

## For Compassionate Care, Call a Lawyer

Today's guest post comes from [Samantha Morton](#), executive director of [Medical-Legal Partnership | Boston](#), an interdisciplinary team of healthcare staff, attorneys, paralegals and researchers that provides legal assistance to patients and families whose care needs are complicated by tough legal issues.



Samantha Morton

Compassion demands an understanding of a patient's entire life context.

We're all familiar with the concept of social determinants of health. What's less intuitive is that many of these factors have solutions – particularly where protections exist in the law. Consider the following recent example from the [Dana-Farber Cancer Institute](#) in Boston.

John and Emily Shannon (*pseudonyms*) were already consumed by their child's cancer diagnosis and treatments when their landlord tried to evict them without cause. Thanks to a savvy social worker and an on-site legal clinic at their child's hospital, the family didn't have to go up against their landlord's lawyer alone. Instead, the DFCI social worker contacted MLP | Boston for prompt "legal triage" help.

The program reached out to the Boston law firm of [Todd & Weld](#), which accepted the case *pro bono*. With expert guidance from MLP | Boston's housing law mentor, attorney [Jeff Catalano](#) helped the family avoid eviction until they could find other stable housing. This allowed the Shannons to focus on their child's medical needs instead of facing the overwhelming double jeopardy of homelessness alongside the many pressures of cancer treatment.

This year marks the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of medical-legal partnership (MLP), a care model founded at [Boston Medical Center](#) that deploys lawyers in the healthcare setting to anticipate and address patients' legal needs. Too often, a patient's social context – such as an unlawful threat of eviction or unsafe housing conditions – threatens to derail a care regimen or exacerbate a patient's chronic disease symptoms. MLP programs help to resolve these kinds of challenges so

that patients can focus on their care and be as healthy as possible when returning home from a primary care visit or from the hospital.

Jeff Catalano is one of hundreds of lawyers and paralegals in Massachusetts who have dedicated their valuable time and skills to allow patients and families to focus on what is paramount – their health – instead of depleting legal challenges. MLP lawyers tackle:

- Housing law advocacy to support healthy and stable housing, particularly for disabled patients
- Guardianship and related estate planning support
- Disability benefits advocacy for chronically ill patients whose benefits have been unlawfully denied or terminated

Thanks to early leadership from the [Boston Bar Association](#) and recent program innovations by the [Massachusetts Bar Association](#), Massachusetts has led the nation in educating the legal community about its critical role in effective and compassionate healthcare delivery. Today, there are [MLP programs](#) operating in more than 250 healthcare institutions, 38 medical schools and almost 50 residency programs across the U.S. The model also is taking root internationally: an MLP symposium was hosted in Melbourne, Australia, this past November.

It's no coincidence that we were invited to write this blog post by the Schwartz Center. Massachusetts is home to an inspiring community of healthcare lawyers – exemplified by Schwartz Center founder and attorney Ken Schwartz – who are helping to translate patient-centeredness from theory to practice. Patients treated at MLP | Boston partner sites receive free legal assistance from more than 20 law firm and in-house [pro bono partners](#).

As we settle into a new year, MLP | Boston and its partner MLP programs across the country encourage the healthcare community to strengthen the caregiver-patient relationship by learning more about the impact legal problems can have on patients' health and wellbeing. A small dose of lawyering can translate into many benefits for vulnerable patients and the care teams that treat them.