

P R O F I L E





Helping Clients at the **INTERSECTION** of **Law** and **Medicine**

By Amy Kenn

A Lancaster woman in her mid-50s came into the SouthEast Lancaster Health Services health center suffering from severe asthma. She was living in an apartment, her rent subsidized by a housing voucher, and she thought that heavy smoking in adjacent apartments was triggering her symptoms.

The doctor, concerned that second-hand smoke was exacerbating her condition, told her she should move. The woman was worried about breaking her lease and possibly losing her housing voucher. So the doctor referred her down the hall to a specialist — a legal aid lawyer with an office inside the health center.

Soon a lawyer had negotiated with the woman's landlord and the Lancaster City Housing Authority, allowing the woman to move to a smoke-free residence and keep her voucher.

This collaboration between law and medicine is thanks to the Lancaster Medical Legal Partnership for Families, which brings legal advocacy into the health care

setting with the aim of addressing environmental and social factors that can impact patient health. Launched in January 2008, the program is a joint effort between MidPenn Legal Services, which serves 18 central Pennsylvania counties as part of the statewide Pennsylvania Legal Aid Network, and SouthEast Lancaster Health Services, which provides primary medical and dental care to community members, regardless of their ability to pay, at three locations in the city of Lancaster.

“There's a natural intersection where law and medicine come together,” said James Orgass, managing attorney at MidPenn Legal Services' Lancaster office. “It's a good thing for patients and clients. Whether it's workers' compensation or personal injury or whatever the case may be, there's a lot of medicine in law and vice versa.”

The Lancaster partnership, the first of its kind in Pennsylvania, is modeled after a program started in 1993 by Dr. Barry Zuckerman, chief of pediatrics at the Boston Medical Center. And it's an approach that's spreading. Two years ago there were about 60 such medical-legal



Illustration by Dr. Jack Maypole, director of the Pediatrics-Comprehensive Care Program, Boston Medical Center, and director of pediatrics, South End Community Health Center, Boston

partnerships at hospitals and health centers around the country. Today there are more than 200, including three more Pennsylvania programs in Philadelphia, Chester and McKeesport. The concept has been officially endorsed by the American Bar Association and the American Medical Association.

Lancaster's is one of the few partnerships involving a small community health center rather than an urban teaching hospital. It is also unusual because it is funded entirely by generous local sources.

"It's a credit to our local community that they would embrace this idea and understand it and want to support it," said Orgass.

The nationwide network of partnerships is supported by The National Center

for Medical-Legal Partnership, based in Boston and led by Ellen Lawton, executive director.

According to Lawton, the Lancaster program "set the stage for the medical-legal partnership model" across the state. "The engaged legal and medical leadership at the Lancaster Medical Legal Partnership is a terrific example of what's possible when a community comes together to address the challenges faced by low-income children and families," said Lawton.

PBA Vice President Matt Creme, a Lancaster attorney, is a strong supporter of the project. "The medical-legal partnership connects legal aid with poor families with critical needs that are otherwise not going to be addressed," said Creme. "These poverty-level families are doing all they can to meet the basic health needs of



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themselves and their children. Without this medical-legal partnership, they would never know that a lawyer can help them, let alone do it for free. They not only don't know any lawyers, they often don't know they have a legal problem that an attorney might remedy."



Catherine Schultz,
MidPenn Legal
Services attorney

MidPenn Legal Services attorney Catherine Schultz is the partnership's full-time lawyer, spending most of her time at the health centers. In addition to providing legal services to patients, she trains doctors, nurses and other medical staff on legal issues. Schultz has also partnered with a doctor to develop a standardized domestic violence screening and response protocol and to advocate for an expansion of the city of Lancaster's lead paint ordinance.

The partnership also includes a half-time social worker, and patients may be referred or can self-refer and are required to meet income and immigration guidelines.

According to Dr. Rachel Eash-Scott, medical director of SouthEast Lancaster

Health Services' South Duke Street location, the partnership "has greatly increased the health center's ability to treat the whole patient by providing us with a tool to resolve legal stressors, such as access to health insurance, poor housing conditions, utility shutoffs and domestic violence."

Since it began, the Lancaster partnership has completed 234 cases benefitting approximately 500 Lancaster County residents. About one-third of those cases have been health care related, involving processes such as accessing Medicaid benefits. Other cases have involved housing and utility issues, domestic matters, Social Security disability, employment-related matters, food stamps and other public benefits, and consumer issues. The partnership does not handle criminal cases.

Schultz says that due to a variety of factors more than 50 percent of the patients/clients served by the partnership have never previously accessed legal aid.

"The one place they can all get to is the doctor's office," said Schultz. "That's why it's so great to have this service available there." ♦

Amy Kenn is a senior publications editor for the PBA. For more information on medical-legal partnerships, see the National Center for Medical-Legal Partnership website, www.medical-legalpartnership.org.

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