

Justice & Health Partnerships for Better Client Outcomes -

A submission to the Legal Aid Ontario Modernization Project

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WHAT IS A JUSTICE & HEALTH PARTNERSHIP?

Justice & Health Partnerships (known in the USA as Medical-Legal Partnerships, and in Australia as Health Justice Partnerships) are collaborative arrangements between medical and health service providers and community legal clinics to foster early, multidisciplinary interventions for low-income individuals and families with overlapping medical and legal problems. Early resolution and prevention of problems that connect to the *social determinants of health* play a significant role in improving people's lives and diminishing the economic, social and other costs of poverty and ill health.

HOW ARE THE *SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH* RELATED TO THE CAUSES OF POVERTY?

International studies agree that people living on a low income suffer more legal and health problems, suffer from these problems more frequently than the rest of the population, and that these problems compound and trigger new problems with more catastrophic results. Social conditions (instability of food, housing, employment or other income, low education and language barriers) create a vicious cycle of deepening problems. Treating symptoms without addressing underlying health or legal problems is an ineffective way to problem-solve. Justice & health partnerships provide **early intervention** and **prevention approaches** with beneficial, lasting outcomes for individuals and families.

HISTORY OF JUSTICE & HEALTH PARTNERSHIPS IN ONTARIO

Following the lead of Australian, American and British projects and studies, Legal Aid Ontario (LAO) and the Law Foundation of Ontario have funded Justice & Health Partnerships pilot projects led by community legal clinics since 2014. These initiatives are now being scaled up to new communities with many exciting developments, and deeper engagement of health care professionals.

OUTCOMES

Outcomes for patients are better when their related problems (instability of food, housing, income, employment, safety or mental health) can be addressed, usually by community legal clinics or by referrals to LAO, and other appropriate agencies where those exist.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AS AN ELEMENT OF JUSTICE & HEALTH PARTNERSHIPS

Community development, sometimes referred to as "outreach" and "community capacity building" is necessary to build trust and good working relationships between medical and legal service providers,

who are unaccustomed to working in interdisciplinary environments. The goal is seamless service with more lasting impacts for the patients/clients. It is an innovation in legal service delivery that takes a holistic approach to meeting community and client needs.

INCREASED LEGAL LITERACY AS AN ELEMENT OF A JUSTICE & HEALTH PARTNERSHIP

Through community “outreach” and “public legal education”, front-line social, medical and allied health workers as well as clients can be taught to recognize when a legal problem exists, and that solutions are available. New approaches are being piloted all the time.

HOW ARE JUSTICE & HEALTH PARTNERSHIPS BEING SUPPORTED?

Community legal clinic staff have created a community of practice that meets virtually at least quarterly to share knowledge, discuss promising practices for developing partnerships, engage in problem solving, develop shared resources, learn about developments in other countries, and share evaluation strategies. Current members of the community of practice include staff from 15 community legal clinics, LAO, Pro Bono Ontario, and the St. Mike’s Family Health Team.

WHY SHOULD WE ENCOURAGE JUSTICE & HEALTH PARTNERSHIPS?

Community legal work that recognizes the potential of these partnerships may spend fewer resources on crisis management and legal band-aids, allowing the focus to move to early intervention, holistic problem-solving, and preventing difficulties from escalating with ensuing health-harming impacts.

LEARNING FROM HEALTH APPROACHES: WHAT IF CLINICS ARE PREVENTED FROM DOING LAW REFORM, SYSTEMIC ADVOCACY, AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT?

If emergency room doctors and family physicians had not spoken up about their observations, we would not have mandatory seat belts, bicycle helmets, or safety caps on prescription medicine. Lawyers need to play the same kind of diagnostic and preventative role that is expected from health professionals: to identify systemic problems and issues, and to contribute to improving legal health and to ensure justice. For the delivery of legal services to be efficient and effective, we must be able to undertake systemic advocacy, community development, and law reform.

OUR “ASK” OF LEGAL AID MODERNIZATION:

Please recognize the beneficial impact of the community capacity building and development work of community legal clinics. This innovative, ground-breaking work is receiving international and cross-disciplinary attention. We will be presenting on our accomplishments in September at an American Medical-Legal Partnership Conference. We presented on our work as part of an international panel with experts from Australia and the United Kingdom at the International Legal Aid Group in June in Ottawa.

This work specifically targets those in our community with greatest need and it leverages new resources from health care partners.

Please connect us to Ministry of Health and Ministry of Justice staff who care about collaborative and effective work that targets the amelioration of difficulties with the social determinants of health. We would like to explore expanding and scaling up these services as is being done in other jurisdictions.