

## Using Health Center Needs Assessments to Understand and Meet Patients' Health-Harming Civil Legal Needs

### How Civil Legal Needs Affect the Health and Health Care Utilization of Health Centers

Sixty percent of a person's health is determined by social and environmental factors, such as her income, the safety and stability of her housing and neighborhood, and her access to health care—all the things that are affected by where she lives, works, and plays. Often, the services, benefits, and laws in place to help ensure economic stability, healthy housing, and access to health care are wrongfully denied or not enforced. When this happens—when she loses her job because of employment discrimination, when her landlord threatens to evict her from her apartment, or when her health insurance or disability benefits are wrongly denied—she needs a lawyer. These problems are civil legal needs, and left untreated, they have a negative effect on health, which in turn increases health care utilization.

In 2015, HRSA clarified that civil legal aid is an enabling service, paving the way for health centers and primary care associations to weave data about civil legal needs into their needs assessment strategies, and then work with community legal aid agencies through medical-legal partnerships to better meet the identified health-harming civil legal needs of vulnerable patients.

Social Determinants of Health Framework	Common Civil Legal Problem	Impact on Health / Health Care
<b>Economic Stability</b> <i>Food Security &amp; Housing Stability</i>	Families wrongfully denied SNAP or housing subsidies	Increasing someone's income means s/he makes fewer trade-offs between affording food and health care / medications.  Being able to afford enough healthy food helps people manage chronic diseases and helps children grow and develop.
<b>Neighborhood and Built Environment</b> <i>Quality of Housing</i>	Children living in housing with mold or rodents, in violation of housing laws	A stable, decent, affordable home helps a person avoid costly emergency room visits related to homelessness.  Consistent housing, heat and electricity helps people follow their medical treatment plans.
<b>Health and Health Care</b> <i>Insurance &amp; Access to Health Care</i>	Seniors wrongfully denied long-term care coverage	Health insurance increases the likelihood that someone will access primary care, and avoid costly emergency room services.

## How Health Centers Can Use Needs Assessments to Identify and Address Civil Legal Needs

To receive health center funding, health centers must conduct a needs assessment to describe the need for and shortage of health services, and to identify opportunities to meet their patients' needs. Since civil legal aid is now considered an enabling health service, assessing and addressing patients' civil legal needs can be part of a broader strategy to depict and meet the health needs of health center patients.

### GOAL ONE OF THE NEEDS ASSESSMENT: Describe the Need for Health Services / Demonstrate a Shortage

National statistics from the Legal Services Corporation and American Bar Association show that every low-income individual in the United States has two to three civil legal needs, and that 80 percent of those needs go unmet because of a chronic shortage of civil legal aid resources. Health centers are not generally aware of the rate or prevalence of their patients' civil legal needs or how they affect health and well-being. Health centers can take the following steps to better understand and measure these needs in their target service area or population:

1. Review your needs assessment with community legal aid leaders to gauge where and how common indicators like access to health insurance and housing status might be framed or documented as civil legal needs.
2. Invite community legal aid leaders into the needs assessment process so they can share their community level data and build awareness of civil legal needs for the needs assessment team.
3. Identify and highlight key community health needs and priorities that can respond positively and rapidly to civil legal aid interventions.

### GOAL 2 OF THE NEEDS ASSESSMENT: Partner to Meet the Identified Need

After a health center uses its needs assessment to highlight and elevate their patients' specific health-harming civil legal needs, they can form a medical-legal partnership with a local legal aid agency to address them. When setting up a partnership, health centers should take the following steps:

1. Pinpoint the overlap between the community's civil legal needs and the health center's existing priorities to determine the target population and goals of the medical-legal partnership.
2. Work with the local legal aid agency to synchronize the target population with legal aid's capacity and service priorities.
3. Design and deploy the medical-legal partnership to meet health and civil legal needs of the target population.

## IN PRACTICE: Linking Community Health and Legal Data Through Needs Assessments

### HOW IT SHOULD WORK

Last year in Springfield, Illinois, the poorest zip code had 247 pediatric ER asthma visits for every 10,000 individuals under 18; that's 15 times the rate of wealthier kids in the same city.

To address this problem, imagine health center A in Springfield identified sanitary housing as a priority community health need linked to these asthma rates. At the same time, without considering asthma, imagine civil legal aid agency B in Springfield handled a high volume of housing remediation cases, which resulted in a focus on advocacy to improve sanitary conditions in local affordable housing.

Together, health center A and legal aid agency B could create a common goal that advances the health and well-being of this population, such as improving sanitary conditions in 50 percent of available community housing in Springfield.

### WHERE IT'S HAPPENING

In 2015, Hawai'i's Waimānalo Health Center updated its community needs assessment and identified the need for "legal assistance (to ensure access to justice)." That explicit acknowledgement of the need for legal assistance was then woven into Waimanalo's priority to meet the needs of teens in their community.

They then developed a medical-legal partnership with the University of Hawai'i Law School to address the employment and education-related civil legal needs of this target population. Waimanalo successfully sought and received HRSA supplemental enabling services funds to set the stage for a pilot project in 2016.