

Integrating Legal Care into Healthcare: Success Stories from WPHCA's Medical-Legal Partnership

Introduction



What is a medical-legal partnership?

A medical-legal partnership (MLP) is a collaboration between a health care organization and a legal aid organization to address health-harming social needs that may have civil legal remedies. Lawyers are partnered with a health care organization so that patients with legal needs can be directly referred through a warm handoff and receive free legal services.

MLPs focus on a variety of legal needs. These may include income and insurance, housing and utilities, legal status and personal safety, or employment.

The Wisconsin Primary Health Care Association (WPHCA) has facilitated an MLP in Wisconsin with three community health centers (*Lakeshore Community Health Care, Noble Community Clinics, and NorthLakes Community Clinic*) and two legal aid organizations (*Legal Action of Wisconsin and Judicare Legal Aid*).

The WPHCA MLP is focused on supporting patients experiencing civil legal needs related to:

-  **Housing** (e.g., eviction and formal notices, housing vouchers, tenants' rights, and/or housing conditions related to safety or repairs)
-  **Benefits denials** (e.g., Medicaid, FoodShare/SNAP, unemployment, or social security)

The Need



Accessing civil legal aid is crucial for low-income households to improve their health.

Research estimates that up to 60% of a person's health is determined by social factors, including: income and health insurance, housing and utilities, education and employment, and personal and family stability, and legal status. These health-related social needs may impact a person's health even more than receiving clinical care.^{1,2}

The 2022 *Justice Gap Report* found that 3 in 4 low-income households experienced at least one civil legal problem in the previous year. 1 in 2 low-income Americans who experienced a problem say these problems substantially impacted their lives, including finances, mental health, physical health and safety, and relationships.³

A 2025 study of found that of 205 emergency room patients, almost all had health-harming legal needs that were unmet. The most common needs reported were financial issues, access to benefits, and insurance coverage, as well as concerns about housing and food insecurity.⁴

References:
1) Bradley, E., & Taylor, L. (2013). *The American health care paradox: Why spending more is getting us less*. Public Affairs.
2) Hood, C. M., Gennuso, K. P., Swain, G. R., & Catlin, B. B. (2016). County health rankings: relationships between determinant factors and health outcomes. *American journal of preventive medicine*, 50(2), 129-135.
3) Legal Services Corporation. 2022. *The Justice Gap: The Unmet Civil Legal Needs of Low-income Americans*. Prepared by Mary C. Slosser, Slosser Research LLC.
4) Ngai, H., Wang, D., Moran, T. P., Gottlieb, S., Priest, C., Smith, R. N., ... & Zeidan, A. (2025). Prevalence of Health Harming Legal Needs of Patients Seeking Care in the Emergency Department. *JACEP Open*, 6(2), 100062.

Success Stories



Unpaid Utility Bills

Luis* faced eviction due to unpaid utility bills. Luis, who was a Spanish speaker, had consistently paid his bills and couldn't understand why he was being threatened with eviction.

The MLP attorney discovered the landlord had made a mistake and was demanding payment for utilities tenants were not responsible for. All communication was in English, so Luis was unable to fully respond.

The attorney successfully had the eviction case dismissed. They also secured an order sealing the court records, protecting Luis from the long-term consequences of an eviction filing.



Avoiding an Eviction Filing

Mary*, a single mother, was facing an eviction from her subsidized housing. The MLP attorney represented Mary in negotiations with her housing provider.

They asserted Mary's federally protected right to an informal meeting before any eviction proceedings could move forward. Despite Mary requesting this meeting on her own, the housing provider had initially refused to comply.

The attorney's intervention compelled the provider to follow federal regulations, resulting in a resolution that avoided an eviction filing.



Securing Insurance Coverage

An MLP attorney assisted David*, a legally present immigrant patient, in navigating the complex process of renewing ACA Marketplace health insurance.

The attorney collaborated with a nonprofit insurance navigator, successfully securing a three-month coverage extension for David.

This ensured continuity of care and prevented potential lapses in essential medical treatment. The case retained access to health care coverage for a member of a vulnerable population.



Eviction Case Dismissed

Jane* was referred to the MLP program after receiving a notice of eviction from her landlord.

Once connected with the MLP, the attorney identified that Jane's landlord failed to wait the **statutorily required notice period** before filing an eviction, which significantly prejudiced Jane's ability to secure alternative housing.

The MLP attorney obtained a **dismissal of the improperly filed eviction**, granting the patient **critical additional time** to relocate safely.

*All names are changed to protect patient confidentiality.

Impact at a Glance

In the first year*...

1980 patients screened
225 positive screenings for legal issues:
195 for housing-related issues
30 for benefits denials

Resulting in...

64 patients referred to legal aid team
29 housing cases opened
12 benefits cases opened

*August 2024 to May 2025

Lessons Learned



Training and continuing education opportunities are important for building CHC staff capacity.

Learning the screening process and tools and understanding potential legal issues all take time. Education was provided to staff through trainings as well as legal "office hours" where lawyers spent time with health center staff members to talk through thorny issues.



Partner organizational capacity can impact the overall project and may require adjustments. Staffing changes and competing organizational priorities impacted CHCs' ability to screen patients, which in turn lowered the number of referrals they sent. In response, legal partners increased outreach and education about the project and updated legal office hours content to support the health centers.

Partners in Success

