



10 Ways Physicians Can Champion Medical-Legal Partnership Services for Patients

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Medical-legal partnership (MLP) is a proven intervention that embeds access to legal expertise and services within the healthcare system. If you're a physician who wants to ensure patients have access to this vital social health resource, here are 10 ways you can help establish, grow, and sustain MLP activities at your institution. Pick a couple and get started.

01

Conduct outreach to other physicians and serve as an MLP resource

Promote MLP to your colleagues to increase overall physician engagement (e.g., participate in relevant training, make referrals) in your Medical Office Building (MOB) by explaining the importance of MLP, how it is beneficial to patients, how it helps physicians and other care team members work at top of license, and how to make referrals. Serve as a designated point of contact for questions regarding MLP content or operations, especially from other physicians. This requires you to be knowledgeable about the evidence surrounding MLP in order to effectively discuss the merits of this program with others.

02

Optimize MLP referral process in care delivery

Use your intricate knowledge of patient and clinician workflows to design and ultimately implement the MLP referral process within the patient encounter. Seek feedback from your clinical colleagues on what would be the most efficient and least intrusive method of embedding referrals. This may include the creation of order sets within the electronic medical record (EMR) and new workflows that link patients with the appropriate referral personnel and resources. Serve as a critical link between physicians and the rest of the MLP team to prevent members from working in silos in order to conduct more efficient referrals.

03

Offer subject matter expertise to MLP program evaluation

Work as a subject matter expert and liaison to the MLP evaluation team members to inform them about outcomes of interest and metrics that matter as well as to help the evaluation team interpret data. Just as critically, communicate these outcomes back to members of the MLP team to sustain engagement and inform quality improvement plans. Use the data collected to inform system changes at the MOB. For example, use data to improve patient documentation processes to facilitate access to utility protections.

04

Ensure rapid quality improvement

Since implementation of the MLP referral system within the clinic workflow is likely to encounter unexpected barriers and challenges, as interest and opportunities

arise, you could conduct Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycles to test changes in the referral process as it is being rolled out at your MOB(s). Perform timely escalation of any concerns related to MLP referrals when those concerns fall outside of their scope.

05

Build program sustainability by baking MLP into clinical infrastructure and workflows

Lead the integration of MLP processes into the existing clinical infrastructure and workflows to build program sustainability. This can include establishing newly recurring training and team building opportunities, such as MLP Office Hours, as well as integrating MLP into already-existing team meetings. It also includes spreading enthusiasm and inspiring clinic staff about the importance of this work in order to ensure its longevity, even when staff (including physician champions) turn over.



Remember: this is human work! We all want patients to receive better care than they are currently receiving, which is why we do this work. Focus on the human relationships; this is the best way to get connected. Be creative and persistent in how you make this relevant to people's lives.

- Dr. Dan Slowey, Kaiser Permanente Northwest MLP physician champion



06

Educate staff, legal partners, and residents

Physicians are essential messengers for MLP training activities and are crucial bridge-builders with a range of target audiences, including nursing, case management, social work, and other allied health professions. Since physicians are frequently the team “quarterback,” they are often best positioned to coordinate across professions for training purposes. If you work with residents, involve them in the MLP referral process since they will be the ones with the most face-to-face patient contact.

07

Identify and support systems-level change

Medical-legal partnership teams are ideally situated to identify patterns in patients’ housing needs and work to address them at a systems-level. *Internally*, within the healthcare organization, this means identifying and implementing ways to make screening and addressing housing insecurity more effective. *Externally*, at a community level, this means advocating for policies that improve housing quality, affordability, and sustainability, such as requiring asthma-friendly housing as part of the city’s housing code. Physicians can advance this patients-to-policy approach by unpacking the key elements and players necessary in enacting systems change both internally and externally, using patient data to identify areas for improvement, and advocating for better policies.

Benefits for Physicians

Championing medical-legal partnership not only helps ensure that patients have access to a concrete and vital housing resource, it provides physicians with opportunities to:



Lead social health research activities and publish across a range of journals and outlets



Engage in advocacy activities, from offering legislative testimony to drafting op-eds



Serve as a lead stakeholder in important government and community engagement activities related to social health



Celebrate successes early. In order to build momentum and increase physician buy-in, it is critical to convey early success stories back to the primary physician and MLP team. Showing physicians how the MLP program helped their patient will get you noticed as a physician champion and increase word-of-mouth regarding the MLP program.

- Dr. Robert Pettignano, Medical Director
Health Law Partnership (HeLP), Atlanta, Georgia



08

Communicate the importance of MLP to key healthcare organization leaders

It is essential for organizational leadership at multiple levels to understand the importance of MLP for patients. Convey not only how this program helps the patient population you serve, but also how it ties into the healthcare organization's mission, vision, and values.

09

Create a patient advisory group

Since this work is ultimately for the benefit of the patient and community, it is important to uplift and center their voices throughout this process. One way to do this is to create a patient advisory group to obtain their vital input on how best to implement the MLP program in a culturally-relevant and respectful way within the community. Within the patient advisory group, it may also be helpful to designate a patient champion to improve community engagement in this process.

10

Network

Leverage your network to connect the MLP team with people they may not normally interact with, such as physicians at other organizations and national MLP leaders, to drive continuous engagement and improvement.