When veterans seek care for their physical or mental health, healthcare providers target the presenting health issues. However, many health conditions are negatively impacted by persisting civil legal issues, which healthcare providers are ill-equipped to address. Further, although legal aid agencies, law school clinics, and pro bono services from the private sector are available in some areas, low-income veterans often have insufficient access to legal assistance. These unmet civil legal needs perpetuate poor health outcomes and health disparities.

A medical-legal partnership (MLP) is a unique service model that integrates lawyers into health care settings to address patients’ civil-legal issues concurrently with their healthcare. Typically, an MLP has a “lawyer in residence” who screens patients for health-harming legal needs, and trains health care providers on the common social determinants of health. The lawyers offer a variety of interventions that directly address social determinants of health. They increase access to public benefits and health insurance, resolve landlord disputes and improve housing conditions, and prevent employment and education discrimination. Improving these conditions directly addresses the underlying civil legal issues impeding patients’ health and health care. An MLP can also identify innovative policy recommendations to bridge the gaps in services provided by local, state, and federal agencies.

While an MLP exists at thirty Veterans Affairs (VA) facilities, thirty-nine states lack a VA facility with an established MLP.
STRENGTH OF FINDINGS

This research provides important insights on the impact of MLP at VAMC on health outcomes for veterans. Although this study did not include a control group, and the sample size was modest, we have a reasonable expectation that the key findings are replicable in other VAMCs across the country. These findings are consistent with prior research demonstrating MLP has a positive impact on asthma and cancer patients, children, rural populations, and low-income patients. Those civilian studies have shown that adding an attorney to the medical team increases awareness of, and access to, social and legal services; reduces patients’ perceived stress while improving their overall wellbeing; and that MLP maintain positive impact and efficiency across time.

REFERENCES

3 Ibid.
4 Sandel et al., “Medical-Legal Partnerships,” 1699.
7 J Martin et al., “Embedding Civil Legal Aid Services In Care for High-Utilizing Patients Using Medical-Legal Partnership.” Health Affairs (2015).
16 J Tsai et al., “Medical-Legal Partnerships At Veterans Affairs Medical Centers Improved Housing and Psychosocial Outcomes For Vets.” Health Affairs 36, no. 12 (2017): 2190–2203.

RESEARCH CONDUCTED

This Stand SMART summarizes the first study to examine medical-legal partnerships at VAMC. That study was also the first to assess the benefits of an MLP for low-income adults with mental health problems, homelessness, or both.

Researchers assessed the impact of legal services provided to homeless veterans, veterans with mental illness, and veterans struggling with both homelessness and mental illness, at four grant-funded MLP demonstration projects at VAMC in Connecticut and New York. During the study, funded by the Bristol-Myers Squibb Foundation, the MLP served 950 veterans who collectively had 1,384 legal issues related to housing, consumer debt, child support, and disabilities. The researchers also followed the mental health outcomes of a subsample of 148 veterans who received full legal representation over a one-year period following the MLP intervention.

GOALS FOR THE FUTURE

- **Quantified ROI:** Future veteran-specific MLP research to confirm these findings with a control group and quantify the return-on-investment for both legal and healthcare programs.
- **Awareness:** A broader public awareness of MLPs as an effective service model will allow veterans, caregivers, and their families to advocate for their VA to implement an MLP so legal providers can address patients’ civil legal needs concurrent with their health care.
- **Sustainability and Implementation:** VA leadership determines how best to fund MLPs with existing resources and enable the expansion of MLPs across VA facilities.

ABOUT STAND SMART FOR HEROES

The Bob Woodruff Foundation is proud to partner with best-in-class scientific organizations to provide important research findings to the community of organizations that represent and serve post-9/11 veterans, service members, families, and caregivers. For more information on the Bob Woodruff Foundation and Stand SMART For Heroes, please see bobwoodrufffoundation.org.

ABOUT THE VA NATIONAL CENTER ON HOMELESSNESS AMONG VETERANS

This Department of Veterans Affairs center promotes recovery-oriented care for veterans who are homeless or at risk for homelessness. The center conducts and supports research; assesses the effectiveness of programs; identifies and disseminates best practices and integrates these practices into policies, programs, and services for homeless or at-risk veterans; and serves as a resource center for all research and training activities carried out by the Department and by other Federal and non-Federal entities with respect to veteran homelessness.