

# Doctors and Lawyers Team Up to Serve Low-Income Patients

by Deirdre Norman

When a child living in poverty goes to a doctor repeatedly for issues relating to asthma, the doctor may be able to treat the medical condition. But if the child then goes home to an apartment infested with mold and cockroaches, medical care alone won't solve the problem. A letter from a lawyer to a landlord is often far more effective than a similar letter from a physician or social worker. That's why doctors, nurses, and social workers are collaborating with lawyers to improve health outcomes for low-income patients by addressing the social causes of poor health that are rooted in legal problems.

Medical-legal partnerships (MLPs) embed lawyers in the clinical setting to work alongside members of the healthcare team to detect, address, and prevent conditions that harm the health of patients. In Virginia and 40 other states, these teams are addressing complex social factors such as unlawful evictions, poor housing conditions, improper insurance and public benefit denials, employment discrimination, and denial of education rights. With more than 300 partnerships across the country, and a growing number of federal funding mechanisms that recognize the value of legal involvement, MLPs represent a burgeoning field dedicated to improving access to healthcare and the overall health of our communities.

VCU Health System, the largest safety net provider in Virginia, recently hired attorney Allison Held from the State Corporation Commission to develop the business plan and formal infrastructure for MLP Richmond.

"Patients with the greatest social needs often have the least access to the legal services necessary to improve health conditions," Held says. "We are taking comprehensive care for our patients to the next level by reshaping the way we address social and legal problems that too often contribute to bad medical outcomes. Offering legal services at the clinic where patients can now see a lawyer when they come to see their doctor is a game changer."

Held is confident that MLPs are a winner for all parties. Adding a lawyer to a clinical team can save the physician time and make the process more effective, since attorney arguments carry more weight when they include a medical opinion — which is more easily obtained when the lawyer is stationed in the clinic with the doctor. Held and her team were recently awarded two competitive grants. The Richmond Memorial Health Foundation's grant will support the launch of onsite legal services at the Children's Hospital of Richmond at VCU (CHoR), and a United Way THRIVE grant awarded to CancerLINC will support onsite legal services at VCU Massey Cancer Center. Sara Blose, senior attorney at Central Virginia Legal Aid Society, will serve as the MLP attorney at CHoR. Mary Weiser, client services attorney for CancerLINC, will assume the MLP attorney role at Massey.

Civil legal aid organizations are natural partners for MLPs. Their legal aid lawyers are poverty law generalists, and have experience and expertise in meeting the legal needs of the most vulnerable populations. In addition, a growing number of law firms and pro bono lawyers are partnering with hospitals and health centers to represent low-income patients to supplement the work legal aid lawyers do. "We will need the support of law firms and the private bar to sustain and expand our legal services to patients across the VCU Health System footprint," Held says. "We are currently only serving a small percentage



Allison Held, Esq., Mary Weiser, Esq., Sean McKenna, M.D., Mary Helen Hackney, M.D., and Sara Blose, Esq., in the newly-built Children's Hospital of Richmond at VCU.

of patients with unmet legal needs at the hospital.”

According to Crista Gantz, director of access to justice at the Virginia State Bar and former staff attorney at CancerLINC, “One of the biggest obstacles for poor people is transportation. Medicaid can get them to the hospital for medical treatment, and if we can have a lawyer there to help with legal issues, then we remove that travel barrier to justice.”

According to the National Center for Medical Legal Partnership, studies show that when legal problems are addressed with MLPs:

- People are admitted to the hospital less.
- Patients take medications as prescribed more often.
- People report less stress.
- Less money is spent on health services, because patients report to the hospital less often.

- Clinical services are better reimbursed by public and private payers.

Held says that VCU Health System patients have access to legal services in the areas of housing, public benefits, employment, insurance, family law, guardianship, education, and estate planning under the MLP Richmond program. “In addition to direct representation, lawyers and health-care professionals work together to identify vulnerable patients who have unmet civil legal needs that negatively impact their ability to live healthy lives. We will be training clinicians and other health workers to recognize these ‘health-harming civil legal needs’ and do something to help.”

For more information about MLPs and how you can help, please contact Crista Gantz at [cgantz@vsb.org](mailto:cgantz@vsb.org) or (804) 775-0522.