

HEALTH & CIVIL LEGAL AID

In one study, veterans receiving medical-legal partnership services saw significant improvements in housing, income, and mental health.

Interested in learning more about civil legal aid?

Contact the NC Interest on Lawyers' Trust Account program:

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The need

60% of a person's health is determined by social factors. Factors that impact health include income and health insurance, housing and utilities, education and employment, legal status, and personal and family stability. (The American Health Care Paradox by Elizabeth Bradley and Lauren Taylor, 2015.) For patients living in poverty, the negative social, environmental, and economic circumstances of their lives can cause illness or injury, make existing conditions worse, and make treatment less effective.

The response

Medical-legal partnerships embed lawyers into the health care system as a part of the team of professionals seeking to improve an individual's health and well-being. Clinical staff in health care settings refer patients directly to lawyers to address complex problems that may have a legal remedy. Medical-legal partnerships can achieve outcomes like the following:

- Help a patient escape an abusive relationship.
- Stop an unlawful eviction and prevent homelessness.
- Improve substandard housing conditions by ensuring repairs are made to the home.
- Obtain Medicaid, disability, or other benefits after wrongful denial.
- Ensure children receive special education services to which they are entitled.

Researchers recently published findings from a two-year study of services provided to veterans through medical-legal partnerships established in four locations in Connecticut and New York. Following veterans for one year, researchers identified significant improvements in housing, income, and mental health. (Partnerships Between Health Care and Legal Providers in the Veterans Health Administration, Psychiatry Services, 2017.)

Spotlight

Charlotte Center for Legal Advocacy, Legal Aid of North Carolina, and Pisgah Legal Services partner with more than 15 health care providers at health centers across the state.

One such collaborative, Carolinas Medical-Legal Partnership (CMLP) is an effort in the Charlotte area to connect eligible patients with legal aid providers who can assist them in navigating civil legal aid issues. Charlotte Center for Legal Advocacy and Legal Aid of North Carolina both participate. Last year, CMLP accepted 86 referrals. Of these referrals, 33% involved benefits, 21% involved wills/powers of attorney, 20% involved immigration, and 17% involved housing, including eviction and foreclosure.



DEBBIE'S STORY

Debbie* was in the middle of chemotherapy treatment for brain cancer when she learned her Medicaid coverage and Food and Nutrition Services had been terminated. A clinical supervisor and social worker with Levine Cancer Institute referred Debbie to Charlotte Center for Legal Advocacy (CCLA) in January. CCLA successfully appealed the Medicaid termination and obtained retroactive Medicaid coverage for Debbie to cover \$245,000 in medical expenses. CCLA challenged the termination of food assistance, obtaining over \$1,500 in benefits and a \$230 per month prospective increase. In February, Debbie stopped treatment and was transferred to hospice. CCLA obtained services from a pro bono attorney to prepare a will and other estate documents for Debbie and her husband. Following Debbie's death, lawyers continued to work with Debbie's husband to address his ongoing legal needs with Social Security. The hard work and collaboration between Debbie's social worker and lawyers from the Medical-Legal Partnership brought valuable peace of mind to a family going through the difficult task of facing end-of-life care.

*Name changed to protect client's privacy.