

# MedLaw Project: Legal Aid Program Improves Health Outcomes for Children, Families Through Medical-Legal Partnership with University

By Anna Lisa Biason

**H**ow does a 72-year old cancer patient get access to crucial medication and chemotherapy when his insurance provider has inadvertently and without due process terminated his Medicare Part D prescription drug benefits? How does an 11-year old child manage to focus on her classes in school when on a daily basis her apartment is riddled with bedbugs that crawl all over her body and lay eggs on her bed? These are just two of the factual patterns that the attorneys of Legal Aid Society of Orange County, California (LASOC) are addressing through MedLaw Project, LASOC's latest venture.

Launched with a press conference in May 2008, after several months of discussion and planning between LASOC executive staff and key stakeholders at the University of California, Irvine (UCI), the MedLaw Project at the UCI Family Health Center Santa Ana (UCI FHC) is one of the newest medical-legal partnerships in the nation. It joins the nearly 80 sites that have emerged since the inception of the innovative medical-legal partnership model 15 years ago. Fashioned after the Boston University School of Medicine/Boston Medical Center Medical-Legal Partnership for Children (MLPC) that was founded in 1993, the mission of the MedLaw Project is to help ensure that the children of Santa Ana and the surrounding areas obtain and keep their daily needs for food, housing, education and stability by improving front-line health care staff's capacity to screen, identify, triage and refer basic needs legal issues.

To further its mission, the MedLaw Project, in the first year, will provide direct legal services to low-income families who are served by UCI FHC; establish and maintain close relationships between the doctors at the UCI FHC and LASOC staff in order to determine the needs of the target population and how to address those needs; implement a training component for health care providers, medical students and residents, as well graduate students in law, public health and other related disciplines; and have an evaluation plan that will measure the outcomes of the MedLaw Project.

## Filling a Gap

As former California state senator and current California Medical Association CEO Joe Dunn mentioned at the MedLaw Project kick off and press conference, collaborations between the medical and legal fields are nothing new. He cited a series of examples of cross-disciplinary cooperation between the two professions, mentioning the legal establishment's leadership on the Orange County Medical Association's Measure



Photo Courtesy of Legal Aid Society of Orange County

**From left: Charles Vega, Michael Clark, Bob Cohen and Anna Lisa Biason respond to questions at the MedLaw Project Kick Off and Press Conference in May.**

H Initiative, the passage of which has helped to ensure that the county portion of the Tobacco Settlement Revenue was spent on health care. He also noted that the local bar had been working long-term with doctors and other professionals in establishing the new University of California, Irvine School of Law, which is set to open its doors in 2009.

However, as Senator Dunn acknowledged, despite prior significant alliances between doctors and lawyers in Orange County, an important element remained missing until the MedLaw Project. That is, prior to the MedLaw Project, there had not been a "systematic approach to providing those most in need with access to both medical and legal services in one collaborative effort." Senator Dunn enthusiastically said that "now we have it, in our community, here in Santa Ana through [the] MedLaw Project."

At the press conference, Michael P. Clark, UCI Vice Provost of Academic Planning, spoke of the need for this collaboration and the future involvement of the newly-established University of California, Irvine School of Law, which will integrate public service into its curriculum. Clark observed that "legal and medical issues are closely connected, especially for the [low-income] segment of our community. This partnership with LASOC should enhance access to the services provided by our School of Medicine at the clinic, and it will help resolve many of the non-medical obstacles to the well-being of these children and their families." Further, he stated that the MedLaw Project is a "prime avenue for the law students to serve the community and a link that will enhance the university's contribution to the community of Orange County and throughout southern California."



LASOC Executive Director Robert Cohen added: "By combining two powerful disciplines for the purpose of training, delivering direct legal services and engaging in advocacy activities aimed at improving the health outcomes of underserved children and their families, [the] MedLaw Project is positioned to make a positive and lasting impact on the communities it serves."

## Commitment to MedLaw

Through a small seed grant from MLPC, the flagship organization that originated this innovative model of the medical-legal partnership, LASOC and UCI Family Health Center have, in the first half of this year, acquired the necessary training and guidance to launch the MedLaw Project in Orange County. So far, so good.

Based on the 2008 grant from MLPC, LASOC and UCI set a goal of providing legal assistance to ten (10) UCI FHC patient families served by the MedLaw Project during the first year of operation. In addition to providing legal assistance, in the first year of the MedLaw Project, UCI will provide 100 unique referrals to its legal partner, LASOC, which will then evaluate the legal needs of eligible clients and will provide a full range of services including, but not limited to, referrals, advice and counsel, extended services and court/administrative agency representation. The MedLaw Project will also provide quarterly two-hour legal clinics to train UCI FHC's front-line health care staff, medical students and residents on basic needs screening and advocacy. LASOC and UCI have created a training schedule that will cover topics such as public insurance, family law, domestic violence, housing and other issues and is currently scheduled from July 2008 through June 2010. The project will also establish an annual legal clinic to train graduate students in law, public health and other relevant disciplines on basic needs screening and advocacy. One of the underlying goals of the project is for medical students and residents to incorporate this training into their private practices to continue to address legal obstacles that affect the health of their patients.

All personnel at UCI FHC are empowered to make referrals to the MedLaw Project. Whether through a family physician, a social worker, a pediatrician or an intake receptionist, UCI FHC is authorized to contact LASOC so that its low-income patients may have the chance to promptly address any legal issues that may be affecting their health. If necessary, a patient is then scheduled for a 45-minute initial appointment with the designated MedLaw Project Health

Advocate, a staff member of LASOC who occupies an office at the UCI FHC two mornings a month. During the free consultation, a third year medical resident from UCI FHC is also present to both aid and observe in the process. Patients with urgent legal problems that require immediate attention are directly connected to the Health Advocate.

After the initial consultation, LASOC determines any further course of action, which may include, but is not limited to, scheduling additional in-depth meetings at LASOC's Santa Ana office, opening a case file, direct representation or providing referrals to additional resources with follow-up as appropriate.

At the date of publication and since it started seeing clients in June, the MedLaw Project has opened 12 cases and already has two closed intakes and one partially resolved case. In fact, UCI FHC had already begun referring patients to the MedLaw Project even before the official launch of the project and long before LASOC had spent its first morning session at the clinic. Thanks to the MedLaw Project, the senior citizen patient who contacted the project himself upon seeing a MedLaw Project flyer at the UCI Cancer Center and whose benefits were terminated without warning will now receive reimbursement for his medication and resume critical cancer treatment.

## Partnership is Paramount

As with any new endeavor, selecting the right partners is paramount to the success of the project. In late 2007, upon recognizing a significant overlap between the client communities of LASOC and UCI FHC, it quickly became clear that the clinic in Santa Ana was an appropriate first site for the MedLaw Project. Founded in 1958 by the Orange County Bar Association and celebrating its 50th Anniversary this November, LASOC's programs and services are aimed at providing support for the family; preserving the home; maintaining economic stability; ensuring safety, stability and health; assisting populations with special vulnerabilities; continuing the delivery of legal services; and giving advice, counsel and referral. LASOC's practice areas and special programs in its Santa Ana, Anaheim, Compton and Norwalk offices include: Health Consumer Action Center, Domestic Violence Prevention Program, Domestic Violence Legal Assistance Center, Low Income Taxpayers Clinic, Homeless Outreach Program, Housing and Landlord/Tenant Issues, Asian-American Services, Government Benefits, Special Education, Consumer Problems and

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## NLADA Training Events

### NLADA 2008 Annual Conference

Washington, DC

November 19-22, 2008

NLADA's conference is the leading national training event for the civil legal aid, indigent defense and public interest law communities. The goal is to offer advocates the latest knowledge and professional skills to enable them to meet the legal needs of low-income people.

### Appellate Defender Training

New Orleans, LA

December 10-14, 2008

NLADA's Appellate Defender Training is an intensive three and one-half day learning experience designed specifically for public defenders and private counsel who represent appellants in criminal appeals.

### Civil Impact Leadership

Washington, DC

February 2009

We look forward to leveraging the reality of a change in administration and a new political landscape that is certain with the November elections.

### Life in the Balance 2009

New Orleans, LA

March 7 - 10, 2009

NLADA's Life in the Balance conference brings together mitigation specialists, defense investigators, and capital defense attorneys from around the nation to improve their skills and techniques in all aspects of death penalty defense.



Bankruptcy.

In 2007, LASOC responded to approximately 175 calls per day on its toll-free hotline and closed 12,089 civil cases. Of the total cases closed, 4,732 involved issues that relate to family, including, but not limited to, assistance with: protection orders for victims of domestic violence, dissolutions of marriage and child custody/child support disputes. LASOC also handled 906 administrative law cases, which include, but are not limited to, applying for and appealing denials of government benefits such as Medi-Cal, Social Security benefits, SSI and unemployment insurance. It provided legal information to more than 8,000 self-represented litigants through its Legal Resolutions Center in Santa Ana and Self-Help Center in the Compton Courthouse. It also returned more than \$33.4 million to taxpayers nationwide through its Earned Income Tax Credit Initiative. As the Small Claims Advisory in Orange County, LASOC provides guidance on more than 31,000 cases annually.

Located within five minutes of LASOC's Santa Ana office, the UCI FHC is situated on Main Street and Civic Center Drive, across the street from the courthouse, in the city's downtown area. It is the only federally qualified health center in Orange County. It is the home of the University of California, Irvine Family Medicine Residency Program and also hosts the training of pediatric and obstetric/gynecology residents, as well as numerous medical students and premedical students at all levels. The core family medicine faculty who attend to patients at UCI FHC have been drawn there by their commitment to provide the highest quality care to the underserved Latino community of Santa Ana.

As the major safety net provider for Orange County, the UCI FHC accounts for about 20 percent of the outpatient primary care visits for the county's indigent children and their families. Its family practice residents and faculty provide about 30,000 patient visits each year. Approximately 30 percent of the UCI FHC's patients have no health insurance. Another 15 percent have safety net health coverage through a county-based program called Medical Services Initiative program (formerly Medical Services for Indigents) for the indigent, and 30 percent have MediCal or CalOptima. Eighty-five to 90 percent of the patients who use the UCI FHC have incomes that fall within 200 percent of the federal poverty level. The UCI FHC furthers the mission of the Family Medicine Residency Program at the University of California, Irvine to train family physicians to succeed in a contemporary practice environment and to deliver high quality medical care to a culturally and socio-economically diverse patient population. The UCI FHC is committed to serving the entire community of Santa Ana and the surrounding area, particularly its underserved population.

## Finding the Right Champion

When LASOC recognized that UCI FHC had essentially the same mission of serving the low-income community, the

next issue that the LASOC and UCI addressed was selecting a medical champion. With guidance from Clark (a LASOC board member) and Sheldon Greenfield, Donald Bren, professor and executive director of UCI Center for Health Policy Research, LASOC focused on Charles P. Vega, who directs the residency program at UCI Medical Center as well as the UCI School of Medicine's Program in Medical Education for the Latino Community (PRIME-LC).

When Vega was approached by LASOC about becoming the first UCI representative to the medical-legal partnership that was beginning to take shape, the title "Medical Champion," among other things, sold him on the project. As a self-described "long-time wannabe athlete," the prospect of being the champion of something greatly appealed to him. According to Anna Lisa Biason, LASOC director of fund development, "Dr. Vega's passion, qualifications and ability to get the support of the staff at UCI FHC led LASOC to immediately conclude that his new title was fitting not just in theory but in reality. His advocacy skills became apparent as early as the first telephone interview with MLPC." She adds, "While developing this project, Dr. Vega showed that he knew his community and the clinic's patients well. His involvement with MedLaw Project demonstrates that enlisting the right 'Medical Champion' is crucial to the process of developing a new medical-legal partnership. Dr. Vega believes in [the] MedLaw Project and sees first hand the need for it." Earlier this year, Vega was asked to serve on the National Medical Advisory Board of MLPS. Nancy Rimsha, director of LASOC's Health Consumer Action Center and MedLaw Project's Legal Champion adds, "This recognition illustrates that the rare combination of talent and social capital is not lost to those who started this model."

"We know from experience that when doctors and lawyers partner to address families' unmet basic needs - for food, housing, education, health care and family stability - families are more likely to get and stay healthy," said Ellen Lawton, Executive Director of MLPC. "We're thrilled to support the MedLaw Project as it transforms the way health care is delivered to vulnerable families in Santa Ana and surrounding communities in Orange County."

In addition to the collaboration between LASOC and UCI FHC, MedLaw Project is poised to expand throughout the community to additional sites within the UCI network and beyond. LASOC has already opened cases and begun partnerships with the CHOC/UCI For OC Kids Neurodevelopmental Center and, as noted previously, the UCI School of Medicine affiliated Chao Family Comprehensive Cancer Center. For more information contact Anna Lisa Biason at (714) 571-5220, [abiason@legal-aid.com](mailto:abiason@legal-aid.com) or visit [www.legalaidturns50.com](http://www.legalaidturns50.com). ★

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