

Medical-Legal Partnership: Advocacy for a Healthy Community

A Partnership Between Community Legal Aid and UMass Memorial Health Care

Sean Reid, University of Massachusetts Class of 2019

About Community Legal Aid

CLA provides free legal services to indigent residents of Central and Western Massachusetts who have civil legal issues concerning housing, family, employment, benefits, elder, immigration, and education.



What is a Medical-Legal Partnership?

The root cause of health conditions often lies beyond the scope of medicine, leaving medical teams able to only partially address their patients' needs. In response, Medical-Legal Partnerships (MLP's) have been established across the country to try to address the social determinants of health that have a key impact on patients' health and well-being. Through MLP's, health professionals are trained to screen their patients for health-harming legal needs and subsequently refer these patients to legal aid for assistance.

MLP Benefits Shown By Previous Studies

- **Patients:** Increased well-being and ability to actively participate in their health care, decreased stress and severity of chronic conditions
- **Providers:** Increased knowledge of and confidence in addressing legal issues
- **Health Care Institutions:** Health care recovery dollars and reduction in unnecessary ED visits and hospitalizations
- **Society:** Identification of health-harming social conditions to be addressed by policy and regulation reform.

The Project

Purpose: This study seeks to evaluate the health and economic outcomes of this Medical-Legal Partnership with a focus on deriving materials that can be used to document the value of the partnership and promote its expansion and sustainability. To this end, data on costs, utilization, and health outcomes will be collected over a six-month period starting in April 2016 at three intervention clinics and four comparison clinics, all of which are in the UMass system.

Methods:

- **Quantitative:** Using routinely collected administrative data, comparisons between the intervention and control groups will be made regarding health outcomes, health care utilization, and cost. Additionally, surveys covering topics like quality of life and economic measures will be administered at baseline and six months post-enrollment to the intervention group. Finally, surveys to assess opinions and satisfaction of both legal and medical personnel will be administered.
- **Qualitative:** Through a series key-informant interviews with clients, attorneys, and medical personnel, a portfolio of case studies will be created. Particularly eloquent interviewees will be asked to share their stories on video. In addition to using salient quotations from the videos in the final written report, the videos themselves will be used as supplements to demonstrate the impact of the partnership.

Results and Conclusions: Pending completion of the study

Illustrating the Project's Impact: Stephen's Story

For years, Stephen, a UMass patient, lived in an apartment with his girlfriend. The apartment had a small subsidy through a federal program that reduced their rent to slightly below market rent. With their combined incomes, the couple could afford the apartment. About two years ago, the complex's management began working with the local housing authority to convert some of these smaller subsidies into a new program to make rents more affordable.

Every eligible tenant at the property had a right to remain at the property with a new project-based subsidy. Stephen gave the housing authority all the information necessary to establish his eligibility for the new program but his application was delayed and he ultimately did not receive the new subsidy. Meanwhile, Stephen's partner passed away. He could no longer afford his current unit but paid what he could each month.

Management began the process of evicting Stephen for non-payment of rent. A medical provider at UMass Family Medicine who was treating Stephen referred him to Community Legal Aid through their Medical-Legal Partnership. Attorneys at CLA represented him in the eviction case and negotiated with the housing authority. After many months, Stephen was given a subsidy to make his apartment more affordable. Going forward, his rent will be set at 30% of his income. Community Legal Aid also filed a motion to dismiss Stephen's eviction case and the management company conceded, waiving over \$8,000 in accrued rent.

Goals for the Summer

- Bridge my past work in legal services to my future career as a physician
- Learn about the role of MLP's in health care
- Learn more about the importance of the Social Determinants of Health on both a population and patient level

Future of the Project

- Data will continue to be gathered both quantitatively and qualitatively from patients in order to understand and learn from their experiences.
- Surveys and interviews will be expanded to cover both clinicians and lawyers to gain insight from their perspectives.
- Ultimately, all of this information will be used to make the case for the continued funding and ideally the expansion of this vital work.

To Learn More

- **Community Legal Aid:** <http://www.communitylegal.org/our-work/cla-projects>
- **National Center for MLP:** www.medical-legalpartnership.org

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the teams at both Community Legal Aid and UMass for allowing me to take part in this project.