



MEDICAL-LEGAL PARTNERSHIPS FOR VETERANS:

ASSISTING VETERANS AND SERVICE MEMBERS WITH LEGAL NEEDS DURING VA TRANSITIONS

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ABOUT

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The VA has an array of programs to address the most pressing social needs of Veterans, including innovative and evidence-backed social work practice models.¹ The VA's Transition and Care Management Program (TCM) puts highly skilled social workers, nurse care coordinators, and case managers at the helm of facilitating health care transitions to the VA for Veterans and ill or injured active duty military personnel.² Given that many Veterans and service members who are transitioning back into civilian life often endure complex physical and mental health issues, these transitions often uncover access issues and social needs, some of which are legal in nature. For example, Veterans may face legal barriers with obtaining discharge upgrades or resolving child support disputes. Veterans and service members experiencing these legal challenges would benefit from an integrated medical-legal partnership (MLP), where they can receive legal assistance from a civil legal aid attorney, on-site at VA facilities. This document describes the need for legal services among Veterans and concrete ways that a TCM partner can connect Veterans to legal assistance.



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AT THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

A QUICK INTRODUCTION TO THE TRANSITION CARE MANAGEMENT PROGRAM AND MEDICAL-LEGAL PARTNERSHIPS

Facts About the Transition Care Management Program



The VA's Transition and Care Management Program teams are located at every VA Medical Center (see the [VA's TCM Program locator](#)).³



Case managers on these teams are typically nurses and social workers who coordinate patient care services for post-9/11 Veterans and service members including primary care, social work, rehabilitation, and behavioral health.⁴



Veterans who receive transition and care management support may present with complex physical, social, and mental health needs and can experience difficulties with accessing the services within the VA system on their own. Some of these difficulties are legal in nature, like unresolved child support or discharge upgrades.



During case management appointments, social workers can administer screening tools, like this [intake form](#) used by the Bay Pines VA Healthcare System, to refer Veterans to on-site MLP attorneys.

What are Medical-Legal Partnerships?



Medical-legal partnerships (MLPs) embed legal professionals into the health care setting to address unmet civil legal needs that can impact Veterans' health and well-being.

VA-based MLPs draw on lawyers from local civil legal aid organizations, law schools, and pro bono partnerships in the community to help Veterans with problems such as gaining access to VA benefits through discharge upgrades, resolving landlord and tenant issues to prevent evictions, and assisting with family matters like child support payment issues. MLP attorneys also consult with VA clinicians and social workers and provide training to health care staff on how to identify social needs with legal underpinnings.⁵

WHY SHOULD TRANSITION CARE MANAGEMENT

PROGRAMS PARTNER WITH MEDICAL-LEGAL PARTNERSHIPS?

1

Legal needs are prevalent among Veterans and can impact health and wellbeing.

2

MLPs have demonstrated that they can improve the mental health outcomes of Veterans and help them secure housing and stabilize their income.

3

Veterans receiving VA transition and navigation support from social workers may particularly benefit from legal help as they enter the VA system and civilian life, and attempt to access new services and benefits.

4

Social workers, care coordinators, and case managers are on the front lines of identifying a Veteran's unmet social needs and can act as a liaison for MLP lawyers in establishing relationships with new Veteran clients and VA clinicians alike.

5

MLP lawyers can provide consultation and training to social workers and clinicians on how to identify common legal needs amongst patients, that may be impacting their overall health, like impending evictions, family issues, or the denial of VA healthcare benefits.

6

The co-location of lawyers within in the VA health care setting creates greater awareness of the availability of legal assistance for Veterans.

7

Dedicated lawyers who serve Veterans receiving assistance through the TCM program may enable better care coordination and outcomes.

What the Research Says About Veterans' Legal Needs

- In 2018, five of the top ten needs reported by Veterans in VA's annual Community Homelessness Assessment, Local Education and Networking Groups (CHALENG) survey required legal assistance.
- A recent study found that Veterans who reported legal problems had 1.9 times greater odds of having suicidal ideation and 1.6 times greater odds of suicide attempt, than Veterans who were not experiencing legal issues.⁶
- Research demonstrates that when integrated with health care teams, legal services can improve health and social outcomes in Veterans.⁷
- In examining the outcomes of Veterans who accessed legal services through MLPs at four VA facilities, a recent study found that Veterans who received legal help from the MLP were able to secure stable housing and income and showed significant improvements in their mental health.⁸

HOW CAN TRANSITION CARE MANAGEMENT PROGRAMS

CONNECT VETERANS TO LEGAL ASSISTANCE?

01

Determine whether your facility has a VA-based MLP or legal clinic that you can partner with. A list of MLP and legal clinics located at VA facilities can be found [here](#).

02

If your facility does not have a VA-based MLP, reach out to local civil legal aid organizations or law schools for potential partnerships, or contact the VA Office of General Counsel for guidance. For specific guidance on how to start a VA-based medical-legal partnership, see the National Center for Medical-Legal Partnership's [VA MLP Readiness Guide](#).

03

Meet with a legal services partner to identify problems facing your TCM Veteran population that a lawyer can assist with. The I-HELP framework (see Table 1 on page 5) provides some examples of how legal services can benefit Veterans.

04

Screen Veterans for unmet legal needs and refer them to MLP lawyers and/or provide them with other community resources that can address a Veteran's unmet legal needs (see potential legal issues to screen for in the I-HELP framework on page 4, as well as the [Bay Pines VA Healthcare System Intake Form](#)).

05

Strategically collaborate with a legal services provider to align goals, establish a relationship, and engage in trainings to strengthen VA health care teams' ability to identify unmet legal needs and successfully connect Veterans with civil legal assistance (see the Bay Pines case study on pages 6-8).

KEY RESOURCES

1. VA Medical-Legal Partnership Readiness Guide: Building and Strengthening Medical-Legal Partnerships for Veterans. Washington, DC: National Center for Medical-Legal Partnership; June 2019.
2. Medical-Legal Partnerships Serving Veterans: History, Growth & Progress. Washington, DC: National Center for Medical-Legal Partnership; May 2019.
3. Free Legal Clinics and Medical-Legal Partnerships in VA Facilities. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs; Updated March 2020.
4. Using Medical-Legal Partnership to Reduce Barriers to Veteran Health and Wellbeing. New York, NY: Bob Woodruff Foundation.

TABLE 1. HOW LEGAL SERVICES HELP ADDRESS THE SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH OF VETERANS

This chart is modified and reprinted with permission from the messaging guide, *Framing Legal Care as Health Care*.⁹

Common Social Determinant of Health	How Legal Services Can Help Veterans	Impact of Legal Services on Health / Health Care
<p>INCOME Resources to meet daily basic needs</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appeal benefits denials (e.g. food stamps, social security, and disability benefits) • Address consumer issues (debt, bankruptcy, student loans, credit history) • Resolve overpayment of benefits 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Increasing a Veteran’s income means they make fewer trade-offs between affording basic needs, such as food or housing, and health care, including medications. 2. Financial stability ensures that Veterans have a place to live and can focus on their health.
<p>HOUSING & UTILITIES A healthy physical environment</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secure housing subsidies • Improve substandard conditions • Prevent evictions or foreclosures • Protect against utility shut-off 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A stable, decent, affordable home helps Veterans avoid costly emergency room visits related to homelessness. 2. Consistent housing, heat and electricity help Veterans follow their medical treatment plans.
<p>EDUCATION & EMPLOYMENT Quality educational and job opportunities</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prevent and remedy employment discrimination • Enforce workplace rights • Secure service-connected education benefits • Secure unemployment compensation or unpaid wages 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A quality education is one of the greatest predictors of a person’s adult health. 2. Consistent employment helps provide money for food and safe housing, which also helps avoid costly emergency health care services.
<p>LEGAL STATUS Access to jobs and VA benefits</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secure discharge status upgrades and record corrections for eligible Veterans • Secure VA benefits for eligible Veterans • Secure proper identification • Clear problems with driving records 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Helping a Veteran change their discharge status or correct their records helps make access to VA benefits possible, including health care. 2. Securing proper identification and records is essential to helping Veterans secure stable employment.
<p>PERSONAL & FAMILY STABILITY Safe homes and social support</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Address family issues (e.g. divorce, child custody, guardianship, and visitation) • Help modify child support agreements to be consistent with income and resources • Assist with advance planning (e.g. wills and power of attorney) 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Stable family relationships significantly reduce stress and allow for better decision-making, including decisions related to health care. 2. A modified child support agreement stabilizes a Veteran’s income and prevents arrests from unpaid child support, which reduces criminal convictions, incarcerations, and criminal records.

BAY PINES VA HEALTHCARE SYSTEM & BAY AREA LEGAL SERVICES

“Legal Outreach for Veterans through VA Social Work and the Transition and Care Management Program”

In February 2017, Bay Pines VA Healthcare System (Bay Pines VA)¹⁰ launched a medical-legal partnership (MLP) in collaboration with Bay Area Legal Services (Bay Area Legal)¹¹ and Stetson University College of Law’s Veteran Law Institute.¹² Lisa Brody, the managing attorney for Bay Pines VA MLP, says that “perfect timing” and a common mission to better serve vulnerable Veterans, including those at risk of homelessness, worked in favor of the creation of the partnership. A thorough, strategic planning process and a decision to house the MLP within Bay Pines VA’s social work department—specifically with its Transition and Care Management Program (TCM)—was key to the success of what is now a thriving MLP.

In laying the foundation for the launch of their MLP, staff at Bay Area Legal and Stetson worked with the social work team at Bay Pines VA to identify potential in-house resources to support the MLP, analyze the number of Veterans in their service area who could potentially benefit from legal help, and to use data sources like the [CHALLENGE survey](#) to determine the most frequent unmet legal needs of Veterans experiencing and at-risk of homelessness.¹³ Monthly meetings between the Bay Pines VA social work team and the managing attorney of Bay Area Legal turned into daily collaboration to build out the key components of the MLP. Together, they worked to identify a target Veteran population for MLP services, determine the point-of-entry for the MLP, and ultimately to form a Memorandum of Understanding between the legal partners and VA.

The VA social work team was identified early on as a key strategic partner and ‘broker’ for the MLP. Their position on the ‘front lines’ of Veteran care, ability to facilitate key relationships within the VA, and role in identifying and supporting the social needs of Veterans made them critical to the successful implementation of on-site legal services at Bay Pines VA. In particular, TCM social workers became pivotal partners, as they often work with Veterans who are new to navigating the VA system and may have

a variety of needs in terms of accessing VA services and benefits, many of which are legal in nature. Examples of legal problems include a Veteran with undiagnosed PTSD and a “bad paper” discharge who is blocked from accessing VA benefits, or a situation in which inability to pay child support cascades into failure to pay rent and a subsequent eviction. Former Section Chief of Seamless Transition at Bay Pines, Meghan Booth, LCSW explains:

“You’re trained to look at those things. We do psychosocial assessments based on those things...You look at social determinants of health. You imagine a lot of the Veterans we may interact with, who do have financial struggles, and do have legal needs that aren’t necessarily criminal.”

In order to increase the capacity of Bay Pines VA health care staff to identify a variety of pressing legal needs among their Veterans, Bay Area Legal provided trainings to the social work team and other health care providers. Objectives of their training (the slides for which can be found [here](#)) include understanding the legal issues that

RESOURCES

1. Bay Pines VA Healthcare System’s [Facebook Page](#)
2. Bay Pines VA Healthcare System’s [Twitter Page](#)
3. Bay Pines VA Healthcare System and Bay Area Legal Services’ [MOU Signing Video](#)
4. Bay Pines MLP [Veterans Legal Prescreen Form](#)
5. Bay Pines MLP [Training Powerpoint](#)
6. Bay Pines [MLP Community-Based Outreach Clinic Flyer](#)
7. Bay Pines [MLP Quarterly Outreach Flyer](#)
8. Bay Pines [2019 MLP Snapshot](#) from Bay Area Legal Services’ Annual Report

low-income Veterans face in the community, how the MLP can help these Veterans, and the process for referral to the MLP.

MLPs that are just getting off the ground can face initial hurdles integrating into a VA health care facility. Attorneys staffing the MLP originate from organizations in the community and often exert substantial effort at the outset both in navigating a new, complex organization and in forging strong connections with a myriad of unfamiliar health care staff. Since social workers are tasked with connecting Veterans to social, physical, and mental health services they are particularly well suited to act as ‘brokers’ to the various providers on a Veteran’s care team. According to Meghan Booth, social work was the ideal department for acclimating a new MLP to Bay Pines VA and for fostering a strong and lasting partnership:

“I think as social workers, we are trained to advocate, broker, and collaborate no matter what. We functioned as that broker to the other stakeholders. We are able to then get that buy-in...We used ourselves as a kind of connections builder, so the doctors could look at things differently. We had doctors calling, making referrals, and sending people over. We allowed the social workers, frankly, to continue working as social workers.”

The MLP at Bay Pines VA is physically co-located with the social work department—right across from the Starbucks, a central location at the facility and a popular spot for Veterans. The shared location is not only convenient for Veterans—many of whom access the MLP on a walk-in basis—it also allows for social workers and attorneys to better coordinate care and services. Lisa Brody, Managing Attorney at Bay Area Legal, explains:

“As the social workers try holistically to help these Veterans either get back on their feet or alleviate some of the obvious stressors that some of them are having, that’s how a lot of legal needs come up...There is a direct tie with social work. Our attorneys will often go back and forth with the social workers, in terms of cases, in order to address some of the issues that they are having.”

Since its implementation, the MLP at Bay Pines VA continues to seek out ways to improve the services that they provide to their Veterans. The MLP tracks encounters on a monthly basis and produces an annual snapshot of the top legal needs for their Veteran clients (see Table 2, “Number of Bay Pines VA MLP Clients Served” and Graph 1, “Areas of the Law in which Veterans Received Assistance” on page 8), allowing for MLP staff to better understand the scope of their client’s needs.

With the help of a Public Affairs Officer, Bay Pines VA also implemented an expansive marketing strategy for its MLP. Informational flyers and pamphlets, an active online and social media presence on their [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) accounts, and several outreach events, such as town halls were leveraged to generate awareness about the availability of legal services. In-house, the team hands out flyers advertising the MLP to every Patient Aligned Care Team (PACT) social worker and other departments within the VA, for display in their offices and waiting rooms. Bay Pines VA also participates in periodic ‘media blitzes’, where Veterans receive texts reminding them of the numerous services available to them at Bay Pines VA, including MLP services. The MLP also hosts quarterly events that are targeted to Veterans and their families and focus on specific legal topics. Marketing efforts have meant new engagement from potential and current Veteran clients, and has helped to grow the Bay Pines VA MLP. In 2019, the MLP saw its highest number of clients to date, with 755 Veterans assisted.

Funding from the Florida Bar Foundation allowed Bay Area Legal to expand its VA MLP and legal clinic efforts to two additional counties (Manatee and Sarasota), outside of Bay Pines VA’s main location, where outreach clinics are hosted twice a month. These two sites were able to serve 182 Veterans in 2019, who otherwise may have not had access to legal services. Bay Area Legal is also on the VA Community Volunteer Engagement Board for Bay Pines VA, allowing Bay Area Legal to have monthly representation at meetings where staff can present the MLP’s “snapshot” data and provide updates to VA administration and board members. Continuous collaboration across all stakeholders engaged with the MLP has enabled Bay Pines VA to successfully address the legal needs of its most vulnerable Veterans.

TABLE 2. NUMBER OF BAY PINES VA MLP CLIENTS SERVED

January 1, 2019 - December 31, 2019

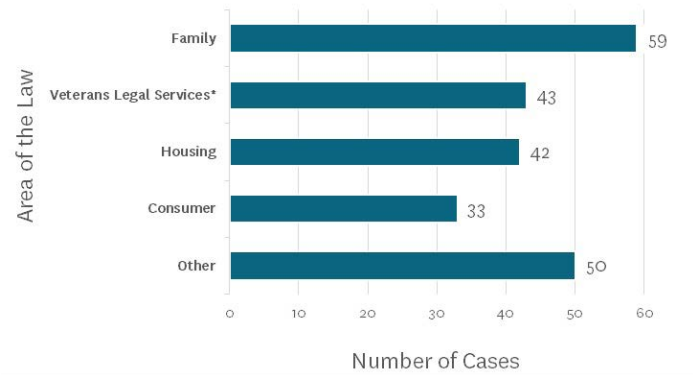
Veterans Assisted at Bay Pines MLP*	
LEGAL INFORMATION / REFERRAL*	528
ACCEPTED CASES^	227
TOTAL CASES (YTD)	755

***Legal Information/Referral:** In many situations, VA-based MLP attorneys are able to assist Veterans by listening to their issues and guiding them with information or a referral that they need to address those issues.

^**Accepted Cases:** In some cases, Veterans require representation by an MLP attorney to address their legal problem(s), either through counsel and advice, or limited action.

GRAPH 1. AREAS OF THE LAW IN WHICH VETERANS RECEIVED ASSISTANCE

Accepted Cases^ at Bay Pines VA MLP, 2019



***Veterans Legal Services:** Refers to a Veteran who was assisted with a legal issue regarding obtaining access to Veterans Benefits (e.g. disability, pension) and/or a Discharge Upgrade.

TAKEAWAYS

01

Strategic planning is essential to starting your VA-based MLP off on the right foot. The partners involved in forming the Bay Pines VA MLP drew on research, input from key staff, and ongoing communication efforts to inform their work and to ensure that the MLP would provide the right legal services at the right time and place to their Veterans.

02

Social workers can serve as valuable partners for VA-based MLPs. Social workers are trained in identifying and coordinating Veterans' unmet social needs and have valuable relationships with both Veterans and staff throughout the VA facility, making them an ideal partner in establishing and supporting a VA-based MLP. Transition and Care Management Program social workers in particular are well positioned to work alongside attorneys to reach Veterans who may face legal barriers to care and services while navigating the VA system.

03

A strategic internal and external marketing plan is key to growing an MLP program's client base. Materials for both Veteran and health care audiences were provided in a variety of mediums, from flyers on the walls of social work offices to text messaging campaigns and Facebook marketing. Outreach events and training sessions also help to maintain and increase awareness about the availability of legal services at Bay Pines.

Endnotes

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4. [Patient Care Services](#). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.
5. Regenstein M, Trott J, Williamson A, Theiss J. [Addressing Social Determinants of Health Through Medical-Legal Partnerships](#). Health Affairs (Millwood). 2018 March; 37(3): 378-385.
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12. Bay Area Legal Services. Tampa, FL. <https://bals.org>.
13. Veterans Law Institute. Stetson University. Gulfport, FL. <https://www.stetson.edu/law/veterans>.
14. [VA Medical-Legal Partnership Readiness Guide: Building and Strengthening Medical-Legal Partnerships for Veterans](#). Washington, DC: National Center for Medical-Legal Partnership, George Washington University Milken Institute School of Public Health. June 2019