

As hospitals and health systems continue to address the social determinants of health to improve health equity and community health outcomes, a key strategy has been to work in partnership with other organizations outside of health care. Medical-legal partnerships are one approach to assist at-risk patients address social needs and resolve legal issues that affect their health and well-being.

During and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, such partnerships help patients and communities that face social and economic challenges, with the aim of improving overall health status.

This issue brief discusses how medical-legal partnerships can support vulnerable populations, and highlights case examples and resources.

What Are Medical-Legal Partnerships?

Medical-legal partnerships focus on identifying health disparities in communities and addressing individuals' unmet legal needs related to social conditions, the physical environment or inadequate knowledge of or access to available public benefits.

Research shows that people with low incomes have at least two legal-related needs that are either resolved without legal assistance or left unaddressed.¹ Because social and legal issues can significantly affect an individual's quality of life, stress levels and health care costs, medical-legal partnerships can be particularly important for vulnerable populations.

As of 2019, there are more than 300 medical-legal partnerships between health care organizations and attorneys across 49 states.² As they become more widespread, these partnerships create opportunities to improve access to care and advance health and equity while reducing disparities.

Existing medical-legal partnerships offer a variety of services that typically fall into three categories:

1. Screening low-income patients for legal needs and connecting them with on-site or community resources;



2. Offering in-house training for providers and staff on the availability of legal services associated with social determinants of health and consultations on patients' legal needs; and
3. Advocating for structural policy changes.³

Established as a formal agreement between a legal services provider and a health care organization, a medical-legal partnership includes a variety of funding models:

- 54% of medical-legal partnerships are funded by the organization's operating budget;
- 64% acquire funding from national or regional philanthropic foundations.⁴

For better care coordination and health outcomes, seven states are leveraging funding for legal services through value-based payments or Medicaid managed care.⁵

Impact on Health and Well-being

Low-income populations have limited access to legal services. In the United States, there is one legal representative or attorney for every 6,415 individuals living in poverty.⁶ By addressing the legal needs of vulnerable, low-income populations that are challenged with limited access to care and resources, medical-legal partnerships provide a multidisciplinary approach to filling that gap.

Outlined here are several ways that medical-legal partnerships can assist vulnerable populations.

Table 1. I-HELP Framework for Screening for Health-related Legal Needs

	Legal Domain	Examples of Legal Needs
I	Income and insurance	Eligibility for food stamps, disability benefits, cash assistance, health insurance
H	Housing and utilities	Eviction, housing conditions, housing vouchers, utility shutoff
E	Education and employment	Accommodation for disease and disability in education and employment settings
L	Legal status	Criminal background issues, military discharge status, immigration status
P	Personal and family stability	Domestic violence, guardianship, child support, advance directives, estate planning

Source: Adapted from *National Center for Medical-Legal Partnership Screening Tool*, 2015.



Screening for and Documenting Legal Needs

Recognizing an individual’s legal challenges is the first step toward addressing them. Using a customized screening tool that incorporates questions focused on legal matters will help identify patients with unmet needs. Screening tools and resources that help identify legal needs include:

- [National Center for Medical-Legal Partnership Screening Guide Template and Tools](#)
- [Protocol for Responding to and Assessing Patient Assets, Risks and Experiences \(PREPARE\)](#)
- [Accountable Health Communities Screening Tool](#)
- [Health Leads Social Needs Screening Toolkit](#)

These resources incorporate questions in several domains from the I-HELP framework: income and insurance, housing and utilities, education and employment, legal

status, and personal and family stability. Each domain helps ensure that screenings include the wide range of legal needs that an individual can experience.⁷ See Table 1.

Participating providers identify health-related legal needs as part of patient screening to educate patients on their rights and potential remedies. Based on their identified needs, patients are referred to either a legal partner of the health care organization, on-site attorney or off-site legal clinic. This approach connects patients with applicable legal resources. It also creates an opportunity for multidisciplinary members of a team, including legal partners, to identify and help address an individual’s social needs.

Some providers use ICD-10 codes, specifically Z-codes (Z55–Z65), to document within the electronic health record a patient’s challenges related to education and literacy, employment, housing and economic conditions. This type of documentation may be used to initiate appropriate referral pathways.

NYC Health + Hospitals and LegalHealth

NYC Health + Hospitals and LegalHealth partnered to develop a medical-legal partnership to provide on-site meetings, referrals and legal interventions to patients affected by immigration, lack of public benefits, housing instability and financial instability. In 2018, this partnership handled 9,800 legal matters for 7,200 patients with unmet legal needs, referred by social workers, providers and community health workers across New York City.⁸

Lancaster General Hospital

At Lancaster General Hospital in Pennsylvania, lawyers trained social workers to better document legal needs in medical records. For example, social workers and other medical staff learned of a medical certification requirement needed to prevent utility shutoffs in the homes of seriously ill patients. In a pilot medical-legal partnership, the hospital enrolled 55 high-utilizer patients and provided direct legal care to 16% of these cases; 84% of the cases were addressed with support from the case management team. This resulted in a 50% decrease in inpatient and emergency department admissions, and a 45% reduction in overall costs.⁹ Now the pilot program has evolved into [Care Connections](#), a community care team at Lancaster General Hospital that provides medical, behavioral health and socioeconomic services to patients to better manage their health.

Improving Health and Well-being

Many individuals across the United States have unmet legal needs that contribute to their health status. In some states, patients with asthma and mental health issues have ranked among the highest percentage of those who take advantage of legal services. These conditions worsen if triggered by housing instability and stress. For example, the likelihood of acquiring asthma is higher among children living in unstable or poor housing conditions with mold, allergens or poor ventilation. Additionally, limited access to affordable homes can cause depression in older adults and anxiety and aggression in adolescents.¹⁰ Older adults may experience difficulty accessing insurance to cover long-term care, which causes stress. Families experience stress when denied food or housing subsidies.



Obtaining legal aid through medical-legal partnerships extends the team of support available to assist patients. Studies show the most common positive benefits of such partnerships for patients, as observed by clinicians, include:

- Improved access to housing and utility needs
- Reduced stress
- Improved access to personal and family stability needs
- Improved access to education and employment needs¹¹

Cincinnati Children's Hospital

Cincinnati Children's Hospital, in partnership with Legal Aid Society of Greater Cincinnati, formed [Child HeLP](#), an initiative to resolve unmet legal and social needs of children. The program screens patients and educates physicians on the implications of unmet legal needs and the different ways to address them. Since 2008, more than 2,450 cases have been referred to Child HeLP, in turn preventing homelessness, improving nutrition, eliminating hazardous conditions in homes, resolving domestic violence or custody disputes, and much more.

Child HeLP also addresses and helps resolve legal needs for an entire community. The partnership learned of health code violations such as moldy pipes, leaky ceilings and insect infestations in 19 buildings owned by one person. These conditions trigger asthma in children, influencing their everyday health and well-being. With legal intervention provided by Child HeLP, repairs to remediate health-harming factors were made in nearly 80% of the cases. Since then, emergency department admissions for asthma have decreased.

Additionally, to provide better nutritional support, the hospital's medical-legal partnership now directly enrolls eligible new mothers and their newborns to receive Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, reducing administrative workflow delays that were causing new moms an average loss of \$154 in benefits.¹²

Building Stronger Relationships with Clinicians and Patients

Medical-legal partnerships provide on-site training to clinicians, helping them better understand legal interventions designed to support social needs of patients. In 2016, more than 75,000 patients across the U.S. received legal assistance to improve their health and well-being.¹³

Clinicians receiving this training reported a better understanding of legal resources and the interconnect- edness of social determinants of health and legal needs. Clinicians also have reported improved patient outcomes, increased patient engagement with medical treatment and an enhanced ability to serve their patients better when medical-legal partnerships exist.¹⁴ Furthermore, on-site attorneys increase the likelihood of better interactions with patients, warmer handoffs when needs are identified and increased convenience for patients to access legal assis- tance immediately, if needed.

Broadening Community Partners

With experience meeting the legal needs of individual patients, hospitals have more data that can highlight ways to address systemic changes to advance health equity and reduce poor health outcomes.

Hospitals may consider engaging or consulting legal organizations to take part in developing a community health needs assessment, to help identify interconnec- tions or linkages between health outcomes and legal assistance and potential community-level interventions.

Addressing Stigma

Individuals with social needs can face stigmatization, whether actual or perceived. For example, “benefits stigma” may prevent people from applying for a public benefit. That is, patients may be embarrassed or ashamed about enrolling in a public benefits program, or have negative perceptions or experiences about such [programs](#).

Medical-legal partnerships provide a holistic approach that supports patients and helps them better address their social and legal needs. These partnerships provide an opportunity for health care and legal providers to come together on-site, facilitate sensitive conversations with patients and refer patients to resources as needed. Reportedly, 81% patients who have encountered these



types of services are willing to share legal problems with physicians, and 70% feel empowered to seek help to support their unmet legal needs.¹⁵

Sustaining Efforts to Address Patients’ Social and Legal Needs

The formation of medical-legal partnerships is one approach hospitals and health systems are taking to create a network of legal services to better address the needs of vulnerable populations. Yet sustaining these efforts can be challenging.

Effective strategies that help sustain medical-legal partnerships include:

- Ensuring a legal practitioner is on site.
- Raising clinician and staff awareness of patients’ legal needs.
- Building stronger relationships with community partners.
- Aligning legal care with clinical initiatives on addressing social determinants of health and with the mission of improving health equity.
- Maintaining effective communication between legal services, clinicians, staff and information technology services.¹⁶

Many hospitals and health systems across the U.S. are screening for legal needs, training providers to identify potential resolutions and educating patients on their rights. By identifying unmet social and legal needs of patients and addressing them more holistically, hospitals with medical-legal partnerships are advancing health equity and improving community health and well-being.



Key Resources

- [Medical-Legal Partnership Impact Stories](#)
- [Social Needs Screening Tool Comparison Table](#)

Endnotes

1. Tobin, T. E. (2017). Medical-legal partnership in primary care: Moving upstream in the clinic. *American Journal of Lifestyle Medicine*, 13(3), 282–291. doi.org/10.1177/1559827617698417
2. The Partnerships. (2020). National Center for Medical-Legal Partnership. Retrieved from medical-legalpartnership.org/partnerships/
3. Trott, J., Peterson, A. & Regenstien, M. (2019, April). *Fact sheet: Financing medical-legal partnerships*. National Center for Medical-Legal Partnership. Retrieved from medical-legalpartnership.org/mlp-resources/financing/.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ruble, K. A. *Medical-legal partnerships help families address health outside the exam room*. (2018, September). Institute for Child Success. Retrieved from www.instituteforchildsuccess.org/new-paper-medical-legal-partnerships-help-families-address-health-outside-the-exam-room/.
7. Regenstien, M., Trott, J., Williamson, A. & Theiss, J. (2018, March). Addressing social determinants of health through medical-legal partnerships. *Health Affairs*. doi.org/10.1377/hlthaff.2017.1264
8. Theiss, J., Schrag, J. & Teitelbaum, J. (2019). *A case study of the NYC Health + Hospitals and Legal Health medical-legal partnership*. National Center for Medical-Legal Partnership. Retrieved from medical-legalpartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/A-System-Level-Approach.pdf
9. Martin, J., Martin, A., Schultz, C. & Sandel, M. (2015, April 22). Embedding civil legal aid services in care for high-utilizing patients using medical-legal partnership. *Health Affairs*. Retrieved from www.healthaffairs.org/doi/10.1377/hblog20150422.047143/full/
10. Matthew, D. B. (2017, January). *The law as healer: How paying for medical-legal partnerships saves lives and money*. Center for Health Policy at Brookings. Retrieved from www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/es_20170130_medicallegal.pdf
11. Regenstien, M., Trott, J. & Williamson, A. (2017, August). *The state of the medical-legal partnership field*. National Center for Medical-Legal Partnership. Retrieved from medical-legalpartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/2016-MLP-Survey-Report.pdf
12. Child HeLP (Legal Aid). (2020). Cincinnati Children's. Retrieved from www.cincinnatichildrens.org/service/c/child-help
13. Keene, D. (2018, January 22). *Interdisciplinary program spotlight: Medical-legal partnerships bring health justice*. Interdisciplinary Association for Population Health Science. Retrieved from iaphs.org/achieving-health-justice-medical-legal-partnerships/
14. Impact. (2020). National Center for Medical-Legal Partnership. Retrieved from medical-legalpartnership.org/impact/.
15. Tobin, T. E. (2017). Medical-legal partnership in primary care: Moving upstream in the clinic. *American Journal of Lifestyle Medicine*, 13(3), 282–291. doi.org/10.1177/1559827617698417
16. Ruble, K. A., Mitchell, K. & Sease, K. (2018, September). *Medical-legal partnership interventions and child development: Cross-sector partnerships to address social determinants of health*. Institute for Child Success. Retrieved from www.instituteforchildsuccess.org/publication/medical-legal-partnership