

A System-Level Approach to Addressing Health-Harming Legal and Social Needs

A Case Study of the NYC Health + Hospitals and LegalHealth Medical-Legal Partnership

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ABOUT THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR MEDICAL-LEGAL PARTNERSHIP

The National Center for Medical-Legal Partnership leads education, research, and technical assistance efforts to help every health organization in the United States leverage legal services as a standard part of the way they respond to social needs. Our mission is to foster a system in which all health organizations can leverage these services. Over the last decade, the National Center's work has helped cultivate programs that do just that at nearly 350 hospitals and health centers across the U.S. Learn more at www.medical-legalpartnership.org.

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America's Essential Hospitals is the leading champion for hospitals and health systems dedicated to high-quality care for all, including the vulnerable. The association supports its over 300 members with advocacy and policy development. In addition, Essential Hospitals Institute — the research, education, dissemination, and leadership development arm of the association — works with members to identify promising practices from the field, conduct research, spread innovative strategies, and help essential hospitals improve organizational performance. Communities depend on essential hospitals to provide specialized, lifesaving services; train the health care workforce; advance public health and health equity; and coordinate care. Essential hospitals innovate and adapt to lead the way to more effective and efficient care. Learn more at www.essentialhospitals.org.

COVER PHOTO:

Atrium of Bellevue Hospital

Credit: NYC Health + Hospitals/Bellevue

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INTRODUCTION

Social, environmental, and economic factors play an outsized role in the health of individuals and whole communities. Housing inadequacies, immigration concerns, food insecurity, public benefit needs, and family law matters often negatively affect health, and call for the involvement of lawyers who can work collaboratively with health care clinicians and population health experts to create solutions at both the individual and population levels.

The medical-legal partnership (MLP) approach seeks to embed patient-facing lawyers as part of the standard of health care to ensure that these factors are efficiently addressed. The largest medical-legal partnership in the country — between NYC Health + Hospitals (NYC Health + Hospitals) and the LegalHealth division of the New York Legal Assistance Group (LegalHealth) — embodies the importance of linking patients to crucial legal services in order to improve health and well-being by recognizing that good legal “care” is consistent with their mission. The medical-legal partnership serves as an example to other public or non-profit hospital systems that may be interested in incorporating legal services into a holistic strategy to address the health-harming social and other non-medical factors that affect their patients.

This case study is an outgrowth of a January 2018 webinar¹ and a September 2018 site visit, both of which delved into the inner-workings of the NYC Health + Hospitals-LegalHealth partnership for the purpose of understanding (1) how the use of patient-facing legal services fits into NYC Health + Hospitals leadership’s overall mission and (2) how LegalHealth structures a variety of legal clinics across the NYC Health + Hospitals system to meet the legal needs of many different types of marginalized patients.

In September 2018, the authors conducted a series of interviews with NYC Health + Hospitals and LegalHealth leadership and staff at each organization’s headquarters in New York City (for a list of all interviewees, see the inside cover). Additionally, they visited LegalHealth clinics at two acute care hospitals: NYC Health + Hospitals/Metropolitan, located in the East Harlem neighborhood of Manhattan, and NYC Health + Hospitals/Bellevue, located on the East Side of Manhattan. During these visits, to better understand the workflow and operations of the LegalHealth clinics, the authors met with staff attorneys during clinic hours, interviewed NYC Health + Hospitals/Metropolitan’s Director of Social Work and NYC Health + Hospitals/Bellevue’s Chief Executive Officer, and spoke with clinicians and social workers who refer patients to LegalHealth attorneys.

Overview of Medical-Legal Partnership, NYC Health + Hospitals, and LegalHealth

Medical-Legal Partnership

Medical-legal partnership, which integrates legal services providers into health care teams, is specifically designed to address what today are commonly known as social determinants of health. Simply put, social determinants of health are conditions in the environments in which people are born, live, learn, work, play, worship, and age that affect a wide range of health, functioning, and quality-of-life outcomes and risks. And while “social determinants of health” is an accepted term, it is a catch-all phrase that sweeps in many health-harming needs that typically find their recourse in administrative or poverty law. For example, clinicians, health care staff, social workers, and attorneys who collectively make up MLPs are typically assisting patients with needs related to Medicaid and Social Security Income disputes, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits, evictions and housing court, utility shut-offs, employment disputes, and immigration status challenges, all of which can negatively affect mental, emotional, and/or physical health.² Furthermore, while these health-harming legal needs are rarely visible to the naked eye, they are alarmingly common: According to a recent study by the Legal Services Corporation, 71 percent of low-income households experienced at least one civil legal problem in 2017, including problems with health care, housing conditions, disability access, veterans’ benefits, and domestic violence.³

There are currently nearly 350 hospitals and health centers in 46 states that formally operate an MLP.⁴ It is a highly flexible intervention that can be adapted to meet the needs of different patient groups, health conditions, and settings. While medical-legal partnerships are adaptable and customizable, these partnerships typically have eight core elements in common.⁵

Most partnerships include:

1. A formal written agreement that describes the goals and services of the partnership as well as the respective responsibilities of each organization involved;
2. A defined focus on low-income and otherwise marginalized populations;
3. A “legal needs” screening strategy;
4. Clearly defined staffing arrangements;
5. Predetermined levels of on-site legal services;
6. Strategies for training clinicians, health care staff, and social work staff on the myriad ways in which legal needs affect health and well-being;
7. Information sharing between health care and legal staff; and
8. Funding expressly devoted to the partnership.

NYC Health + Hospitals

NYC Health + Hospitals is the largest municipal hospital system in the United States and provides services to more than one million people per year. With over 70 care locations, the scope of NYC Health + Hospitals’ facilities and services includes 11 acute care hospitals, five post-acute/long-term care facilities, a network of Federal Qualified Health Centers, a certified home health agency, and a health plan, as well as providing Correctional Health Services for the city’s 12 jails. The hospital system, in particular, boasts top-ranked trauma care, numerous inpatient specialties, and mental health services, as well as having earned many special quality designations such as LGBTQ Healthcare Equity Leader, Baby Friendly, and Safe Sleep certification.

Furthermore, the system is a community pillar with a deep-rooted history across New York City. For example, NYC Health + Hospitals/Bellevue is the oldest continuously-operating hospital in the country, first opening its doors to patients in 1736.⁶ As such an established organization, NYC Health + Hospitals is often viewed as “the” place of care for the vast and diverse communities across New York City’s five boroughs. As a public safety net organization, NYC Health + Hospitals provides care for all, regardless of ability to pay. As a result, the system provides care to many uninsured and publicly insured patients. In 2016, for example, 85 percent of NYC Health + Hospitals discharges were covered by a government payer (e.g., Medicare or Medicaid).⁷

LegalHealth

LegalHealth is the legal partner to NYC Health + Hospitals. It is a division of the New York Legal Assistance Group (NYLAG), a nonprofit law firm that partners with over 600 health and human services agencies across New York City to combat social and economic injustice for low-income, medically underserved, and other vulnerable New Yorkers. Now in its 18th year of existence, LegalHealth provides advice to and direct representation of patients through onsite free legal clinics, while also training health care professionals to recognize legal issues that may negatively affect patients and their medical outcomes. LegalHealth Associate Director Julie Brandfield noted, “We started with one legal clinic and with very little funding. We built LegalHealth on the successful outcomes to patients and hospitals through the years, and now we have over 35 legal clinic sites across the city. There are many creative ways to launch an MLP at a hospital of any size.”

In 2018, LegalHealth handled over 9,800 new matters for 7,200 patients referred by physicians, social workers, and community health workers at hospital systems across New York City,

including NYC Health + Hospitals, the Mount Sinai Health System, Maimonides Medical Center, New York-Presbyterian, NYU, Montefiore Medical Center, and community-based health organizations (CBOs) including CancerCare and MJHS Hospice and Palliative Care.

In addition to its bread-and-butter on-site MLP work, such as advising and representing clients with legal matters, LegalHealth has launched a series of condition- and population-specific initiatives with this network of health care organizations. These include:

- The National Cancer Legal Services Network, which supports the provision of legal services for people with cancer throughout the country;
- The LegalHealth Veterans and Immigration Projects;
- Establishment of the New York State Coalition of Medical-Legal Partnerships; and
- The LegalHealth Technical Assistance Center.

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All told, one funder’s metrics quantified the value from LegalHealth’s assistance at approximately \$11.6 million.⁸ Beyond this quantifiable financial benefit are other benefits that stem from LegalHealth services: benefits to health care providers in the form of job satisfaction; benefits to hospitals in the form of mission fulfillment and meeting utilization metrics; benefits to patients in the form of supporting access to essential health care coverage; and non-financial benefits to clients in the form of reduced stress and improved health outcomes and quality of life.

ALL TOLD, ONE FUNDER’S METRICS QUANTIFIED THE VALUE FROM LEGALHEALTH’S ASSISTANCE AT APPROXIMATELY \$11.6 MILLION.

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NYC Health + Hospitals' Use of Patient-Facing Legal Services to Improve Population Health

LegalHealth Sites and Staffing Within the NYC Health + Hospitals System

Given the complex needs of its patient populations, NYC Health + Hospitals focuses on treating the whole patient, which includes both medical and non-medical needs. As part of its mission, the system routinely screens patients for social needs which may impact health outcomes and implements various hospital-led programs to address community needs (such as violence and housing insecurity), and it created a Chief Office of Population Health position in early 2018.

NYC Health + Hospitals' partnership with LegalHealth bolsters this population health mission by creating new pathways to address the social determinants of health. LegalHealth operates legal

clinics in 15 NYC Health + Hospitals facilities, with some facilities offering more than one legal clinic. Most of the clinics are open one day per week and are staffed by one LegalHealth attorney. At the clinic, the attorney conducts appointments with patients who have been referred by clinicians and other healthcare providers at the hospital. Across most of the participating NYC Health + Hospitals facilities, the MLP referral process is integrated into the hospital system so that clinicians and social workers can refer patients to LegalHealth telephonically, often through the hospital's Social Work Department. In addition, NYC Health + Hospitals is working toward incorporating the legal clinic referrals into hospital electronic appointment systems, making the process even easier for clinicians and social workers. In this way, a referral to legal services is analogous to referral to other specialty services, and

NYC HEALTH + HOSPITALS/METROPOLITAN

NYC Health + Hospitals/Metropolitan, a general hospital located in East Harlem, was founded in 1875. LegalHealth has been operating legal clinics there since 2014. Legal clinics take place on Thursday afternoons, and appointments are coordinated through the Department of Social Work. Perhaps as a side effect of this collaborative relationship, social workers often act as liaisons between the LegalHealth attorney and their patients' clinicians. Richard Siegel, Metropolitan's Director of Social Work, described social workers as the "arms and legs" that ensure that a clinician completes paperwork that is required for a patient's legal matter to proceed. When attorneys work with social workers to resolve a patient's legal issues, there is a built-in sense of trust because patients already know their social worker and feel comfortable talking to them about problems, a familiarity that might not exist with a legal aid attorney outside the NYC Health + Hospitals system. As LegalHealth attorney Lia Minkoff put it, by working in partnership with social workers, patients feel "comfortable" and "safe" confiding in their attorney.

NYC HEALTH + HOSPITALS/BELLEVUE

In 2009, LegalHealth and Bellevue's Cancer Center teamed up to offer legal services to patients. The legal clinic takes place on Friday afternoons, and patients often meet with the LegalHealth attorney in an examination room. LegalHealth attorney Domna Antoniadis stressed the importance for cancer patients of knowing that their preferences pertaining to end-of-life care and medical decision-making are proactively resolved, and in a way that satisfies state law requirements. Ms. Antoniadis stated that, because cancer patients are often more involved with their care team than other patients given the severity and complexities of a cancer diagnosis, she is able to coordinate with clinicians to receive medical documents necessary to advocate for patients, and to provide advice about legal issues — such as one's immigration status — that may affect their receipt of care. Dr. Susan Cohen, who heads a palliative care clinic within Bellevue's Cancer Clinic, refers patients to the LegalHealth attorney a couple times a month, and noted that palliative care is naturally suited to a medical-legal partnership because clinicians must focus on the whole patient in order to provide them with high quality care.

FOR EACH LEGALHEALTH CLINIC SITE, NYC HEALTH + HOSPITALS PROVIDES FUNDING FOR APPROXIMATELY 60 PERCENT OF LEGALHEALTH'S COSTS,

with remaining operating costs covered by foundation funding and in-kind support from NYLAG.

part of NYC Health + Hospitals' "philosophical change around the social determinants of health." Chief Officer of Population Health, Dr. Dave Chokshi, acknowledged these improvements, saying, "we think of [legal help] as a service in the same way that we think about other specialty services."

At some legal clinics, LegalHealth attorneys will see patients without an appointment or who self-refer, otherwise known as "walk-in" patients. For example, the LegalHealth clinics at NYC Health + Hospitals/Elmhurst, NYC Health + Hospitals/Lincoln, and NYC Health + Hospitals/Gouverneur which focus on patients with immigration issues, will accept referrals from hospital staff and through a city hotline, as well as meet with patients who self-refer.

LegalHealth attorneys conduct initial meetings in examination rooms, community rooms, or conference rooms, depending on the availability of a confidential location. At NYC Health + Hospitals/Bellevue, patients can meet with LegalHealth attorneys at the newly-designed Patient Resource Center, which is centrally located and thus easy to find in the very large hospital. Patient meetings that take place in exam rooms, however, also emphasize the very real connection between legal and health issues, both for patients who meet with their attorneys there and the clinicians who make the initial referrals.

In addition to staffing the clinics, LegalHealth attorneys work on patient matters from their offices in downtown Manhattan, and often travel around the city to represent patients in court or at administrative hearings, or to meet with patients in other contexts. Because NYC Health + Hospitals facilities are located all over New York City and using public transportation can be expensive or difficult for patients, LegalHealth attorneys also follow up with patients at the hospital during non-clinic hours. LegalHealth meets people where they are, a feature that is especially important for admitted patients, such as those in Bellevue's palliative care clinic, who likely would not otherwise be able to see an attorney at all.

Financing LegalHealth Services Across the NYC Health + Hospitals System

The contractual and financial agreements behind the various LegalHealth partnerships vary slightly by hospital system, driven in part by how long LegalHealth has been providing legal services to a particular partner. That said, within the NYC Health + Hospitals system, for each LegalHealth clinic site, NYC Health + Hospitals provides funding for approximately 60 percent of LegalHealth's costs, with remaining operating costs covered by foundation funding and in-kind support from NYLAG. Note that LegalHealth's immigration-focused legal clinics at various NYC Health + Hospitals locations, including Bellevue, are covered through separate funding from the NYC Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs and the New York City Council.

In 2017, LegalHealth and OneCity Health — a NYC Health + Hospitals-led Performing Provider System under New York State's Section 1115 Medicaid Waiver for the Delivery System Reform Incentive Payment (DSRIP) program⁹ — entered into an additional contract for the purpose of providing social determinant of health trainings through the legal lens and formulating a new curriculum for use across the NYC Health + Hospitals system. This contract also created mechanisms for data sharing and reporting across LegalHealth clinics.

Types of Legal Work Performed Across the NYC Health + Hospitals System and Benefits to Patients

Hospital staff who interact with LegalHealth lawyers readily shared examples of the ways in which legal interventions resulted in positive health outcomes for their patients. For example, social workers and physicians recalled how collaboration with LegalHealth lawyers enabled patients to have a better understanding of their legal issues and how those may affect their health or health care.

The most common legal issues facing NYC Health + Hospitals patients that interact with LegalHealth lawyers involve immigration, public benefits, and housing. Indeed, during interviews with most of the professionals associated with the NYC Health + Hospitals-LegalHealth partnership, interviewees described an important immigration status issue — called PRUCOL for short — which is a court-created New York State Medicaid eligibility category for undocumented immigrants who are “Permanently Residing Under Color of Law”. For seriously ill patients, the effect of PRUCOL eligibility cannot be understated. For example, securing Medicaid benefits can enable patients with congestive heart failure to receive a heart transplant, or patients with cancer to enroll in a clinical trial. Furthermore, LegalHealth has assisted patients who are candidates for kidney transplants with the often-complicated process of achieving PRUCOL status. NYC Health + Hospitals/Metropolitan social worker Priscilla Santiago, who has been instrumental in gathering the letters to demonstrate medical necessity for transplant-eligible patients, said it was “thrilling” to learn of patients who received kidney transplants as the result of legal interventions.

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Many NYC Health + Hospitals patients are eligible for public benefits or programs but do not know it or elect not to apply for benefits out of fear of revealing their immigration status. Legal-

Health attorneys counsel and advise patients about the risks and the benefits of immigration remedies available to them, such as the risks associated with applying for citizenship or obtaining various types of visas (e.g., the U-visa, for victims of crimes or asylum). These are complicated matters involving in-depth analysis of family, criminal, and immigration history, as well as analysis of conditions in a patient’s home country.

Beyond immigration matters, LegalHealth attorneys also frequently work with patients on overcoming reductions or denials of cash and food assistance. They also assist with a variety of housing issues, including eviction prevention so that patients maintain affordable housing, negotiating for or going to court for housing repairs so patients have habitable housing, and shelter advocacy so homeless patients with health issues can be discharged appropriately. Finally, NYC Health + Hospitals staff and LegalHealth attorneys also work with patients who have legal issues related to interpersonal violence, child custody, education, employment, and end-of-life issues, such as wills and advance directives. Providing legal services on these matters can provide patients with peace of mind.

Needless to say, LegalHealth attorneys cannot remedy every legal/social factor that negatively influences the health of all NYC Health + Hospitals patients. For example, many interviewees mentioned a growing crisis pertaining to affordable housing in New York City and increasing fear in immigrant communities that directly flow from policy changes occurring at the federal level. However, LegalHealth works closely with healthcare partners to keep them updated and informed regarding issues like the housing crisis and immigration policy so that patients understand what their options are in these difficult times.

LIFE-SAVING INTERVENTION FOR AN UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRANT

Although NYC Health + Hospitals does not perform transplant surgeries within its system, it does provide kidney dialysis treatment to patients who may be good candidates for a kidney transplant. Ibrahima Sylla* had been receiving kidney dialysis for ten years but was unable to receive a kidney transplant because of his immigration status. By working with LegalHealth’s attorney Norma Tinubu and the staff of NYC Health + Hospital/Metropolitan, Mr. Sylla was able to become eligible for New York State Medicaid as someone who is PRUCOL. Mr. Sylla subsequently underwent kidney transplant surgery at a private hospital.

RESOLVING HOUSING ISSUES TO PREVENT EVICTION

Home health care coordinators at NYC Health + Hospitals work with patients who are disabled, elderly, or otherwise in need of additional assistance to facilitate their care. When NYC Health + Hospitals/Woodhull patient Jesennia Rodríguez’s* landlord threatened to evict her for failure to pay rent, her home health care coordinator reached out to LegalHealth attorney Ira Needleman to see if he could help. After consulting with Ms. Rodríguez, Mr. Needleman determined that the rental charges were improper, and he challenged the landlord on the propriety of the charges. After two legal conferences, the landlord withdrew the claim and did not proceed with attempts to evict Ms. Rodríguez. Because maintaining stable housing is crucial for individuals who are also facing multiple health conditions, providing legal services on housing is a significant element of LegalHealth’s work.

*These patients consented to share their case examples in this report.

Lessons Learned for Essential Hospitals Interested in Promoting Legal Services as a Tool to Promote Population Health

The partnership between NYC Health + Hospitals and LegalHealth serves as an example for other essential hospitals that may be interested in integrating legal services to promote population health. Many lessons—both sound practices and challenges—can be learned from the NYC Health + Hospitals experience, particularly as they relate to leadership buy-in, culture change, training, staffing, data reporting, and financial return on investment.

01.

Secure Support from the Executive Level

An integral piece to the success of the NYC Health + Hospitals-LegalHealth partnership is the buy-in and support from NYC Health + Hospitals executives. Randy Retkin, Director and Founder of LegalHealth, said, “In running LegalHealth over the past 18 years, it has become clear to me that in order to be successful, an MLP needs to be part of the fabric and culture of a health care institution and have buy-in from leadership on all levels. We have worked hard to achieve that at each of our NYC Health + Hospital sites, and are excited that Dr. Mitchell Katz, the President and CEO of NYC Health + Hospitals, is supportive of our work.”

This commitment not only sustains the working relationship between the two organizations, but also influences C-suite executives to individually support the MLP clinics in their respective hospitals. For example, William Hicks, CEO of NYC Health + Hospitals/Bellevue, commented, “Our President and CEO, Dr. Mitchell Katz, has this incredibly fresh look at the way we do our work.” Mr. Hicks went on to describe the sense of empowerment he feels the system now has in creating cost-efficient means to treating the whole patient, adding, “We have to break the common misconceptions about how we approach providing care and you have to think differently.”

02.

Train All Partners...in Both Directions

Integrating patient-supporting legal services into health care organizations and teams can be a difficult culture change for many clinicians. Hospital staff may not understand how to refer patients to legal clinics, what types of issues the attorneys can (and should) handle, or even that there is a legal clinic within their own hospital. In addition, high turnover among staff often

prevents the dissemination of existing knowledge. As a result, NYC Health + Hospitals, in collaboration with LegalHealth and staff attorneys, publicizes the LegalHealth clinics to hospital staff and trains all staff about the services that are offered and the referral process. In addition to training for hospital staff, LegalHealth has worked in conjunction with NYC Health + Hospitals Office of Population Health to provide training to community partners. This training is particularly valuable in that it helps generate referrals to the LegalHealth clinics, while also publicizing the MLP approach and the importance of legal services to address the social determinants of health. LegalHealth attorneys have trained approximately 350 community providers and 830 hospital staff over 18 months with favorable feedback.

At the same time, because NYC Health + Hospitals and LegalHealth are in a partnership, training must flow in both directions. If an attorney does not have a basic understanding of a patient’s medical condition, he/she may not understand the speed with which legal issues must be addressed. Thus, some training is required. LegalHealth attorney, Domna Antoniadis, said, “[you have to] understand some of the medical conditions that [clinicians] will be seeing so [they] know how to prevent problems down the line and be proactive.” Additionally, just as hospital staff must be trained to understand the types of issues that attorneys can handle, MLP attorneys must be trained to understand the types of documentation that clinicians are able to provide to support a patient’s legal claim. For example, an attorney may inquire into whether a clinician sees a direct connection between a legal issue and the worsening of a patient’s health condition and is comfortable writing a note to that effect. Further, because hospital staff are generally working under severe time constraints, attorneys must be respectful of how much time their document requests may take, and how much medical information is actually needed in order to facilitate remediation of a legal matter. One of the first goals of the MLP, therefore, must be to establish open communications and means of collaboration so that the health care and legal staff can work together, rather than in silos. The two-way communication must include consideration of confidentiality, with regard to sharing information about patients’ medical and legal concerns.

03.

Co-Locate Legal Services in a Place Where They Will Be Highly Visible

In addition to training, NYC Health + Hospitals learned that strategic co-location and visibility of the legal clinics themselves had an important impact on the inevitable culture shift of integrating patient-focused legal services within a hospital system. Kalpana Bhandarkar, Head of Social Determinants for the NYC Health + Hospitals Office of Population Health, said, “Sometimes the workflow in the clinic is very specific, where the patient goes through the course of their visit and then leaves. If the attorney is not visible, compounded with people not thinking about them as part of the clinic visit, the referral or handoff may get missed. It takes some time, but having a champion, along with the attorney’s visibility, makes a big difference, at least in the beginning because you want the service to be top of mind.”

04.

Ensure an Equal Partnership Where Everyone is Committed to the Same Mission

Mr. Hicks commented on the enthusiasm he hears from providers across NYC Health + Hospital/Bellevue’s legal clinics, including statements like, “They’re part of the team. They’re just like us!” That is to say, clinicians, social workers, and frontline staff perceive the attorneys as equal members of the care team. NYC Health + Hospitals leadership also emphasized the importance of ensuring that the attorneys who staff the legal clinics support NYC Health + Hospitals’ mission. Dr. Susan Cohen, head of the palliative care unit in Bellevue’s Cancer Clinic, said that those who are committed to the mission and “driven by the safety-net” will

“roll up their sleeves” and excel. This team cohesion resonates with patients, as well; they develop trusting relationships with MLP attorneys like they do with other providers, because patients recognize that the care team itself views lawyers as being an integral part of that team. This also helps to contextualize that their visit to the MLP clinic is to promote health, as opposed to some other context.

05.

Make the Business Case for Medical-Legal Partnership

Ultimately, both leadership buy-in and shifts in culture can be sustained by the financial return on investment provided by MLPs. As a safety net provider, NYC Health + Hospitals understands the importance of implementing innovative programs that have a concrete business case, and the partnership with LegalHealth has withstood that test for many years. NYC Health + Hospitals President and CEO Mitchell Katz said, “We’ve been uniformly pleased with [LegalHealth’s] work, even on a financial basis, because even if you can help a relatively small number [of patients] succeed, the ... economics are very favorable.”

Regular data reporting and analysis between the MLP clinics and NYC Health + Hospitals’ Office of Population Health has contributed to effective operations and articulating this business case. For example, if there has been a downturn in referrals at one hospital, the Office of Population Health and LegalHealth will provide a targeted training with that facility to ensure that referrals continue as needed. Similarly, if LegalHealth attorneys notice a specific issue (e.g., several patients are being referred for problems that are outside LegalHealth’s purview), they can refresh the hospital staff on the types of issues for which a referral is appropriate.

In addition, the partnership routinely analyzes referral data—particularly as more trainings occur and more hospital staff become aware of the services—to consider whether adding additional clinic days and hours is merited. For example, NYC Health + Hospitals and LegalHealth, with support from the NYC Mayor’s Office of Immigrant Affairs, added nine new clinic locations to answer the increased demand for immigration legal services.

Conclusion

NYC Health + Hospitals makes clear how a mission-driven public health system is able to further its mission to provide high quality, equitable care to all by utilizing a medical-legal partnership approach to care. From the highest levels of system leadership, to hospital administrators, to front-line staff, NYC Health + Hospitals employees view LegalHealth lawyers as an integral part of caring for patients. In turn, LegalHealth lawyers lean on and learn from hospital staff in order to help individuals and families with unmet legal and social needs that contribute to poor health. This multi-faceted medical-legal partnership not only addresses downstream legal issues plaguing individuals, but integrates yet another valuable service into the upstream and holistic care that patients receive at NYC Health + Hospitals. It truly serves as a model for other essential hospitals and systems that aim to combat some of their patients' most pressing, and seemingly intractable, health problems.

ENDNOTES

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MISSION

Recognizing the enormous potential for legal services to help health care providers respond to the social needs and deficiencies they see every day in their clinics, the National Center for Medical-Legal Partnership's mission is to foster a system in which all health organizations can leverage these services. Over the last decade, the National Center's work has helped cultivate programs that do just that at nearly 350 hospitals and health centers across the U.S.

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