



THE

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*Combining law
and medicine –*

How Iowa Legal Aid's Health and Law Project is working

ALSO IN THIS ISSUE

- ERISA, part two
- Should blawging or blogging be in your future?
- Sioux City attorney doubles as mom, Army soldier
- Bar Foundation 2007-08 Annual Report

Cooperative venture between medicine and law shows promise of curing the body and mind

When Iowa Legal Aid's Health and Law Project was conceived several years ago, the authors had several goals in mind:

1. Improve the lives of low-income Iowans by addressing the underlying legal problems that are affecting their health status.
2. Establish cooperative working relationships through training and joint intake and case identification between medical personnel and social workers working with health care providers, and lawyers working in Iowa Legal Aid regional offices.
3. Reduce health care costs over the long-term by addressing the underlying legal problems of low-income Iowans that are causing them to seek medical care.

Now, nearly three years into the project, organizers are pleased at how well it is meeting its goals. Statistics presented to The Iowa State Bar Foundation, which has provided some of the funding for the project the last two years, show that during the first six months of 2008, 199 cases were closed through the project. The cases impacted 460 household members — 160 of whom were children.

Twenty nine percent of the closed cases involved family issues; 17% involved housing issues; 15% involved consumer issues; 13% involved income maintenance issues; 8% involved employment issues; 6% involved health issues; 1 % involved individual rights issues; and the remainder of the cases were miscellaneous in nature. Project staff opened 188 cases during that same six-month period.

Financial gain for clients whose cases

were closed was \$61,543.87.

Reducing healthcare costs by addressing underlying legal problems has been one of the more challenging goals to quantify, according to Dennis Groenenboom, Iowa Legal Aid's executive director. Financial support from the Bar Foundation and assistance from the ISBA's Health Law Section have enabled Iowa Legal Aid to work at some solutions.

For example, Iowa Legal Aid Project staff attended a national summit of the Medical Legal Partnerships. During that summit, much time was spent discussing how best to track information as it relates to the reduction of healthcare costs.

The Project Advisory Council was instrumental in assisting project leaders in identifying issues which would help establish cost savings to the community — resulting in a reduction of emergency room treatment for primary care problems. The council also assisted in honing a survey to investigate this premise.

As a result, project staff members have implemented a system as part of their case-closing procedures to help determine how their representation has impacted the health status of clients and to track the monetary reduction of healthcare costs. Project goals have been incorporated into Iowa Legal Aid's case management software and a box is checked by staff to indicate which of the three project goals were met. Iowa Legal Aid also tracks financial gain for any client who was provided assistance.

Another challenge was getting health care centers to refer patients to project

attorneys. Specific measures that have been implemented include a one-page self-referral form that patients can complete and place in a confidential box for follow-up by a project attorney, and legal "prescription" pads placed in all of the health centers participating in the project.

Presently, there are four health centers involved in the project — Council Bluffs Community Health Center, Council Bluffs; Primary Health Care, Des Moines; River Hills Community Health Center, Ottumwa; and Siouxland Community Health Center, Ottumwa.

Key to the success of the project is a medical champion who believes in the value of marrying health and law and the benefit it can have for patients. Dr. Bery Engebretson is the medical champion for the Health and Law Project. He is the part-time medical director at Primary Health Care in Des Moines, and recently accepted a medical director position with the Council Bluffs Community Health Center. Iowa Legal Aid hopes eventually to incorporate the medical champion's work into all project sites.

However, the real value of teaming lawyers with medical professionals is perhaps best illustrated with actual cases. One such case involved an HIV-positive man suffering from schizophrenia who was referred to the Health and Law Project for assistance. He had lived in federally subsidized housing for about four years and received notice that his tenancy was being terminated for criminal activity and a failed inspection.

During investigation it was learned that the criminal activity was a three-year-old simple assault that had been dismissed, and the failed inspection was due to clutter in his apartment. The project attorney obtained copies of his medical records and spoke with his primary physician, nurse and social worker. As it turned out, he was not medication compliant and was not receiving the kind of mental health case management he desperately needed.

The project attorney represented him in district court and was ultimately successful in negotiating a settlement with the housing agency. As a result, he continues to reside in his apartment, is medication compliant and is healthier — both mentally and physically.



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