

## Medical Legal Partnerships: Helping those with Substance Use Disorders

### Importance of Social Determinants of Health

Research shows that 60 percent of a person's health is determined by social factors. Social determinates of health "are the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work, and age that shape health." A variety of factors influence social determinates of health, including a person's socioeconomic status, education, neighborhood and physical environment, employment, and social support networks. All these factors affect a person's physical and mental wellbeing and can impact the way a person responds to treatment. When social determinates of health are addressed in conjunction with physical and mental health, it helps to improve a person's overall health and reduce health disparities.

### Medical Legal Partnerships

Medical legal partnerships (MLPs) integrate lawyers into the health care setting to assist physicians, case managers, and social workers in addressing the factors that influence a patient's social determinates of health and reducing the health inequities of the community. Many illnesses are affected by social and legal problems, and MLPs allow health problems to be addressed through a multidisciplinary approach to achieve better and more effective health care.

For example, an insulin-dependent diabetic may require refrigeration for his or her insulin; if he or she is unable to pay his or her electric bills, the electricity could get shut off leaving the person unable to properly store his or her medication. While health care professionals can treat diseases with medication and/or other forms of treatment, some patients' illnesses will be "retriggered" once they leave the health care setting and return to their home environments. MLPs help to bridge this gap by addressing issues such as health insurance access, wrongful benefits determinations, utility shut off, landlord/housing disputes, immigration and naturalization concerns, and family law issues. By addressing these issues, patients can remove those areas of stress from their lives and focus on treatment and recovery.



A total of 333 health entities, including hospitals and health systems, children's hospitals, Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA)-funded health centers, and Veterans Affairs medical centers, have developed MLPs in 46 states. The top five states with the most MLPs are California (48 MLPs), New York (39 MLPs), Ohio (20 MLPs), Illinois (20 MLPs), and Pennsylvania (15 MLPs). When legal services are combined with medical care to address the social needs of patients, studies show that patients: (1) are admitted to the hospital less frequently; (2) are more likely to take their medications as prescribed; (3) report lower levels of stress and experience improvements in mental health; and (4) spend less money on health care services because they are going to the hospital less and investing more in preventative care. Additionally, with MLPs, clinical services are more frequently reimbursed by public or private payers due to MLPs' assistance with health insurance access.



In addition to assisting patients with their social needs, MLPs can advocate for policy changes within their communities. Through their practice with individual patients, MLP lawyers may identify trends and systemic problems. MLP attorneys can advocate for increased funding for social programs, make recommendations to establish better systems, and create training and educational programs for health care staff on how to spot critical issues.

### **Medical Legal Partnerships and Substance Use Disorder**

Treatment of substance use disorder (SUD) requires a holistic, multi-pronged approach in order to help people enter and stay in recovery. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) identifies four crucial areas for managing life in recovery:

- Health - overcoming and managing one's disease(s) or symptoms.
- Home - having a stable and safe place to live.
- Purpose - conducting meaningful daily activities, including having a job, going to school, volunteering, family caretaking, and having the independence, income, and resources to participate in society.
- Community - having relationships and social networks that provide support, friendship, love, and hope.

The areas that allow a person to succeed in recovery are referred to collectively as "recovery capital." The lower an individual's recovery capital, the more recovery support services they will need to succeed in treatment. MLPs can be an important tool for those in recovery by allowing them to address potential barriers. MLPs have only recently been integrated into treatment facilities and other settings focused on SUD. As of September 2017, only four MLPs in

the United States specifically focused on assisting those with SUD. These programs are the Helping Opiate-addicted Pregnant women Evolve (HOPE) Program at Good Samaritan Hospital Faculty Medical Center in Cincinnati, Ohio (established in December 2017), the Eskenazi Health Midtown Community Mental Health MLP in Indianapolis, Indiana (established in 2010 and began accepting referrals for patients with SUD in 2014), the Counseling Center MLP in Portsmouth, Ohio (established in 2016), and the Northern Nevada Hopes MLP in Reno, Nevada (established in May 2017). The number of MLPs focused on SUD populations will likely increase, however, as more grants, such as SAMHSA grants, are made available to support partnerships and programs that help to address the social determinants of health related to mental health and SUDs.

Legal issues connected to SAMHSA's four areas crucial to supporting recovery may be the issues that are hardest for individuals with SUD to overcome. As health insurance access, employment, housing, and utilities, are common problems addressed in traditional MLP settings, working with SUD populations is an area ripe for MLP growth. High stress associated with issues such as threatened eviction or custody disputes can lead to relapse; MLPs are in the position to assist people with these stressors and thus, allow more focus on recovery. Incorporating legal services into a health care environment should increase the chance that those with SUD will receive assistance with their legal problems. Because individuals with SUD have a high rate of involvement with the criminal justice system, many have a distrust of the legal system. Having a trusted health care provider refer the individual to legal services partnered with the provider can help to establish trust between the individual and the lawyer.

## Resources

1. *National Center for Medical Legal Partnership*, <https://medical-legalpartnership.org/>, last accessed December 24, 2019. [hereinafter NCMLP].
2. Samantha Artiga and Elizabeth Hinton, "Beyond health care: The role of social determinates in promoting health and health equity," *Kaiser Family Foundation*, May 10, 2018, <https://www.kff.org/disparities-policy/issue-brief/beyond-health-care-the-role-of-social-determinants-in-promoting-health-and-health-equity/>.
3. Heather A. McCabe and Eleanor D Kinney, "Medical legal partnerships: A key strategy for addressing social determinants of health," *Journal of General Internal Medicine* 25 (2010): S200, accessed December 20, 2019, [https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2847113/pdf/11606\\_2010\\_Article\\_1298.pdf](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2847113/pdf/11606_2010_Article_1298.pdf).
4. "Voices from the Field," *Philadelphia Health Partnership*, April 2018, <https://philahealthpartnership.org/strategic-initiative/advancing-health-equity-medical-legal-partnerships>.
5. Jay Chaudhary, Kate Marple, and Jillian Bajema, "The opioid crisis in America and the role medical-legal partnership can play in recovery," *National Center for Medical Legal Partnership* (March 2018): 2.

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