

Medical-legal collaborations make difference in lives of patients

Legal Aid's HEAL program addresses legal issues that impact health

There are certain legal issues that impact a person's, family's or population's health. These issues can include housing, education, employment, domestic violence, income stability, and access to healthcare – all of which can affect mental and physical well-being.

These are called *legal determinants of health*, and collaborative programs between the legal and medical community can address them.

Community Legal Aid's HEAL project looks to do just that. HEAL, which stands for Health Education Advocacy and Law, is a partnership between Legal Aid and area health providers and educators. The project helps patients overcome legal problems that are getting in the way of their health.

"It makes us part of the care team," explained Marie Curry, managing attorney for the HEAL program. "Doctors and nurses can actually refer patients to us, and we open a case and address the legal issues that impact that patient's health."

Curry highlighted asthma as an example of where a medical-legal partnership can be helpful. If a doctor notices that a child has repeat visits to the ER with asthma attacks, he/she may inquire as to the condition of the home the child is living in.

"Things like mold or other hazardous materials can contribute to or even cause problems like chronic asthma," Curry said. "An attorney can be helpful in working with the landlord to make sure that the mold is removed so the child can go home to a clean and safe environment."

Another area HEAL frequently helps with is education, such as working with schools to make sure children with disabilities are able to access the services they need to be successful.

Currently, Legal Aid partners with several area health providers, including Akron Children’s Hospital, its ACHP Practices, and Summa Health System.

“We’ve found the addition of attorneys to our care team a really positive experience for both us and our patients,” said Cooper White, a physician at Akron Children’s Hospital who partners with Curry on the HEAL program. “We already have interdisciplinary teams working with each patient – doctors, nurses, social workers. The attorneys have been a great addition to the team, especially in the context of our efforts to see that every child has a medical home and our efforts to improve population health.”

Steven McGarrity, executive director of Legal Aid, said that HEAL is one example of ways the non-profit law firm works within the community, outside of direct client representation.

“Of course, we directly represent the patients that are referred to us, but the program goes much deeper than that,” he explained. “We’re serving as collaborative partners and as a resource to the hospital, we’re educating landlords about safe housing practices or schools about proper services for disabled students. So, while there is a direct client-attorney relationship, there also is a larger advocacy side that’s so important to what we do.”

For more information on HEAL, visit www.communitylegalaid.org/HEAL. To learn more about medical-legal partnerships, visit the National Center for Medical-Legal Partnership at www.medical-legalpartnership.org.

About Community Legal Aid

Community Legal Aid is a 501(c)3 non-profit law firms serving the legal needs of low-income individuals in central and northeast Ohio. Dedicated to improving the lives of those in need, Community Legal Aid provides free legal information and representation, as well as free education to those who work with the poor and elderly. The non-profit firm serves clients in Columbiana, Mahoning, Medina, Portage, Stark, Summit, Trumbull and Wayne counties.

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