Medical-Legal Assistance for Families: Insights from the First Year

by Susan Zinn, JD and Minnette Son, MD

Special thanks to Dr. Rebecca Huston and Dr. Juan Parra for their guidance

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University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio

Impact on Health

- Pediatricians have taken the lead in recognizing that social determinants mediate children’s health. Social and environmental factors influence health positively or negatively.

Multiple research studies, such as the link between substandard housing and diarrheal illness or family violence and child school function, document the influence of social determinants on health.


Sometimes, the best way to help a family protect or improve a child’s health is for physicians and attorneys to work together to resolve a child’s related health and legal problems.

- We can do more together than we can alone.

AAP Policy for MLP

Whereas the American Bar Association recently passed a resolution “That the American Bar Association encourages lawyers, law firms, legal services agencies, law schools and bar associations to form medical legal partnerships with hospitals, community health care providers and social service organizations to help identify and resolve diverse legal issues that affect patients’ health and well-being”; therefore be it

RESOLVED that the Academy encourage closer and more frequent collaboration between legal service and medical professionals, and be it further

RESOLVED that the Academy promote “medical-legal partnerships,” in which lawyers work with members to identify and resolve legal issues affecting the health and well-being of children.

First MLPs in Texas (Fall 2008)

- MLAF was the first active medical-legal partnership in Texas
- Second active MLP in Texas: MedicoLegal Partnership, Lower Rio Grande Valley/Brownsville

New MLPs in Development in Texas

We hope to see new MLPs soon in Texas in:
- Dallas
- Houston
- Austin
- El Paso

Faculty Feedback

- “MLAF has an immediate impact on families by providing them not only with guidance in their lives but provides the hope and endurance for the families to help themselves.” Juan Parra, MD
- “MLAF has been a precious resource in our efforts to treat children with developmental disabilities… MLAF has and will play an important role in the well-being of our families, which will help improve the developmental-behavioral health of the children. It also shows the families that doctors indeed really do care! We care enough to listen and find a lawyer for their cause!” Nhung Tran, MD

Family Feedback

“I was in deadlock with my daughter’s [school] regarding her special education placement. MLAF stepped in immediately and before the next school year began, we had reached a very agreeable placement and even obtained resources that had not been previously offered.

Now my daughter has excelled in school and exceeded everyone’s expectations.”

MLAF Client

MLAF’s Priority Areas (Legal)

- Primary areas addressed:
  - Housing
  - Education
  - Benefits (Medicaid, food stamps, Social Security, utilities assistance)

What Makes MLAF Different?

- Most MLPs have two partners:
  - Legal partner
  - Medical partner
- MLAF has three main partners:
  - Legal: Texas RioGrande Legal Aid, Inc.
  - Medical: Dept. of Pediatrics/UTHSCSA
  - Resources and Assistance to Strengthen Families: City of San Antonio, Department of Community Initiatives

CHRISTUS Santa Rosa has also provided support such as retrofit/use of office space.
Why Is This Important?

- 85% of patients have Medicaid or CHIP
- Case management can supplement indigent families’ resources to help stabilize the family:
  - Utilities assistance
  - Rental assistance
  - Long-term case management

What has MLAF Done So Far?

- Moved into our permanent offices (thanks to Division of Critical Care for their help early on!)

MLAF Staff

MLAF staff is in place and ready to help your patients and their families. Meet...

Kathryn Newell, JD
MLAF Attorney
704-8733

Elida Flores
MLAF Case Worker
704-8734

Lupita Rocha
MLAF Administrative Assistant
704-8730
Grants

- San Antonio Area Foundation: ($15,000 awarded June 2009)
- Baptist Health Foundation of San Antonio: (Awaiting decision in October 2009)
- Krist Foundation: Submitted August 2009
- Smothers Foundation: Proposal in process

Training for Health Care Professionals

- Formal training
  - September 2008: Grand Rounds
  - September 2008: Two weeks of residency training
  - July/August 2009: Residency training
  - August 2009: Second Grand Rounds
- Informal sessions/meetings
  - General Pediatrics; third floor clinics’ staff
  - Child Abuse Pediatrics
  - Children’s Cancer Center
  - Social Workers
- Educational fliers for physicians and staff

Training: Feedback About Referrals

- Feedback about specific cases
- With family/client permission only
- Brief memos to referring professional
- Brief service case: one memo
- Extended service cases: two memos
  1) case accepted/staff contact
  2) summary of results

Education for Families

- One-on-one outreach in waiting rooms, Walk-In and Continuity Clinics
- Educational fliers for use in waiting rooms and by professionals in clinics
- One-on-one counseling and advice about clients’ individual legal/resource concerns by MLAF staff
**Case Statistics**

**October 2008-July 2009**

**Distribution by Ethnicity**

- Black
- Hispanic
- White
- Other

**October 2008-July 2009**

**Distribution by Case Type**

- Housing
- Benefits
- Education
- DCI
- Other

**October 2008-July 2009**

**Distribution by Referral Source**

- Resident
- Faculty
- CSR Social Workers
- Counselor
- Child Cancer Program
- Self
- Other

**October 2008-July 2009**

**Distribution by Service Provided**

- Limited
- Extended
- Pending
- Rejected
- DCI
- Other

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**What Can You Do?**

- Please refer families to MLAF to help resolve social and environmental problems that:
  - Harm your patients' health
  - Limit the family's ability to take care of your patient

- **IMPORTANT TRIGGER:** Is there a child in the household who is a patient of the Department of Pediatrics or an in-patient at CHRISTUS Santa Rosa?
Your Referral Is Important

A referral from a trusted professional – like you - will encourage parents to get help that they need to meet their children's needs, including those that doctors cannot address.

Steps to Refer to MLAF

Identify a legal problem or case management need during the social history and/or by reviewing the family survey.

Refer families with problems involving housing, education or public benefits and/or need for utility or rental assistance.

Fill out a referral form with patient-family name and address and include a brief description of the problem.

If you do not have referral form, use a sheet of paper.

Provide a copy of the face sheet.

First Way to Refer

Walk your patient-family and paperwork to the MLAF Intake Office near the exit of the Walk-In Clinic. This may not work if you are not in the Goldsberry Center for Children and Families.

If an intake appointment is available, the MLAF staff may be able to meet with the family right away. Some families prefer to meet later; this is fine with us, too.

Second Way to Refer

Fax the paperwork to MLAF at 704-8743 and direct the family to the MLAF offices near the exit of the Walk-In Clinic.
**Third Way to Refer**

Give the family a fact sheet about MLAF with the phone number to call: 704-8730.

**Resources for Referral**

- Fact sheet for families on MLAF services (English/Spanish) and
- Brief instructions for providers on how to refer

Available on the MLAF web site at http://www.pediatrics.uthscsa.edu/centers/MLAF/index.asp

These resources will also be emailed after Grand Rounds, thanks to Dr. Mayes

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**Weekly Schedule for Intake**

**Monday-Wednesday:**
9 to 11 a.m. (last appointment)
1:30 to 3:00 p.m. (last appointment)

**Thursday-Friday:**
9 to 11 a.m. (last appointment)

**Tips for Talking about MLAF**

- I’d like you to talk with the staff at MLAF because I’m concerned about [X problem] and its impact on your family and [patient’s name].
- Services at MLAF are free.
- I hope you’ll qualify for MLAF services. They’ll ask you some questions to find out.
- MLAF is here to help your family and other families like yours.

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**Tips for Talking about MLAF(cont.)**

- MLAF lawyers are here to help children and families.
- You haven’t done anything wrong. I’d like MLAF to find out if [landlord, school, public agency] has done something illegal that’s harming your family/child.
- They’re right here [on this floor, in this building, next door/ across the driveway].
- I hope MLAF will be able to help you.
- We won’t know unless you ask.

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**Plans for the Next Year**

- Meet with Divisions in the Department of Pediatrics:
  - Establish practical referral pathways and learn how to work together
  - Learn about special needs of Divisions’ patients
**Plans for the Next Year (cont.)**

- **New Training:**
  - Seminars for residents on special education at 7 a.m. Thursdays, Dec. 10 and Jan. 7; presented by Kathryn Newell, JD, MLAF Attorney
  - Please let us know if you would like training on other topics

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**Medical-Legal Assistance for Families**

**You Are Invited!**

**MLAF Open House**
- Friday, September 25, 4-6 p.m.
- Reception area, lower level of the Goldsbury Center for Children and Families
- FREE FOOD!

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**Medical-Legal Assistance for Families**

**Plans for the Next Year (cont.)**

- **MLAF Long Range Planning:**
  - Please let us know if you would like to be involved or if you have suggestions
  - We may be contacting you, too
  - Any special populations with special needs?

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**Medical-Legal Assistance for Families**

**Questions?**

**Comments?**

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