Erin Jacobs, a law school student with Project SALUTE.

The "Project Salute" law students take on the veteran's case for free.. file the proper documents (look at just part of the file from one veteran) and get the former service member the benefits he or she is entitled to.

"When these people come home, they've given their time and efforts to the service. And now they have to.. now it's our turn to take care of them," says student Lisa Lozen.

The effort started last year.. begun by the University of Detroit Mercy School of Law.. which funds it with help from donations.

Jeff Dillon is a veteran and one of the law school students.

"I am a veteran of the United States Army. This seems to be an area that is developing where attorneys can make a difference.. and can do a job that they can have a good conscience about," he says.

If you've ever dealt with the government or an insurance company trying to get benefits you think you're entitled to.. you know how challenging it can be.

In fact, by the V.A.'s own account, when an attorney represents a veteran.. the VA winds up paying more than 6-thousand dollars more per year.. than to a vet without representation.

This mobile law office is the only one of its kind in the country. They're visiting 22