



OUR PATIENTS' LEGAL HEALTH

By Joel Abrams, President and CEO
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I have a very exciting new development to discuss this month. For the past 15 years, the Medical-Legal Partnership for Children (MLPC), based out of Boston Medical Center, has been providing a critical service by connecting lawyers with pediatric clinicians. Through the program, doctors and nurses are able to refer patients in need of legal services to direct legal assistance.

This life-changing program is based on a principle that has been the foundation for most of Dorchester House's programs - that health is directly affected by a family's surroundings, living conditions and life circumstances. Once a week, a legal clinic is held at Dorchester House with lawyers present and ready to respond to the needs of clients who have been referred to the service through their clinicians.

And here is the new, very exciting development: We've been adopted by a wonderful law firm! So what does that mean, and why is that exciting? Well, for the last few years, the MLPC has facilitated "adoptions" of community health centers by Boston law firms. The law firms work with MLPC staff and eventually provide pro bono (free) services for patients. MLPC remains a partner in the adoption by providing mentoring, training and assistance. I am thrilled to report that Dorchester House has been adopted by Ropes and Gray (R&G), one of the top firms in the city. Beginning this month, R&G is working at Dorchester House alongside MLPC.

The program will also expand beyond the pediatric department and be open to adults and families without children. The services will focus on housing, immigration, employment, guardianship, end of life and other geriatric issues, education and school issues, income support, and utility protection. R&G has a six-member staff team that includes a partner, two associates, and four paralegals who will all be working here at Dot House. And there are 100 staff at their Boston office who have volunteered to be on teams with specific expertise in the major areas. For example – the team that will assist with housing issues has experience in courtroom eviction defense.

These volunteer attorneys provide very real services that improve or maintain the health of our patients. For example, a patient may be living in a rental that has mold and other known asthma triggers. Or a patient might reveal to her doctor that the landlord is saying that her family will be evicted in 30 days, even though they've been paying rent. Often, a single phone call from a lawyer is all that is needed for the problem to be resolved. The landlord takes care of the problem, and the family's threat to health or well-being is alleviated.

Another common problem is the need for support for educational intervention. A patient may explain that his child was expelled from school for behavioral problems, but that no referral to another educational program was made. The attorney makes sure that the school does its part to find a proper placement for the child, as required by law.

Immigration issues are particularly sensitive, and patients are often hesitant to talk about them. But immigrants do have basic rights, and a lawyer based at a community health center can help patients navigate a system that can be confusing, particularly when there's a language barrier.

MLPC's work at community health centers clearly demonstrates what can be achieved by the medical and legal professions. Ropes & Gray's adoption of Dorchester House is a natural outgrowth of this collaboration and all of us at Dorchester House are thrilled to have them work with us. There is no doubt that this kind of advocacy allows health care providers to have an influence beyond the clinical arena, and it can make a profound difference in the quality of one's life.

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