

Reducing the Justice Gap and Improving Health through Medical-Legal Partnerships



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Background

- 71% of low-income US households experienced at least one civil legal problem in the last year and 86% of legal needs reported by low-income Americans received inadequate or no legal help (Legal Services Corporation, 2017).
- The “justice gap,” the disparity between civil legal needs and resources available to meet those needs, is directly related to critical social determinants of health including education, housing, and benefits.
- The Medical-Legal Partnership model may uniquely address barriers to legal access that contribute to this justice gap.

Objective

This qualitative study draws on interview data to identify barriers to legal access and examine how the MLP model uniquely addresses those barriers.

Method

- We conducted semi-structured interviews with 20 parents and guardians (see table 1) who had received services from one pediatric MLP located within the children’s hospital at an academic medical center in New Haven, CT.
- Our interview guide asked about experiences with the MLP, child and parent health, provider relationships, and prior experience with the legal system.
- Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.
- Analysis followed an iterative and inductive coding approach
- A final codebook was applied to all transcripts using Dedoose software.

Table 1: Participant Characteristics (N=20)

Presenting Issue		Time Since MLP Interaction	
Housing	30%	Average	27 mos
Utilities	15%	Shortest	1 month
Education	35%	Longest	64 mos
Guardianship	5%		
Benefits (SSI, SNAP)	15%		
Ethnicity		Language	
Black	70%	English	90%
Hispanic	25%	Spanish	10%
Other/Refused	5%		
Guardian type		Female	100%
Parent	90%		
Grandparent	10%	Average Age	40 yrs

Results*

Our interviews suggest that the pediatric MLP addressed multiple barriers to attainment of legal advice and/or representation, including:

1. Identifying legal needs and creating awareness of legal rights

Several participants were unaware that their problems had legal remedies prior to engagement with the MLP. By enhancing awareness of legal rights among medical staff, the MLP was able to identify and serve patients who otherwise would not have sought legal services.

- Sara, who was facing an impending eviction, noted: *“I didn’t know my options before [the MLP lawyer] got involved....after that, I knew.”*
- Nia was also unaware that she had legal recourse to resolve her impending eviction. The MLP informed her of her legal rights and helped her stay in her home. She explained, *“If, God forbid, it happens again...I know my rights and I know what I’m entitled to.”*

“I know my rights and I know what I’m entitled to.” -Nia

2. Providing an easy access point to legal assistance and services that were often difficult to locate, navigate and obtain.

Some participants were too overwhelmed by the challenges they were facing to reach out for legal help. The MLP brought services to them.

- Tiana explained, *“It’s like, trying to do it on your own, you don’t know which way to go. You don’t know where to start.”*
- Jessie explained. *“Sometimes my mind closes, I have a lot going on. My brain closes and then I feel like I’m alone. Then I forgot that I could reach out and talk to this person.”*

3. Facilitating early access for future needs through ongoing relationships.

The MLP created ongoing relationships between lawyers and participants. Some participants described regular contact with the lawyer similar to the contact they had with the pediatrician.

- Sylvia had regular contact with the MLP and over many years had multiple issues addressed. She noted *“I’ve been six years with [the MLP lawyer] and I still call her sometimes...If I’m at the hospital I’ll stop and see her, she see the kids...”*

“I’ve been six years with [the MLP lawyer]” -Sylvia

4. Improving trust and confidence in the legal system.

Experiences with MLP served to counter negative beliefs about the legal system and gave participants confidence that this system could work on their behalf.

- Nia explained, *“with legal services in general I feel that now that I have an understanding I wouldn’t feel like it’s an enemy. I feel like more it’s more of a resource.”*

Results (continued)

Several participants were often reluctant to share information about their challenges. The MLP helped them feel more comfortable asking for help.

- Sara explained, *“I was really worried that the doctors might call [child protective services]...[the lawyer] was like, ‘No that is not going to happen.’ She reassured me a lot. That’s why I’m more comfortable now to ask for help.”*

5. Addressing affordability concerns

By providing no-cost services, the MLP also addressed affordability concerns that prevented many participants from considering the possibility of legal interventions.

- Tiana explained, *“Most of the parents don’t have the finances to afford a lawyer. And to have someone that’s able to help you and you don’t have to worry about the cost, it’s [the MLP] a blessing. Because that’s what stops most of us from reaching out to get legal help.”*
- Sequoia noted that the MLP offered frequent reassurance regarding cost. *“And she always reassured me that these services were free through the health care. ‘Cause that was one of my biggest fears.”*

“She always reassured me that these services were free...’cause that was one of my biggest fears” -Sequoia

*We use pseudonyms for participants

Discussion

- Our study extends conversations about the justice gap that have primarily focused on interventions within the courthouse. Many of these traditional justice gap initiatives are unable to address barriers that exist before the courthouse door including lack of awareness of legal rights and trust in the legal system. MLP is one intervention with potential to overcome these challenges.
- Our findings can also inform MLP best practices: they highlight the importance of on-going relationships that result from locating a full-time lawyer within a clinic setting.
- Our study is based on only one MLP and some findings may not be transferable to other MLP settings. Additional qualitative work at additional MLP sites is needed to deepen our understanding of how the MLP model may address the justice gap.
- Despite this limitation our study provides novel insight into the ways that MLPs can uniquely address barriers to legal services and ultimately improve critical social determinants of health.