

Medical-Legal Strategy Can Improve Health Care of Low-Income Families with Newborns

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There is new evidence that legal advocates have a key role to play in addressing **social determinants of health**, non-biological conditions that increasingly are understood to be key drivers of patients' health and well-being. A new approach to health care for low-income families of newborns **successfully addressed a range of concrete needs** — such as access to food and nutrition programs, utility service, and other key benefits — and also led to **better adherence to recommended well-child checkups and fewer emergency department visits**.

As described in the study, "[Medical-Legal Strategies to Improve Infant Health Care: A Randomized Trial](#)," published in the July 2015 issue of *Pediatrics* (published online June 1, 2015), over a roughly two-year period researchers based at [Boston Medical Center](#) paired families of newborns with a family specialist who supported the family during routine well visits, at one home visit, and through email, text and phone communications. The family specialist was equipped with intensive training, coaching, and back-up from legal advocates at [Medical-Legal Partnership | Boston](#), the founding site of the [national medical-legal partnership \(MLP\) network](#), as well as with training in the [Healthy Steps for Young Children](#) approach.

At the time of their child's birth, most study participants reported at least one material hardship, such as food insecurity, housing concerns, or trouble paying utility bills, and many families had multiple hardships. Relative to parents in the control group, parents who received services from an MLP-backed family specialist reported better success in securing utility assistance, food support programs and other resources — not merely becoming aware of those supports or attempting to obtain them. In addition, families in the intervention group were found to have improved rates of on-time immunization and preventive care, and decreased emergency department utilization.

“Many social benefits and services exist that can improve the health of vulnerable families, but all too often people are denied or are unable to access these critical supports on their own,” said Ellen Lawton, co-Principal Investigator of the [National Center for Medical-Legal Partnership](#). “This study validates what the MLP field has observed for years: it often takes the insight and advocacy of legal advocates to clear a path to these services, and the health of vulnerable families is best addressed by partnering the health care system's front-line — in this instance, family specialists — with civil legal services.”

Subscribers to *Pediatrics* can access the full paper [here](#); non-subscribers can view the study abstract.

For an interview with the study's Principal Investigator and lead author, contact Robert Sege, MD, FAAP, at bsege@hria.org or (617) 451-0049 ext. 063. For an interview with the co-investigator who led MLP | Boston's participation in this study, contact Samantha Morton, JD, at smorton@mlpboston.org or (617) 336-7500 ext. 455. For an interview with the co-investigator who led Healthy Steps' participation in this study, please contact Margot Kaplan-Sanoff, Ed.D at msanoff@zerotothree.org or (202) 857-2283.