



Doctors, lawyers partner in hospitals for patient health

By Adam Jadhav

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Anika Porter was taken aback when her 16-year-old son invited his girlfriend into the house earlier this month to meet the parents before heading out to a dance.

Porter's son, Dannell Wise, was all smiles, sporting slacks, a tie and a vest. Porter just cried.

The teenage ritual — "a little parade" in the living room — would seem commonplace were it not for what Porter considers a family miracle, connected to a partnership that pairs doctors and lawyers together for patient health.

A year ago, Dannell was headed in a completely different direction, busted for stealing from a Shop 'n Save, caught with drugs at school, failing his classes, running away from home and getting into fights. Military and leadership summer camps didn't help.

"It was a dark road," Porter said.

Dannell's situation was complicated by his mental disabilities and his family's meager resources. Porter said the family had neither the money nor the savvy to secure services for him through the school district or the court system.

Navigating the bureaucracy of public assistance programs and fighting for legal entitlements ranging from disability benefits to special education requirements are tough tasks for many people, poor or not. Low-income families are in even more of a bind, social service advocates say, because they often aren't aware of resources and can't afford legal representation.

Dannell's turnaround began when his case was picked up by a pilot program that brings lawyers into hospital settings when a medical diagnosis alone can't solve the problem. The program, the Children's Health Advocacy Project, is expanding now with a \$573,000 grant from the Missouri Foundation for Health.

Dannell began seeing doctors who serve the poor at Grace Hill's Children's Developmental Center. Those physicians ordered medicine and therapy for attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder and paranoid schizophrenia.

But that alone wouldn't solve Dannell's academic and legal troubles. His saving grace: a St. Louis University law professor named Tricia Harrison. As part of the pilot program, Harrison was consulting on cases with doctors at Grace Hill.

Harrison got Dannell allowances from his school district, mandated by law for students with disabilities, and he wasn't kicked out. In addition, Harrison arranged for Dannell to perform community service in place of more serious punishment.

Dannell's story is held out as an example of what is possible by connecting lawyers with doctors, two professions that sometimes have "an inherent distrust" of each other because of medical malpractice law, said Tim Kutz, a doctor at Cardinal Glennon Children's Medical Center who is assisting the program.

The first such effort began in 1993 at Boston Medical Center; more than 80 similar programs have sprung up around the country since, according to the National Center for Medical-Legal Partnership.

Locally, the foundation's grant will fund a new lawyer and paraprofessional to oversee the program at Legal Services of Eastern Missouri, an aid group that provides legal representation to low-income people. In the first year, doctors at Grace Hill and Cardinal Glennon will receive training on situations in which a lawyer can assist. St. Louis Children's Hospital will join the program in the second year.

Legal Services staff, aided by area law students, among others, will also hold clinics on site to provide immediate case review to referred patients.

"There are just some things that we can do that would be enormously helpful to (doctors and patients) if they know that we can help out," said Jesse Goldner, another law professor at St. Louis University who started with the pilot project and aided in the grant application.

Take, for instance, the child with allergies that a doctor can't fix because the cause is mold in an apartment. Or, a teen's poor grades and trouble concentrating might be because of malnutrition after the parent mistakenly was

cut from food stamps. A lawyer could reach out to the landlord or state social services to find a legal solution.

"Being poor is extremely challenging," said Dan Glazier, executive director of Legal Services, which handles thousands of cases for poor people every year. "Most of the poor could never afford a lawyer."

Porter, a fitness trainer, and her husband, a business consultant, are self-employed and their insurance wouldn't cover Dannell's mental health problems, Porter said. His father's coverage got him service at Grace Hill, and Porter could handle the co-pays. But paying for an attorney was simply not an option, Porter said.

For Dannell, even a year ago extracurricular activities and dates were out of the question. His mom feared his occasional attempts to run away. She thought juvenile detention was around the corner.

After treatment and an individualized education plan, Dannell's grades, which were practically zeros, have turned into a near-B average. He's getting off medication and playing football — defensive end — at a new school in University City.

As Dannell and his girlfriend left the house for their dance, Porter was struck by how much things had changed.

"He had the chance to go out with his own money — a date. He can do normal things," Porter said. "In the past, we never would have trusted him to go out alone. I have never met the son that I have now."

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