

STAND **SMART** FOR HEROES

**SPOTLIGHT
PARTNER:**



Using Medical-Legal Partnership to Reduce Barriers to Veteran Health and Wellbeing

ISSUE/CHALLENGE

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.¹ 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.² 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.³ 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.⁴

While an MLP exists at thirty Veterans Affairs (VA) facilities, thirty-nine states lack a VA facility with an established MLP.⁵

KEY FINDINGS

Veterans who received legal services in conjunction with medical treatment showed considerable improvement in multiple psychosocial outcomes, to include:

- Significant reductions in symptoms of hostility, paranoia, psychosis, generalized anxiety disorder, and posttraumatic stress disorder within the first three months
- Significant reductions in symptoms of hostility, paranoia, and generalized anxiety disorder at 12 months
- Greater overall improvements in housing, substance abuse, and mental health

IMPLICATIONS

VA Medical Centers (VAMC) that establish a medical-legal partnership will serve veterans more effectively. Incorporating medical and legal services can improve both medical outcomes and general wellbeing for veterans. An MLP provides healthcare organizations an in-house capability for comprehensive services. When lawyers are embedded in a health care setting they can directly resolve specific problems for individual patients, while also helping medical staff understand system and policy barriers. This collaboration can stop the cycle of discharging veterans from a hospital right back to the unhealthy conditions negatively impacting their health.

Medical-legal partnerships may also produce greater efficiency and positive return-on-investment for the VA. The study demonstrated that each legal issue took an average of 5.4 hours of partnership time to resolve, and the average cost to address each legal issue was considerably lower than the annual direct cost to provide healthcare to an individual who is chronically homeless and/or has a severe mental health condition.⁶ Additionally, pilot data from a civilian MLP study suggest the VA could expect a decrease in patient readmission rates given that civilian inpatient and Emergency Department use decreased more than 50 percent, and overall civilian costs (as defined by charges) fell by 45 percent.⁷ This suggests that MLP may also provide a cost-effective model to provide a continuum of care for veterans in VA healthcare system.

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 VAMC across the country. These findings are consistent with prior research demonstrating MLP has a positive impact on asthma⁸ and cancer⁹ patients, children,¹⁰ rural populations,¹¹ and low-income patients.¹² Those civilian studies have shown that adding an attorney to the medical team increases awareness of, and access to, social and legal services;¹³ reduces patients' perceived stress while improving their overall wellbeing;¹⁴ and that MLP maintain positive impact and efficiency across time.¹⁵

RESEARCH CONDUCTED

This Stand SMART summarizes the first study to examine medical-legal partnerships at VAMC.¹⁶ 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.

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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.