

The MedLaw Partnership of WNY: When Legal Problems are Health Problems

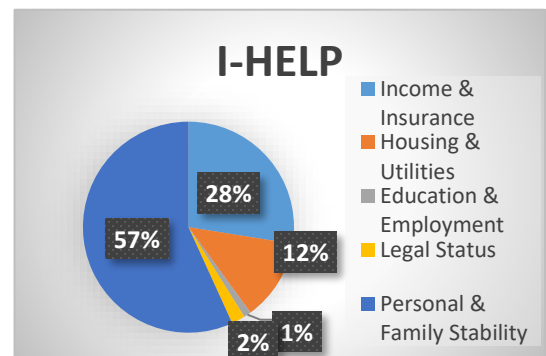
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The medical-legal partnership (MLP) model was formed in 1993 by doctors serving low-income patients at Boston Medical Center; today there are 450 health organizations with a MLP.¹ Individual and community health is not just dependent on biology and behavior, but also on socio-economic factors, such as income, education, employment, community safety, and social supports. These factors affect our ability to make healthy choices, afford medical care and housing, manage stress, and determine how well and how long we live.² A MLP is an interdisciplinary team made up of healthcare and legal professionals who work together to address these social determinants of health impacting patients.

In 2017, the Erie County Medical Center (ECMC), a safety net hospital, formed a MLP with the Center for Elder Law & Justice to help close the gap in health disparities for their patients. The MedLaw Partnership of WNY addresses health-harming civil legal issues facing patients by embedding legal professionals as part of the patient care team. Since its inception at ECMC, MedLaw has handled 1,546 matters, including full representation in 907 legal matters and limited consultations in an additional 639 matters. The patients we have helped through this partnership include older adults (age 60+), the homeless or unstably housed, immigrants, and veterans. The clients self-identified as being one or more of the following: disabled (64%), frail (48%), low-income less than 150% of the poverty guideline (63%), and/or 200% or below poverty (69%).

In line with the National Center for Medical-Legal Partnerships, we utilize a system to categorize the types of cases handled through the partnership. These five case categories, known as I-HELP, include: Income and Insurance; Housing and Utilities; Education and Employment; Legal Status; and Personal and Family Stability. Some issues that we have helped our clients with include:



- Medicare and Medicaid eligibility and claims
- Obtaining social security benefits
- Protection from elder abuse
- Employee rights
- Preventing discharges from adult care facilities
- Preventing or delaying evictions and foreclosures
- Creation of Advance Directives and Power of Attorneys
- Drafting of Last Will and Testament documents

Through our work, we have helped ECMC patients obtain more than \$1,572,000 in financial benefits. We have also accommodated patient needs for home/hospital visits, provided notary services, removed social or legal barriers to their hospital discharge, demonstrated cost savings to both patients and the hospital, and helped to link patients with other sources of support based on their legal and social needs. The MedLaw Partnership on WNY is a community initiative that continues to provide innovative delivery of social care, in an effort to reduce health equity disparities for vulnerable populations in our region.

¹ National Center for Medical Legal Partnership. <https://medical-legalpartnership.org/>.

² Social and economic factors. County Health Rankings & Roadmaps. <https://www.countyhealthrankings.org/explore-health-rankings/measures-data-sources/county-health-rankings-model/health-factors/social-and-economic-factors>.