

PRO BONO HOT LIST | A SPECIAL REPORT

LATHAM & WATKINS Securing US Citizenship for Those Who Serve

FOR DECADES, LATHAM & WATKINS' PUBLIC interest practice has provided pro bono assistance to both immigration clients and, in recent years, has helped military veterans fight to access their benefits.

But last year, Latham attorneys were able to put their expertise in both practice areas to use: They secured citizenship for Daniel Torres, an undocumented immigrant from Mexico who did a tour in Iraq with the Marines but who was banished from the U.S.

Torres came to the U.S. with his parents while he was still a child. In 2007, when he was 21, Torres enlisted after a recruiter told him that it didn't matter that he was undocumented and registered him with a fake birth certificate.

But at one point, Torres lost his wallet and, while trying to get new documents, his story fell apart. He was honorably discharged in 2011 and, after going overseas in a failed attempt to join the French Foreign Legion, he was locked out of the U.S.

San Diego-based Latham attorneys Taiga Takahashi and James Erselius, along with former firm attorney Katherine McGrath came across Torres' case while conducting interviews for the American Civil Liberties Union of California's report on deported veterans, "Discharged, Then Discarded."

The Latham attorneys determined that they could help Torres and others in his predicament get citizenship, said Colleen Smith, a partner at the firm.

"They've earned that right as a result of their honorable military service," Smith said.

Jennie Pasquarella, director of immigrants' rights for the ACLU of California, also worked on Torres' case.

Undocumented immigrants who serve in the military can get on a fast track to naturalization, especially those who serve during wartime.

But Torres' path to citizenship was beset with logistical challenges, such as gaining him entry into the United States for a required in-person interview and fingerprinting.

"There were some challenges in dealing with the bureaucracy," Erselius said.

Takahashi said the firm is now assisting at least five more veterans in Ecuador, India and Mexico in gaining citizenship.

Torres, who was sworn in as a citizen last April, is living in Tijuana and working to finish his own legal education.

Bardis Vakili, a senior staff attorney at the ACLU of San Diego and Imperial Counties, said the Latham attorneys gave individual attention to the deported veterans, which helped to build trust with people who have had "door after door slammed shut in front of them."

"It's hard to imagine that we could have pulled this off without them, to be honest," Vakili said.

—ANDREW DENNEY



"THEY'VE EARNED THAT RIGHT AS A RESULT OF THEIR HONORABLE MILITARY SERVICE."

—COLLEEN SMITH



DANIEL TORRES