



**BOB WOODRUFF FOUNDATION**  
Investing in the Next Chapter for Our Veterans

National Center for Medical  Legal Partnership  
AT THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

# VA MEDICAL-LEGAL PARTNERSHIP READINESS GUIDE

Building and Strengthening  
Medical-Legal Partnerships for Veterans

*June 2019*



## AUTHORS

### Jennifer Trott, MPH

Senior Research Scientist  
National Center for  
Medical-Legal Partnership

### Joanna Theiss, JD, LLM

Research Associate  
National Center for  
Medical-Legal Partnership

### Alanna Peterson

Senior Research Assistant  
National Center for  
Medical-Legal Partnership

## ABOUT US

**THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR MEDICAL-LEGAL PARTNERSHIP** leads education, research, and technical assistance efforts to help every health organization in the United States leverage legal services as a standard part of the way they respond to social needs. Our mission is to foster a system in which all health organizations can leverage these services. Over the last decade, the National Center's work has helped cultivate programs that do just that at nearly 350 hospitals and health centers across the U.S. Learn more at [medical-legalpartnership.org](http://medical-legalpartnership.org) or follow us on Twitter at @National\_MLP.

### **THE BOB WOODRUFF FOUNDATION (BWF)**

was founded in 2006 after reporter Bob Woodruff was hit by a roadside bomb while covering the war in Iraq. Since then, the Bob Woodruff Foundation has led an enduring call to action for people to stand up for heroes and meet the emerging and long-term needs of today's veterans. To date, BWF has invested more than \$57 million to Find, Fund and Shape™ programs that have empowered impacted veterans, service members and their family members, across the nation. For more information, please visit [bobwoodrufffoundation.org](http://bobwoodrufffoundation.org) or follow us on Twitter at @Stand4Heroes.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Before You Begin: What You Need to Know about VA Medical-Legal Partnerships .....	1
Part I: Laying the Foundation for a Medical-Legal Partnership .....	3
Step 1: Defining your Target Population .....	4
Step 2: Identifying a Legal Partner .....	10
Step 3: Funding the Medical-Legal Partnership .....	18
Step 4: Developing a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) and Understanding Information Sharing and Consent .....	23
Step 5: Making the MLP Visible and Accessible .....	28
Part II: Screening Veterans for Legal Needs .....	33
Part III: Training Clinical and Other Staff on Meeting Veterans' Legal Needs .....	38
Part IV: Keys to VA MLP Success .....	42
Appendices .....	46

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This Guide was developed at the National Center for Medical-Legal Partnership at the George Washington University Milken Institute School of Public Health with support from the Bob Woodruff Foundation. Special thanks to the contributions and insight from:

### VA MLP TASK FORCE:

**Lara Eilhardt, JD**

*Attorney and Special Advisor,  
Veteran' Access to Legal Services  
Office of General Counsel,  
U.S. Dept. of Veterans Affairs*

**Fanita Jackson-Norman, LCSW**

*Transition Care Management Program  
Coordinator  
U.S. Dept. of Veterans Affairs*

**Sean Clark, JD**

*National Coordinator,  
Veterans Justice Outreach Program  
U.S. Dept. of Veterans Affairs*

**Laura Taylor, MSW**

*National Director, Social Work  
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs*

**Lelia Jackson**

*Director,  
Office of Community Engagement  
Center for Compassionate Care  
Innovation, U.S. Dept. of Veterans Affairs;  
White House Leadership Development  
Program Fellow*

### VA MLP EXPERT PANEL MEMBERS\*:

**Linda Baggett, PhD**

*Director and Staff Psychologist,  
Women's Mental Health Center  
VA Long Beach Healthcare System*

**Marion Eakin, MD**

*Director, Mental Health Clinic  
NYHHS VAMC, NY Campus;  
VA Site Director  
NYU Adult Psychiatry Residency Training  
Program;  
Assistant Clinical Professor of Psychiatry  
NYU School of Medicine,  
Dept. of Psychiatry*

**Anne Fabiny, MD**

*Professor of Medicine & Associate Chief  
of Staff for Geriatrics, Palliative &  
Extended Care Service  
San Francisco VA Medical Center*

**Sarah Hooper, JD**

*Executive Director  
UCSF/UC Hastings Consortium on Law,  
Science & Health Policy;  
Adjunct Professor of Law  
UC Hastings College of the Law*

**Lee Lyford, LCSW**

*Social Work Executive  
VA Maine Healthcare System Togus VA  
Medical Center*

**David Rosenthal, MD**

*Primary Care Physician & Medical Director  
H-PACT (Homeless Patient Aligned Care  
Team)  
VA Connecticut Healthcare System;  
Assistant Professor of Medicine  
Yale School of Medicine*

**Krista Selna, JD**

*Portfolio Manager,  
Equal Justice Works;  
Former Founder & Coordinating Attorney  
Pine Tree Legal Assistance VA MLP with  
VA Maine Healthcare System Togus VAMC*

**Jack Tsai, PhD**

*Research Director, National Center on  
Homelessness Among Veterans  
US Dept. of Veterans Affairs Central  
Office;  
Associate Professor of Psychiatry &  
Director of the Division of Mental Health  
Services and Treatment Outcomes  
Research  
Yale School of Medicine*

### VA MLP FIELD INTERVIEW

#### PARTICIPANTS:

**Meghan Booth, LCSW**

*Section Chief, Seamless Transition  
(TCM,VJO,CSP,MST/PTSD)  
Bay Pines VA Medical Center*

**Lisa Brody, JD**

*Team Leader/Managing Attorney  
Bay Area Legal Services*

**William (Tony) Ingram, LCSW**

*Social Work and Peer Support Supervisor  
Orlando VA Medical Center Viera VA  
Outpatient Clinic*

**Christie Bhageloe, JD**

*Veterans Project Manager  
Community Legal Services of Mid-Florida*

**Christina Russo, JD**

*Manager of Public Interest &  
Medical-Legal Partnerships  
Community Legal Services of Mid-Florida*

**Melody Osuna, JD**

*Staff Attorney  
Inner City Law Center*

**Anjani Reddy, MD**

*Homeless Patient Aligned Care Team  
Director  
West Los Angeles VA Medical Center*

**Jonathan Killoran, JD**

*Homeless Veterans Project Supervising  
Attorney  
Inner City Law Center*

**Debbie Deegan, LCSW, ACSW, CPRP**

*Director  
Errera Community Care Center,  
VA Connecticut Healthcare System;  
Assistant Clinical Professor  
Yale School of Medicine*

**Cindy Johnson, JD**

*Deputy Director  
Connecticut Veterans Legal Center  
(CVLC)*

**Dylan Maeby, JD**

*Staff Attorney  
Pine Tree Legal Assistance*

**Samantha Kubek, JD**

*Staff Attorney, LegalHealth  
New York Legal Assistance Group*

**Margaret Middleton, JD**

*Assistant Clinical Professor,  
Co-Director of HeLP Legal Services Clinic,  
& Director of the Health Law Partnership  
Georgia State University College of Law;  
Former Co-Founder  
Connecticut Veterans Legal Center*

*\*VA Expert Panel Members also  
participated in field interviews.*

# BEFORE YOU BEGIN: WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT VA MEDICAL-LEGAL PARTNERSHIPS

Today, more than 30 medical-legal partnerships (MLPs) are currently operating in VA Medical Centers (VAMCs) across the country and many more VAMCs are in the exploratory or planning phases. Drawing upon expertise, examples, and tools from the field, the VA MLP Readiness Guide provides VAMCs with a step-by-step approach to starting and sustaining a medical-legal partnership. Though we present these steps in order, many activities – particularly during the planning process – can happen in tandem.

## WHAT IS A MEDICAL-LEGAL PARTNERSHIP?



Medical-legal partnerships (MLPs) embed lawyers specializing in civil law into the health care setting to address Veterans' unmet legal needs. MLP lawyers from civil legal aid nonprofits, law schools, or private pro bono partners in the community work to resolve legal issues that may impact a Veteran's health such as unsafe housing or impending eviction, employment and income problems, family and personal stability, and access to VA benefits. In addition to providing advice and representation to Veterans with legal needs, MLP lawyers also consult with clinicians on legal issues that might affect their healthcare and provide training to healthcare staff on how to identify social needs with legal underpinnings.

Before you embark on building a VA MLP, here are 10 things that you need to know:

1. MLPs are highly flexible in that the legal services they provide can be tailored to your VAMC's clinical priorities, a specific clinic, or population.
2. MLPs can be paired with other existing programs (e.g. social work, Homeless Patient Aligned Care Teams, behavioral health) to achieve better outcomes for Veterans who might be facing social issues with legal underpinnings.
3. In MLPs, legal staff provide direct legal services to Veterans, but also often engage in activities such as training VAMC staff on legal issues impacting Veterans, conducting topic-specific legal clinics with Veterans, and more. VAMC staff may also provide training or guidance to MLP lawyers about how to best serve Veterans, such as using trauma-informed language when discussing legal issues with Veterans.
4. Under VHA Directive 2011-34, VAMCs are encouraged to make space available for legal services providers to assist Veterans who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. In addition to the MLP, VAMCs must also make Veterans aware of other local legal resources available to them.

5. Co-location of an MLP lawyer(s) at the VAMC site for meetings with Veterans and clinical team member consultations is often said to be key to the visibility and use of legal services, though other models (e.g. telelegal services) may be explored. VA Form 10-611 (a revocable license) must be completed for a legal partner to use VA space.
6. Building a VA MLP team is strongly advised. Participants of this team should include VAMC staff who can help guide the implementation and growth of the MLP and provide support to the MLP lawyer(s). This multidisciplinary group may include a clinical champion, a social worker, behavioral health specialist, administrator, frontline staff, and/or a Veterans Justice Outreach (VJO) specialist.
7. The VA Office of General Counsel and VAMC Facility Director must approve a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the VAMC and legal services partner prior to launching a VA MLP.
8. Currently, the VA cannot provide any financial support for legal services unless explicitly included in regulatory statutes (e.g., see Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) Program).
9. MLP lawyers must become VA-accredited prior to providing legal assistance related to VA benefits.
10. There is a VA MLP Internal Taskforce that can assist VAMCs with the development of new VA MLPs.

For background information on the development of the medical-legal partnership intervention in VA settings, see “Medical-Legal Partnerships Serving Veterans: History, Growth, and Progress.”

# PART I: LAYING THE FOUNDATION FOR A MEDICAL-LEGAL PARTNERSHIP

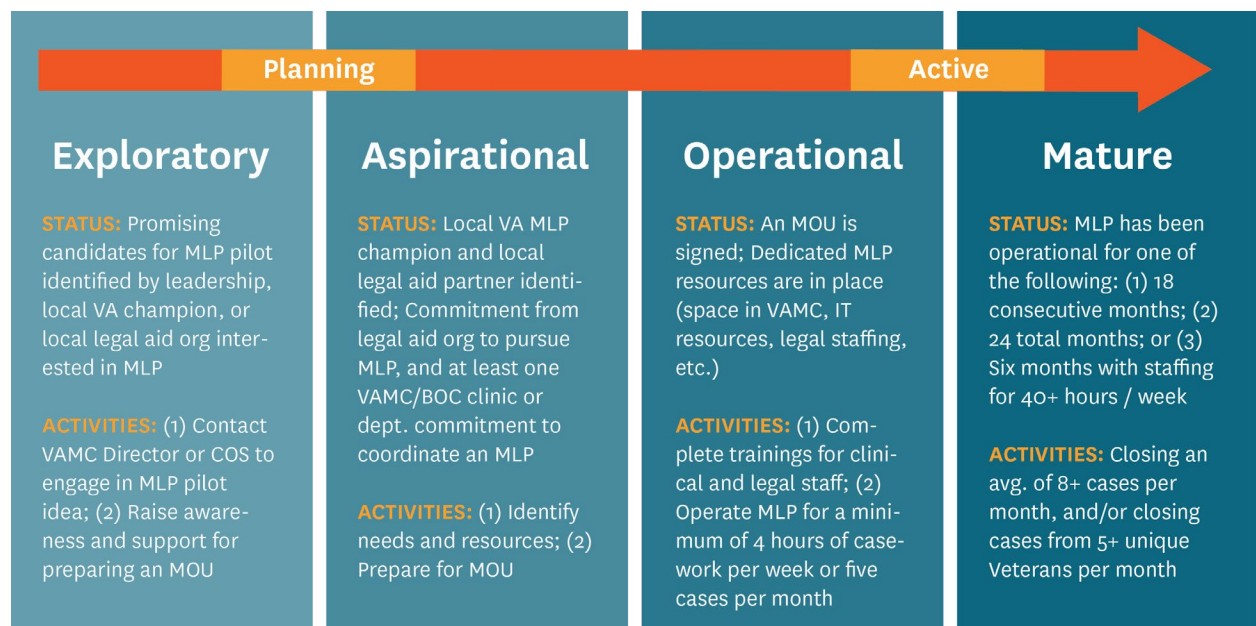
Medical-legal partnerships can spend up to 6 to 12 months just in the exploratory and aspirational phases of planning. During the MLP planning process, VAMC and legal partners discuss staffing and organizational arrangements to include the scope of legal services, funding and space.

VAMCs may begin their planning process with a legal partner already identified, such as a civil legal aid organization, law school, or pro bono partner – as such, many of the activities listed below are conducted collaboratively.

It is important to note that health care organizations and legal organizations represent different organizational structures, cultures, and disciplines. Some of the information laid out below may be more relevant to the VAMC, while other points may be geared toward the legal partner. As is the case in any partnership, understanding the resources, strengths, and constraints of each organization is key toward achieving common goals together.

**Figure 1. The VA MLP Pipeline**

There are more than 30 VA MLPs at different levels of maturity, and even more VAMCs are considering developing MLPs as well.



**STEP  
01****DEFINING YOUR TARGET POPULATION**

VA MLPs can be designed to be broad and serve a variety of legal issues facing low-income Veterans, or they can take a specialized focus on a specific clinical focus area or population. For example, an MLP may focus on women Veterans, behavioral health, or the homeless Veteran population. Many programs elect to start small with one clinic or a segment of the Veteran population, and then scale up over time.

Conducting a needs assessment of Veterans' social and environmental needs that aren't currently being addressed at the VAMC is an important initial step in building your MLP. Once this gap is identified, the VAMC can articulate the level/type of expertise that would be most beneficial for its Veterans. This step is important for selecting the right legal partner (see Step 2: Identifying a Legal Partner).

### **Understand the Social and Legal Needs of Your Population**

There are a number of resources that VAMCs can consult with to better understand the social and legal needs of their Veterans, and to identify those segments of the Veteran population that could benefit from legal services:

#### ***Community Homelessness Assessment, Local Education and Networking Groups (CHALENG) Survey***

This annual survey of homeless Veterans provides valuable information about the top unmet needs of this population. Each year, legal needs rise to the top of this list. Many low-income Veterans with pressing legal needs are either homeless or unstably housed. This survey can provide VAMCs with information about trends in legal needs among homeless Veterans nationally.

#### ***Literature on Veterans' Legal Needs and Medical-Legal Partnerships***

There is a growing body of literature and publications on Veterans' legal needs. Many of these resources are listed in the "State of the Field: Medical-Legal Partnerships Serving Veterans: History, Growth, and Progress", including "The Invisible Battlefield: Veterans Facing Health-Harming Legal Needs in Civilian Life" which describes the legal needs faced by Veterans that MLPs across the country are addressing. Included in the report are examples of how lawyers can assist with the top ranked legal challenges from the CHALENG survey (see additional resources below).

#### ***VAMC Departments and Staff that Engage with Veterans about Social Needs***

Many other VA departments and staff members may have insight into the unmet social needs of Veterans that they interact with at the VAMC. These departments may include social work, primary care clinics, homeless programs, geriatric clinics, mental health clinics, women's health clinics, hospital discharge planning, community-based partners, Veterans Advisory Council members, peer support specialists, care coordinators, financial navigators, and others. Engaging with these departments and staff to identify unmet needs among Veterans can be extremely beneficial at the outset to ensure that Veterans' top unmet social needs are identified and legal services are integrated into existing social support programs for Veterans at the VAMC.

#### ***Veterans Justice Outreach Specialists***

As specialists who devote their time to ensuring that Veterans involved in the criminal court system receive timely access to the Veterans Health Administration, VJOs often have all-around knowledge of the VAMC, the local legal landscape, and the civil legal issues impacting Veterans. Though these specialists interact with Veterans who are navigating criminal matters (unlike MLPs which typically deal in civil legal matters), it is not uncommon for these same Veterans to also be facing a myriad of civil legal

issues. The VJO often refers Veterans to local legal resources for civil legal issues and may be a useful resource for a VAMC to consult when conducting the needs assessment process.

### ***Survey Your Patients and/or VAMC Staff Directly about Top Legal Needs***

Though there are many common needs that Veterans share, every VAMC organization and Veteran population is different. Asking Veterans and staff directly about the most prevalent unmet legal needs in your organization allows you to collect more targeted information for your needs assessment, while generating initial awareness and buy-in for the MLP at the same time. Some MLPs do this formally through instruments like surveys or by collecting data from community-based partners; while others gather information informally by collecting anecdotal information and polling groups like Veterans who attend VAMC support groups, for example. Be sure to check with your VAMC about any vetting or special approval required before surveying VA staff.

## **VA MLP NEEDS ASSESSMENT**

Early on in their MLP implementation, the VA Maine Healthcare System Togus VAMC and Pine Tree Legal Assistance developed an all staff survey to gather information on staff perceptions and awareness of Veterans' legal needs. The results of the survey were used to inform the MLP on how to target its resources in terms of serving Veterans, as well as how to focus its training of VAMC staff in legal concepts that they reported less familiarity with. The assessment generated initial awareness for the MLP, and received a healthy response rate due to the Medical Director agreeing to personally distribute the survey along with a message about the importance of the assessment to staff (To view the survey instrument, see Appendix A1: MLP Needs Assessment for VA Maine Healthcare System).

If surveying all VAMC staff is not possible, smaller surveys or polls can be effective too. Consider focusing your efforts on gathering information from a representative group of staff members with varied interactions with Veterans, including frontline staff, physicians and other clinical staff, and social workers. Social workers especially have a sense for the social needs that go unaddressed in the organization due to a lack of expertise or capacity.

### **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

1. "State of the Field: Medical-Legal Partnerships Serving Veterans: History, Growth, and Progress"
2. [VA Project CHALENG](#) (Community Homelessness Assessment, Local Education and Networking Groups).
3. Tsai J, Blue-Howells J, Nakashima J. [Needs of homeless Veterans: 5 years of the CHALENG Survey 2012-16](#). Journal of Public Health. 2018 May:1-9.
4. Manchanda R, Murphy S, Lawton E, Middleton M. [The invisible battlefield: Veterans facing health-harming legal needs in civilian life](#). Washington, DC: National Center for Medical-Legal Partnership; Jun 2016.
5. VA Maine Healthcare System Togus VAMC/Pine Tree Legal Assistance MLP Needs Assessment (See Appendix A1)



## **Identify Your Initial Target Population**

Once you have data in hand to illustrate the most prevalent unmet social needs, you will want to weigh two considerations:

### ***What can a lawyer help with?***





Your needs assessment may uncover unmet social needs that may or may not have a remedy in law. In order to better understand which social determinants of health can be assisted by a lawyer, consult the “Veterans I-HELP Framework” (See Table 1).

You also may uncover unmet needs for which there is no local legal expertise or capacity in your region to address these matters. For example, in rural areas there may be a lack of access to legal organizations that handle family law or disability compensation matters. In Step 2, you will identify a legal partner and will think through issues related to legal capacity and expertise.

### ***What is the best fit for the MLP from a clinical perspective?***

Free legal services for Veterans are limited and demand is often high. MLPs report a median of 1.0 legal FTE per health care site, with legal professionals being on site at least a couple of days per week. Deciding where to deploy these limited resources to achieve maximum impact is key. There is also a learning curve to embedding a new program into any health care setting. Some MLPs have found success by starting small and/or tying legal services to a specific clinical initiative, a particular clinic, or segment of the population when possible. Targeting legal services with intentionality may afford the MLP a chance to define the intervention for staff, identify a specific clinical champion to support the start of the effort, and to embed legal services in a priority clinical focus area. Initial, demonstrated success in one clinic or population may allow you the opportunity to broaden your defined population and expand the availability of services over time.

**Table 2. How Legal Services Help Address the Social Determinants of Health of Veterans**

Common Social Determinant of Health	How Legal Services Can Help Veterans	Impact of Legal Services on Health / Health Care
<p><b>INCOME</b> Resources to meet daily basic needs</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Appeal benefits denials, e.g. food stamps, social security, and disability benefits</li> <li>• Address consumer issues (debt, bankruptcy, student loans, credit history)</li> <li>• Resolve benefits overpayment</li> </ul>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Increasing a Veteran’s income means s/he makes fewer trade-offs between affording basic needs, such as food or housing, and health care, including medications.</li> <li>2. Financial stability ensures that Veterans have a place to live and can focus on their health.</li> </ol>
<p><b>HOUSING &amp; UTILITIES</b> A healthy physical environment</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Secure housing subsidies</li> <li>• Improve substandard conditions</li> <li>• Prevent evictions or foreclosures</li> <li>• Protect against utility shut-off</li> </ul>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. A stable, decent, affordable home helps Veterans avoid costly emergency room visits related to homelessness.</li> <li>2. Consistent housing, heat and electricity help Veterans follow their medical treatment plans.</li> </ol>
<p><b>EDUCATION &amp; EMPLOYMENT</b> Quality educational and job opportunities</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prevent and remedy employment discrimination</li> <li>• Enforce workplace rights</li> <li>• Secure service-connected education benefits</li> <li>• Secure unemployment compensation or unpaid wages</li> </ul>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. A quality education is one of the single greatest predictors of a person’s adult health.</li> <li>2. Consistent employment helps provide money for food and safe housing, which also helps avoid costly emergency health care services.</li> </ol>
<p><b>LEGAL STATUS</b> Access to jobs and VA benefits</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Secure discharge status upgrades and record corrections for eligible Veterans</li> <li>• Secure VA benefits for eligible Veterans</li> <li>• Secure proper identification</li> <li>• Clear driving record problems</li> </ul>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Helping a Veteran change their discharge status or correct their records helps make access to VA benefits possible, including health care and other benefits.</li> <li>2. Securing proper identification and records is essential to helping Veterans secure stable employment.</li> </ol>
<p><b>PERSONAL &amp; FAMILY STABILITY</b> Safe homes and social support</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Address family issues, e.g. divorce, child custody, guardianship, and visitation</li> <li>• Help modify child support agreements to be consistent with income and resources</li> <li>• Assist with advance planning, e.g. wills and power of attorney</li> </ul>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Stable family relationships significantly reduce stress and allow for better decision-making, including decisions related to health care.</li> <li>2. A modified child support agreement stabilizes a Veteran’s income and prevents arrests from unpaid child support, which reduces criminal convictions, incarcerations, and criminal records.</li> </ol>

Source: Modified from the messaging guide, [“Framing Legal Care as Health Care.”](#)

## Examples of MLPs that Target Specific Veteran Populations

A number of VA MLPs offer targeted legal services for segments of the Veteran population that face specific, or more predominant legal needs tied to their age, gender, or medical conditions.

Several examples of these targeted services can be found at LegalHealth, which is part of the New York Legal Assistance Group and has set up MLPs in the Manhattan Campus of the VA New York Harbor Healthcare System, the James J. Peters VA Medical Center in the Bronx, and the Northport VA Medical Center in Long Island. LegalHealth currently operates four distinct clinics at each of the VAs in the City, and a general clinic at the Northport VA. This enables the MLP lawyers to focus on specific legal issues that are common among each unique Veteran population. While one MLP at each VA facility is accessible to the general Veteran population, LegalHealth also offers targeted legal services specifically designed for women Veterans, older Veterans, and post-9/11 Veterans. Each of these Veteran populations faces distinct legal barriers to health and wellbeing that MLP lawyers address in a more targeted way. This enables the MLP lawyers to become experts in the legal services needed by these high-need Veteran populations. A variety of resources from LegalHealth and their VA partners can be found throughout this Guide and Appendices.

### *Caring for the Legal Needs of Older Veterans*

The San Francisco VA Health Care System operates an MLP for older Veterans. Legal services are offered to Veterans in the geriatric and palliative care clinics, the Community Living Center (or nursing home), and the inpatient hospital. This model enables the MLP lawyer to provide a range of services that are targeted for older Veterans including accessing Veterans benefits; creating advance directives, durable powers of attorney, wills; assigning representative payees, and creating conservatorships. The MLP lawyer also provides

assistance with housing, consumer debt issues, and elder neglect or abuse. Older, lower income Veterans are a particularly vulnerable population for which MLP services can be extremely beneficial in preventing unnecessary use of health care services and poor health outcomes. For example, a major barrier to discharging older Veterans from the hospital is the lack of a durable power of attorney for finances. This process can take time to put into place and MLP lawyers can work with the social work team to coach an older Veteran through the process before it is needed, preventing the individual from being stuck in the hospital, when they might be too frail or overwhelmed with the process to get this in place expeditiously. Older Veterans may also be stuck in a hospital or nursing home for an extended period of time if they are homeless or if they lose their housing while they are in treatment and there is no safe place for them to be discharged. MLP lawyers can help secure access to safe, affordable housing for older Veterans and can help to prevent older Veterans from losing their housing. Older Veterans who are denied health care, disability, or other benefits may avoid using necessary health care services due to cost or other barriers, such as transportation, even as they age and their conditions worsen. MLP lawyers can work to ensure that Veterans have the health benefits and other social services that they need to age well.

### *VA MLP for Women Veterans*

In 2017, LegalHealth opened some of the first legal clinics in the country to specifically address the legal needs of women Veterans. The clinics, located at the Bronx and Manhattan VA Hospitals, were created with the goal to provide a space for women Veterans. Women Veterans often face a number of health and social challenges that are distinct from their male counterparts. For example, most of the Veterans served at the Women's Health Center have posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) secondary to military sexual trauma (MST), and many are experiencing homelessness.

The VA Long Beach Healthcare System developed a similar MLP to address the legal needs of this specific Veteran population. Women Veterans served at these MLPs often feel more comfortable discussing sensitive topics, including military sexual trauma, with a female MLP lawyer at the VA women’s clinic who has sensitivity to MST and uses trauma-informed language compared to other organizations that might assist with these types of claims. Women Veterans often avoid other organizations because of a fear of not being believed or due to the prospect of having to work with a man or someone who lacks sensitivity to MST that can re-traumatize the women Veteran.

This acknowledges that the woman’s service was harmed by the trauma, not her performance or conduct, and the VA acknowledges this and is there for them to offer the support and health care services they need to recover. Dr. Baggett explains that when a discharge upgrade is approved for a woman Veteran with MST, “that has been really powerful in terms of healing and validation from this horrific trauma.”

#### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

1. Regenstein M, Trott J, Williamson A. [The state of the medical-legal partnership field: findings from the 2016 National Center for Medical-Legal Partnership surveys](#); Aug 2017.
2. [How legal services help health care address the social determinants of health](#). Washington, DC: National Center for Medical-Legal Partnership; Jan 2015.
3. Regenstein M, Trott J, Williamson A, Theiss J. [Assessing social determinants of health through medical-legal partnerships](#). *Health Affairs (Millwood)*. 2018 Mar; 37(3):378-385.
4. Long P, Abrams M, Milstein A, Anderson G, Apton KL, Dahlberg ML, et al., eds. [Effective care for high-need patients: opportunities for improving outcomes, value, and health](#). 2017. Washington, DC: National Academy of Medicine.



*“The act of putting in a claim or requesting a discharge upgrade itself has some really powerful potential for the healing process from MST specifically because [the MST] is so often not acknowledged, missed, or minimized, or the person is even blamed for it. So the very act of submitting a claim is the Veteran standing up and saying, ‘Hey. This happened to me, and it’s not okay, and here is how it has impacted me,’ which for many women it may be the first time they are doing this or the first time they are doing this with support. It allows them to speak up for themselves and to have the trauma acknowledged by the system which allowed it to happen.”*

Dr. Linda Baggett, Director and Staff Psychologist  
VA Long Beach Healthcare System Women’s Mental Health Center



Selecting an appropriate legal partner is key to the success of a medical-legal partnership. The legal organization partner should work with the VAMC to lay the groundwork for the partnership and to provide the appropriate on and off-site legal staffing needed to assist Veterans and form important relationships with VAMC clinical and frontline staff. It is also important for the success of the MLP that the leadership and legal staff from this organization be willing to familiarize themselves with the operations, structure, and culture of the VAMC in order to effectively integrate MLP legal services into Veteran healthcare.

In searching for a legal partner, it is essential to begin by identifying those organizations that currently provide legal services to low-income individuals in your community. Below, we outline the main types of organizations that provide free legal services to low-income individuals, discuss how to assess which resources are available in your community, and provide considerations for determining a good fit. We conclude with some important resources for MLP lawyers providing legal services to Veterans.

### **Understand the Types of Legal Services Organizations Serving Low-Income Individuals**

In general, there are three kinds of legal partners that provide free legal services to low-income individuals throughout the country and may be potential legal partners for your VA MLP. They are: (1) Nonprofit civil legal services organizations; (2) Law school clinics; and (3) Pro bono legal services provided through private law firms, corporations, and bar associations.

VA MLPs are supported by one or more of the types of legal partners described below (e.g. a

VAMC may partner with both a law school clinic and a private law firm that provides pro bono legal aid services).

#### ***Nonprofit Civil Legal Aid Organizations***

Nonprofit civil legal aid organizations represent the largest category of potential legal partners. There are approximately 1,000 nonprofit civil legal aid organizations in the United States. Nonprofit civil legal aid organizations serve as the legal partner in over 70% of MLPs, according to the National Center for Medical-Legal Partnership 2016 national survey findings.

In general, nonprofit civil legal aid organizations provide free legal services to individuals who are deemed unable to afford a lawyer, usually by virtue of an established income threshold, such as a percentage of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL). Nonprofit civil legal services organizations handle civil legal matters, including landlord-tenant disputes, consumer debt, and family law, though the services offered will vary from organization to organization. In general, these organizations do not handle criminal matters, though some will provide limited services on low-level criminal matters that cannot result in jail or prison time.

These organizations are often further divided into those that receive funding from the Legal Services Corporation (LSC), a congressionally-funded corporation that provides grants to legal aid organizations serving low-income individuals. LSC provides funding to 133 legal aid organizations. Legal aid organizations that use LSC funding to provide legal services may only offer services to those individuals with household incomes up to 125% FPL.

Organizations that do not receive LSC funding constitute the bulk of nonprofit civil legal services organizations. Their eligibility requirements for providing legal services will vary, but all will consider an individual's income or other personal circumstances before agreeing to provide legal services. For example,

an organization may provide free legal services to survivors of interpersonal violence even if they have income above the organization's established income threshold. Legal services organizations that offer legal services to Veterans (or other special populations) may have a higher income threshold, such as 200% FPL. Legal services funded through the Older Americans Act do not have a specific income eligibility threshold, but are required to target services to the most "socially and economically vulnerable" older adults in the community.

#### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

1. Regenstein M, Trott J, Williamson A. [The state of the medical-legal partnership field: findings for the 2016 National Center for Medical-Legal Partnership surveys](#); Aug 2017.
2. [StatesideLegal.org](#), a directory of free legal services available for Veterans.
3. Information on nonprofit legal aid organizations from the [National Legal Aid and Defenders Association \(NLADA\)](#), a national advocacy organization that provides technical assistance to legal aid organizations.
4. Information on qualifying for free legal services from [American Bar Association](#) (ABA), a national organization of lawyers which also accredits law schools.
5. Description of how [LSC provides grants to civil legal services organizations](#).

#### Law School Clinics

Law schools establish clinics to enable law students to develop experience in legal practice, while providing much-needed legal services to low-income individuals. Law school clinics serve as the legal partner in 20% of MLPs, according to the National Center for Medical-Legal Partnership 2016 national survey findings.

The vast majority of the 203 ABA-accredited law schools in the U.S. operate clinics. Law school clinics often specialize in a certain legal area, such as children's advocacy, estates and trusts, or housing. Many law schools operate clinics that focus specifically on Veterans, and often communicate via listserv. See William & Mary Law School's list for all Veterans-specific law school clinics. The National Law School Veterans Clinic Consortium is a member organization for lawyers providing legal services to Veterans. Law students must be supervised by professors or other licensed lawyers, and law students participate on a temporary basis (e.g., for one semester).

#### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

1. [List of American Bar Association-Approved Law Schools](#).
2. William & Mary Law School's list for all [Veterans-specific law school clinics](#).
3. [National Law School Veterans Clinic Consortium](#).
4. Wizner S. [The law school clinic: Legal education in the interests of justice](#). *Fordham Law Review*. 2002;70(5):1929-1937.
5. [Association of American Law Schools](#), a membership organization of 179 law schools.
6. [Clinical Legal Education Association](#), a membership organization dedicated to advancing clinical legal education in law schools.

### Pro Bono Legal Services

Pro bono legal services are provided by lawyers on a volunteer basis. For example, a lawyer employed by a private law firm may decide to volunteer their time and expertise to individuals who are unable to pay to hire them. Less than 10% of MLPs use pro bono legal services as their legal partner, according to the 2016 National Center for Medical-Legal Partnerships national survey.

Lawyers may provide pro bono legal services individually, but the provision of pro bono legal services are often coordinated through law firms or large corporations (which may have a department devoted to pro bono legal services), bar associations that coordinate the provision of legal services through volunteer lawyers, or referral networks in which a central organization matches volunteer lawyers to

individuals in need. For example, the ABA has a committee devoted to pro bono legal services specifically for Veterans. In addition, nonprofit legal aid organizations may ask private lawyers to volunteer to assist clients in discrete matters when demand exceeds supply or expertise. For example, volunteer lawyers might provide pro bono legal services through legal clinics in estate planning. Volunteer lawyers may also be trained in the specific legal area by the pro bono department of the law firm, corporation, the bar association, or the nonprofit legal aid organization.

#### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

1. More information on [pro bono legal services from the ABA](#).
2. [ABA Pro Bono Resources for Veterans](#).

**Table 2. Overview of Legal Partners**

	NONPROFIT LEGAL SERVICES ORGS	LAW SCHOOL CLINICS	PRO BONO LEGAL SERVICES
<b>National leaders</b>	Legal Services Corporation (LSC) and National Legal Aid & Defender Association (NLADA)	Association of American Law Schools (AALS)	American Bar Association (ABA)
<b>Scope</b>	133 LSC-funded organizations; 800+ non-LSC-funded organizations	170+ law schools offering clinics	900+ pro bono programs
<b>Funding</b>	\$374 million in LSC grants and \$600 million additional (est.)	\$75 million (est.)	\$180 million (est.)
<b>Case priorities</b>	Focus on basic needs: housing, income, safety. Non-LSC funded organizations may have a greater focus on policy matters.	Vary widely	Vary widely

## Assess Your Local Legal Resources

After you have become familiar with the different kinds of free legal resources serving low-income individuals, it is important to assess the options available in your community. The ABA and LSC include tools to search nonprofit legal services organizations by city/state or zip code. Statesidelegal.org includes a directory of legal services organizations offering services to Veterans as well. The ABA also identifies all accredited law schools in the country on its website. Your state's bar association may include a list of pro bono legal services. The VA MLP Taskforce can also assist you in locating and assessing potential legal partners.

### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

1. [List of American Bar Association-Approved Law Schools](#).
2. [StatesideLegal.org](#). Find Legal Help by State.

## Factor in Key Considerations When Evaluating a Potential Legal Partner

### *Capacity and Access to Legal Services*

Unfortunately, in the U.S. there is a shortage of legal services available for all of the low-income individuals who need them. LSC estimates that, in 2017, 86% of the civil legal needs faced by low-income individuals went unaddressed, in part due to a shortage of lawyers providing services to low-income individuals. While law school clinics and pro bono legal services attempt to bridge this "justice gap," the fact remains that the need for free legal services outstrips supply.

In considering which potential legal partner to select, it is important to have a clear understanding of the number of lawyers and support for those lawyers that the legal partner can dedicate to the MLP, as well as the number of hours per week the lawyer(s) will be available on-site to ensure adequate access to legal services for Veterans. You should also discuss how many hours the MLP lawyer(s) will be dedicating to legal work on behalf of the Veterans when they are not on-site. It should be

noted that the lawyer's availability on-site is crucial as it enables the lawyer(s) to become part of the Veteran's health care team and increases the visibility of the VA MLP. The MOU (see Step 4) should lay out the specific staffing expectations discussed here (e.g. number of legal staff, number of hours per week on-site, and number of hours committed to VA MLP work while off-site).

If you anticipate a high level of legal needs within the target Veteran population, you may also consider partnering with more than one legal resource, such as a civil legal services organization and a pro bono department of a law firm.

Finally, along with evaluating potential legal partners for their capacity to serve your target Veteran population, it is also important to work closely with the potential legal partner(s) to identify the individual lawyer(s) that will be dedicated to your MLP. This lawyer will be the face of the legal partner at the VAMC, the main point of contact between the VAMC and the legal services organization, and will be working directly with Veterans and their health care team to address Veterans' legal matters. It is important to interview the lawyer(s) and evaluate whether they are:

- Self-starters;
- Knowledgeable (or willing to learn) about the organizational structure and culture of the VAMC;
- Able to successfully forge and maintain relationships with busy professionals such as social workers and clinicians; and
- Knowledgeable (or willing to learn) about the key legal and health issues facing Veterans.

In addition, find out whether the lawyer(s) have prior experience working with clients who have experienced trauma, as legal consultation may bring up past experiences, such as military sexual trauma, that require a sensitive approach and the support of behavioral health staff.



### **Continuity**

Another consideration concerns continuity of MLP legal staffing. As discussed above, law school clinics consist of law students who are committed to the clinic for temporary periods, which may be as short as a three- or four-month semester. While law school professors or adjunct faculty directing the clinic will remain in place, this turnover may require some adjustment for the MLP. Health care staff and Veterans often build trust and reliance upon the MLP lawyer(s) and may have some difficulty with constantly adjusting to new faces and relationships. Similarly, in pro bono legal services, volunteer lawyers may not be able to handle more than a few cases at a time, given that they are often full-time employees of law firms, and may not be able to volunteer for long periods of time.

### **Understanding of Intersection between Health and Law**

Potential legal partners that have an understanding of the social determinants of health, and how legal interventions can address health and health care, will be easier to work alongside than those which are unfamiliar of these connections. Along with looking for organizations that have MLP experience or health justice practice (or a law school clinic focusing on these issues), also consider whether the organization is involved in the community, and has a reputation for being flexible and working well with other community partners.

### **Expertise in Veterans' Legal Matters**

In Step 1, you conducted a needs assessment and defined the target population, including the top legal needs faced by the Veteran population you intend to serve. It is important to match these legal needs to the services offered by the potential legal partner. As discussed above, and set out in detail in the MOU, you will be working closely with your legal partner(s) to identify the lawyer(s) who will be assigned to the MLP, and they should – as much as possible

– have expertise that aligns with the top issues faced by the target Veteran population. As noted in Chart 1, the services offered by law school clinics and pro bono legal services may vary widely, so you will need to research those services provided by the potential legal partners in your community. For example, if one of the top legal needs faced by the population concerns child custody, you should ensure that the legal services organization handles family law cases, and that the MLP lawyer(s) is familiar with child custody matters. To the extent that issues arise which the legal partner cannot handle, or cannot assign to another lawyer within their organization, it is the legal partner's role to refer out to another resource within the community when possible. Note that private law firm or pro bono lawyers may be enthusiastic partners but may require additional cultural competency training if they are not accustomed to working with Veterans or other socially and economically vulnerable populations.

Further, potential legal partners should have an understanding of the requirements for VA MLPs that may be different from other health care partners. For example, legal partners must be able to independently fund legal services through legal resources or philanthropic resources (see Step 3: Funding the Medical-Legal Partnership), and the VAMC must provide information about other legal resources in the community so as not to endorse one provider. Potential legal partners must understand the scope of the VAMC's involvement, including that VA health care providers can refer Veterans and assist in identifying legal needs in the course of clinical care, but cannot perform any tasks outside the scope of their employment.

### **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

1. [The justice gap: measuring the unmet civil legal needs of low-income Americans](#). Washington, DC: Legal Services Corporation; Jun 2017.

## STRATEGIC PLANNING AT BAY PINES

During the MLP planning phase, Bay Pines VAMC staff considered how an MLP would fit into their organizational goals, mission, and capacity. While Bay Pines VAMC leadership immediately saw the potential for legal services to help vulnerable Veterans at the medical center, MLP staff members found that incorporating VA priorities and language such as “whole health” into their work helped to integrate the new initiative into the existing organizational structure and priorities. Additionally, aligning legal services with Bay Pines VAMC’s goal to address Veteran homelessness, a specific objective that leadership wanted to accomplish, made it easier to generate support for the program. Bay Pines VAMC staff saw that legal services would complement the robust array of supportive services and outreach programs available for vulnerable Veterans, including Veterans experiencing homelessness. Therefore, the social work department was intentionally selected to house the Bay Pines MLP. Bay Area Legal Services staff worked closely with the Bay Pines VAMC social work team for several months to plan their MLP program prior to launch. MLP staff identified available in-house resources, analyzed the number of Veterans in their entire catchment area, and examined their space constraints to determine the number of Veterans that could be accommodated for legal services. VA staff also reviewed current VA Community Homelessness Assessment, Local Education and Networking Groups (CHALENG) survey results to identify unmet legal needs of at-risk or homeless Veteran populations, which tend to report frequent and pressing unmet legal needs. Once these unmet needs were identified, the VA and Bay Area Legal Services legal partners discussed which unmet Veterans’ needs could be addressed by Bay Area Legal Services. Bay Pines VAMC staff also spent time learning from Bay Area Legal Services about what medical-legal partnership are and how they work. Bay Area Legal Services, also provided substantive legal training to the social work team and medical providers that assisted with spotting and identifying potential legal issues. By the time the MLP was launched, MLP staff and partners had forged a meaningful partnership that is reflected in the high quality services provided.

## Approaching Potential Legal Partner(s)

After you have determined the local legal resources and narrowed this list based on capacity, continuity, understanding of the approach, and the types of legal services offered, the next step is to approach potential legal partners. Table 3 outlines the roles of the common staff members within various legal services organizations.

**Table 3. Roles within Legal Resources**

RESOURCE	PERSON	ROLE
<b>Nonprofit Legal Services Organizations</b>	Civil Legal Aid Executives <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Board of Directors</li> <li>• Executive Director</li> <li>• Deputy/Associate Director</li> <li>• Managing Attorney</li> </ul>	Civil legal aid executives have a deep understanding of the legal barriers that low income and vulnerable people commonly face. They must have a role in the planning process and development of the MOU. They also understand their organization's financial situation and can be helpful partners when thinking about sources of funding for a new VA MLP.
	Civil Legal Aid Front-Line Staff <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff Attorneys</li> <li>• Paralegals</li> <li>• Legal Secretaries</li> </ul>	To ensure buy-in from the legal resource, it is important to engage with staff attorneys, paralegals, and legal secretaries. Further, consider whether your organization has already had contact with any of the front-line staff (e.g., through referrals for legal matters), and they may already understand the benefit of the MLP approach and may champion the approach to executives as well.
<b>Law School Clinics</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dean</li> <li>• Clinic Faculty</li> </ul>	Law school leaders, such as the dean, and faculty, such as the directors of law school clinics (which may be law school professors and/or practicing lawyers), bring academic experience and an educational mission. They can be an effective partner with other legal allies, but often have limited service capacity relative to Veterans in need. Clinic faculty that has handled Veterans-specific matters in the past may have an understanding of the benefit of MLP services.
<b>Pro Bono Legal Services</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Director of pro bono practice</li> <li>• Corporate legal departments</li> </ul>	The director of the pro bono practice for a law firm, bar association or referral network often coordinates pro bono activities or identifies pro bono opportunities that exist in nonprofit legal services organizations. This individual will be able to provide an overview of the areas to consider in selecting a partner (e.g., capacity and types of legal services). They are likely to have a good understanding of the legal services already available to Veterans in the community, and understand potential gaps.

### ***Receiving VA Accreditation for Benefits Issues***

If they are going to be assisting with VA benefits claims, lawyers partnering in VA MLPs are required to be accredited by the VA before they are allowed to represent Veterans.

- Use the VA Accreditation Search tool to determine whether your MLP lawyer is already certified. Note that each individual lawyer within the legal partner that provides legal services must be certified.
- Complete the requirements for accreditation and note the requirements for maintaining accreditation, including continuing legal education credits.
- In addition, legal partners should be aware of the requirements, established by federal regulation 38 CFR §14.632, for all VA-accredited lawyers.

#### **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

1. [VA Accreditation Search Tool](#).
2. [VA Accreditation Program](#): How to Apply for VA Accreditation as an Attorney or Claims Agent.

### ***Criminal Law Issues***

Legal partners that provide civil legal assistance often do not provide assistance with criminal law matters. Veterans Justice Outreach specialists may be a good resource for Veterans with criminal law issues. MLP lawyers and VA medical staff may consider providing Veterans with information to help them access representation for criminal law issues that cannot be addressed by the MLP lawyer. For example, some MLP lawyers are able to assist with expungement of criminal records, but not representation for criminal law issues. Ask your legal partner about the scope of their services for criminal law matters.

#### **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

1. [Veterans Justice Outreach Program](#).
2. Stateside Legal. [Getting help with criminal cases](#).

### ***Connecting with other VA MLPs and their Lawyers***

Understanding the specific needs of Veterans is essential for any VA MLP lawyer. Fortunately, there are several ways that MLP lawyers and VA MLP teams can connect with other professionals who are participating in a VA MLP, or who are working in other capacities to support Veterans' unmet legal needs:

- VA MLP Task Force email: [VAMLPTaskforce@va.gov](mailto:VAMLPTaskforce@va.gov)
- William and Mary Veterans Legal Services Listserv- contact: [Veterans@wm.edu](mailto:Veterans@wm.edu)
- [List of Free Legal Clinics in VA Facilities](#).
- [VA MLP Community Forum](#) (requires a VA.gov email address or PIV card).

With no one predominant source of funding for medical-legal partnerships, funding is nearly always a top challenge for sustainability. More often than not, VA MLPs rely on patchwork of funding sources for support. Though identifying initial funding for the MLP is naturally top of mind during the planning process, MLPs and their legal partners should also plan ahead for future funding, anticipating future strategic growth and the potential instability of time-limited grants and fellowship programs. Understanding the potential sources of VA MLP funding and what comprises a VA MLP budget are two important steps in funding a medical-legal partnership.

### Become Familiar with the Potential Sources of MLP Funding

In 2011, the VHA issued Directive 2011-034, which encourages VAMCs to provide physical space for local legal services providers seeking to assist Veterans. However, there is currently no additional guidance that recognizes the VHA's authority to fund the provision of legal services in the MLP (for an in-depth discussion around the VA's current policies related ability to funding of MLPs, see the NLADA Policy scan). Given this reality, VA MLPs and their legal partners draw upon diverse funding streams to support their work.

#### Federal Funding

A host of federal funding streams are available to support civil legal aid, including the provision of legal services in MLP. The federal Legal Aid Interagency Roundtable, which is comprised of 22 federal members including the VA, leverages resources to strengthen Federal programs by incorporating legal aid. When existing and new federal grant opportunities become available, the National Legal Aid and Defender Association (NLADA) informs the civil legal aid community

through its Project to Advance Civil Legal Aid Collaborations.

In addition, the American University Justice in Government Project (JGP) Toolkit "[Grants Matrix](#)" identifies federal funds administered at the state and local government levels that allow spending to address the civil legal needs of residents. As a complement to the federal grants announced on the NLADA website where applicants apply directly to the federal agency, the Grants Matrix provides an overview of *state-administered* federal funds, including block, formula, and open-end reimbursement grants, that can support legal aid and are disbursed by state and local government policymakers. The [JGP Toolkit](#) also has examples of how states have used these funds to advance their goals with legal aid, and helpful tips, like how to find your state's administrator, how much funding is available, and where to find state-specific plans and reports. Connecting to this activity are important steps in identifying federal funding to support MLPs. Those of special interest are listed below:

#### VA Funding Streams

**Supportive Services for Veteran Families:** The Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) Program began in FY 2012 to provide grants to non-profit organizations that will coordinate or provide supportive services to very low-income Veteran families who are residing in or transitioning to permanent housing. A number of community agencies were awarded grants to provide SSVF services in the form of Rapid Rehousing and Homeless Prevention. Other eligible supportive services under the SSVF Program include case management, outreach, financial assistance, assistance in obtaining VA and other public benefits including legal services. As such, the VA strongly encouraged grantees under this program to provide legal services to assist participants with issues that interfere with participants' ability to obtain or retain permanent housing or supportive services. SSVF Legal Services can be provided directly by the primary grantee or indirectly via referral. Indeed, SSVF permits funding for legal

assistance to prevent eviction and foreclosure, to help restore drivers' licenses, for child support issues, for outstanding warrants and fines, family reconciliation assistance, credit counseling, and access Veterans and public benefits. Practically speaking, however, SSVF may not be a source of funding to sustain for MLP because of its limited focus.

**The Maintaining Internal Systems and Strengthening Integrated Outside Networks (MISSION) Act:** Just enacted in 2018, the MISSION Act envisions funding legal services for Veterans' caregivers and will enable this population to receive the legal help that they need. Presently, the VA is reviewing how this program will be set-up, but it may provide additional opportunities for civil legal aid programs – and indeed VA MLP partners – to access additional funding to provide legal assistance for these important caregivers.

### **Legal Services Corporation**

The Legal Services Corporation (LSC) is an independent nonprofit organization that was established by Congress in 1974 to provide civil legal assistance to low-income Americans with incomes at or below 125% of the Federal Poverty Level. LSC is now the single largest funder of civil legal aid for low-income individuals nationwide. LSC funds are authorized by Congress annually and disbursed to local civil legal aid organizations nationwide through competitive grants.

Many LSC grantees serve as the legal partner organization in MLPs nationwide. LSC helps support civil legal aid for more than one million Americans every year, but data shows that the funding is not nearly enough to cover the need for legal services. Due to lack of resources, LSC grantees are unable to fully address more than half the civil legal needs for which people seek help. Additionally, legal aid organizations that receive any LSC funds are subject to certain restrictions on activities that they are able to engage in and populations they can serve. These restrictions can limit the scope of legal

assistance provided by LSC-funded legal organizations that participate in MLPs. VAMCs should check with potential legal organization partners on the nature of these restrictions.

### **State-Administered Federal Funds**

States receive a significant influx of federal pass-through funds to implement many public policies and programs, including those to enable access to health care, income security, education, employment, social services, and housing, and to improve family stability and public safety. Many opportunities to financially support civil legal aid flow from states' powers to administer some of those federal funding sources. This [Grants Matrix](#) focuses on the block, formula, and open-end reimbursement grants where the federally-established amounts and spending parameters give states flexibility to tailor spending to local priorities and infrastructure and allows for state spending on civil legal aid. Each of the federal funding sources have their own rules, regulations, formulas, and degrees of flexibility.

Some of the state-administered federal block grants can be tapped by VA MLPs and legal organizations to support civil legal services for homeless and/or low-income veterans. For example, the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) distributes to states the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Block Grants and Opioid State Targeted Response Grants. SAMHSA states that state agencies funded by the mental health and substance abuse block grants "may wish to develop and support partnerships and programs to help address social determinants of health and advance overall health equity. For instance, some organizations have established medical-legal partnerships to assist persons with mental and substance use disorders in meeting their housing, employment, and education needs." The Corporation for National and Community Service's AmeriCorps State and National grant with its history of supporting AmeriCorps legal assistance programs including specifically

medical-legal partnerships, names as two of its seven funding priorities “Healthy Futures – reducing and/or preventing prescription drug and opioid abuse” and “veterans.” While these are originally federal funds, the decision-makers about priorities and grantees are made by state administrators in state agencies.

#### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

1. [Legal Aid Interagency Roundtable](#).
2. National Legal Aid and Defender Association’s [Project to Advance Civil Legal Aid Collaborations](#).
3. VA Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF): [Supportive Services: Enhanced Services- Legal Services](#).
4. [Five Best Practices for SSVF Legal Services](#).
5. [Template Legal Services Contact – Flat Fee Arrangement](#).
6. VA Presentation: Legal Services and the SSVF Program (See Appendix II)
7. [The justice gap: measuring the unmet civil legal needs of low-income Americans](#). Washington, DC: Legal Services Corporation; 2017.
8. [LSC restrictions and other funding sources](#). Washington, DC: Legal Services Corporation; 2019.
9. [The Justice in Government Toolkit Module 2: Funding Civil Legal Aid](#). Washington, DC: American University, School of Public Affairs, Justice Programs Office.
10. [SAMHSA Substance Abuse and Mental Health Block Grants](#). Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, US Department of Health and Human Services.

#### *Other Sources of Funding and Support*

Other sources of funding and support for MLP also exist. These should be explored at the local-level, where the priorities for determining how to expend these resources are set.

#### **Interest on Lawyers Trust Accounts (IOLTA)**

**Funds:** Interest on Lawyers Trust Accounts (IOLTA) are state-operated programs designed to increase access to civil legal assistance for low-income individuals. IOLTA funds are generated through client funds that are held by lawyers in a trust for future use. If client funds cannot generate interest on their own, these funds are pooled in an interest-bearing state-administered IOLTA account. Interest generated from IOLTA accounts can be used to fund civil legal services and other access-to-justice programs for low-income individuals and families. While IOLTA is an important source of funding for MLP services, these funds are limited and insufficient to meet the demand for civil legal aid. IOLTA funds also fluctuate based on total account balances and interest rates, and changes in available funds can be significant, especially in economic downturns when access to civil legal assistance is particularly important.

**Law School Collaborations:** Law schools may provide civil legal assistance directly through legal clinics staffed by law professors, students, or other volunteers, financial support for partnership activities, or both. The most common way that law schools provide resources to MLPs is through committing legal staff as a part of their mission to support learning and training opportunities for law students to practice.

**Legal Fellowship Programs:** Legal fellowship programs like the one through Equal Justice Works support legal professionals who are looking to focus on important areas of service and law, including legal assistance for Veterans. Equal Justice Works connects law students and recent law school graduates with the funding, training, and professional mentorship to pursue a two-year fellowship engagement. Since 2005, 80 Equal Justice Works Fellows have either started or worked in medical-legal partnerships, serving Veterans, LGBTQ+ individuals, children, pregnant women, and immigrants. Since 2013, 8 Equal Justice Works Fellows have either started or worked in medical-legal partnerships serving Veterans at a VAMC facility, and many others have served Veterans through MLPs in other health care settings.

Although legal fellowship programs are an important asset to VA MLPs, partnerships should keep in mind that fellowships are time limited and subject to the fellow's specific area of legal expertise (for example, if a fellow's project is focused on Veterans' housing issues they may not have background in issues like family law). If it chooses to, the VA MLP will need to search for additional funding to keep the fellow on after the program's end.

#### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

1. [IOLTA.org](http://IOLTA.org). National Association of IOLTA Programs & ABA Commission on IOLTA; 2009.
2. [List of American Bar Association-Approved Law Schools](#).
3. [Equal Justice Works](#).
4. Equal Justice Works [fellowship projects related to Veterans legal rights](#).

#### Private Funders

The legal services provider in an MLP partnership will often need to identify additional sources of funding to sustain its MLP activities. Several VA MLPs receive funding from national and regional foundations, private donations, fundraisers, and other forms of charitable giving that support Veterans' issues, health, or social justice. While philanthropic funding sources have been a financial lifeline for MLPs across the country, this type of funding is usually time-limited and may not a sustainable source of financing in the long run. Additionally, it requires that valuable and limited MLP staff time – often the staff time of the MLP lawyers – be devoted to grant writing and reporting. Still, some VA MLPs have found ongoing success by devoting time to fundraising.



*It's not just that they [MLP lawyers] do great work and that they're co-located It's that they have to be fundraisers and development, and there's a whole other arm of the organization that has to maintain itself. And so, that ability to do that is tremendous.*

David Rosenthal, MD, Medical Director, Homeless Patient Aligned Care Team  
VA Connecticut Healthcare System Errera Community Care Center





## Understand What is Included in an MLP Budget

VA MLPs generally provide the following core services:

1. Legal intake and on-site direct legal services for Veterans (services range from brief legal advice to full representation);
2. Consultations with physicians and other VAMC staff about Veterans' legal needs;
3. Training on social determinants and legal issues for VAMC staff.

The MLP budget primarily supports legal staffing for the core services listed above. Free legal services are mainly provided by a designated MLP lawyer(s) from a civil legal aid nonprofit, law school, or private firm pro bono partner. To give VA MLPs a sense of what the average MLP staffing looks like, the national median staffing – including non-VA MLPs – is 1 FTE lawyer and 0.2 FTE from the health care organization to support the work of the partnership. The VA MLP Taskforce classifies an operational MLP as being staffed for casework at 4 or more hours per week or accepting 5 or more cases per month, and a mature MLP as being staffed to close 8 or more cases per month or serving 5 or more unique Veterans per month.

In Step 4: Developing a Memorandum of Understanding, you will define the legal services to be provided by the legal partner, including the total number of hours to be committed to the MLP, the services activities that will be undertaken, as well as the scope and nature of the services. This process will help to define the budget. It is worth noting that this likely underrepresent the total commitment of resources for MLP activities. It is not uncommon for MLPs to draw on resources not necessarily reflected in budgets, such as in-kind support from VAMCs (i.e. physical space for the MLP lawyer and staff time from a VAMC MLP

champion), fellowship programs for MLP lawyers, and other donated staffing from legal resources. VA MLPs may especially lean on in-kind support from VAMCs given that there is no directive that enables VA to contribute direct financial resources to the partnership.

VA MLPs should consider that different levels of staff support are needed depending on the stage of their development. For example, during the exploratory and aspirational phases, significant VAMC and legal partner staff time is required to complete the steps described in this Laying the Groundwork section. As they mature, MLPs may also need additional staff time to grow the partnership by building data infrastructure, improving the quality and consistency of Veteran referrals for legal services, reporting on progress, and continuing their grant writing efforts. VA MLPs might also consider including program evaluation or collaboration with researchers to demonstrate the effect of legal services for Veterans, return on investment of the MLP program, and quality improvement activities.

### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

1. NLADA VA MLP Policy Scan and Sustainability Issues
2. NCMLP Financing Brief

STEP  
04

DEVELOPING A MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING (MOU) AND UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION SHARING AND CONSENT

In Steps 1 through 3, you gave extensive consideration to what you want from your MLP. In this chapter, you will put into writing the decisions, goals, and resources that will shape the partnership.

### Develop a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)

An MOU is a renewable agreement entered into for a set period of time that outlines key responsibilities and expectations of the VAMC partner and the MLP legal partner, both individually and collectively. The process of drafting your MOU will formalize all of the decisions that the participants have made and ensure that all participants acknowledge the parameters of the relationship. It is important to be as specific and detailed as possible in setting out responsibilities and expectations and think strategically about how the elements of the MOU may enhance a successful partnership. For example, if the VA MLP partners think that demonstrating results like improved legal or health outcomes will be important for securing ongoing funding, data collection capacity may be included in the MOU. Or, if ongoing leadership or clinical involvement is identified as being important for the MLP's ability to successfully support Veterans, you may elect to write into the MOU regular meetings with leadership, or clinical participation on a VA MLP team.

Below, we provide general guidance on features to include in an MLP MOU, as well as the specific terms that must be included in an MOU in order for a medical-legal partnership to be established within the VA. Note that you may organize the content differently than indicated here. Consult the additional resources at the end of this section for VA MLP MOU examples.

### Contents of the MOU

**Introduction:** The introduction to your MOU, often known as a “preamble,” establishes your VA MLP’s objectives as specifically as possible. The preamble will introduce the health care and legal partners, and the location where the MLP will operate. It will include a Statement of Purpose that explains who your MLP intends to serve, what goals it seeks to achieve, and what it plans to do to satisfy those goals. For example, “Many Veterans in Philadelphia are homeless or at risk of homelessness, in part because of legal needs that have not been addressed. The purpose of our MLP is to address legal needs for homeless Veterans, or

## BUILDING AN ADVISORY COUNCIL FOR MLP

Intentionally written into the VA Maine Healthcare System Togus VA Medical Center- Pine Tree Legal Assistance MLP memorandum of understanding was an advisory council to collaboratively guide the work of the MLP. The advisory council is made up of a diverse and representative group of staff members involved in the MLP. The initial advisory council included the VA medical center director, physicians from primary care and mental health – two of the focus areas where the MLP was focusing its efforts – a nurse, a social worker, and a housing case manager to ensure that all areas that the MLP is focused on are involved. Through the advisory council, the MLP ensures that important input and feedback from those who are actually seeing what is happening on the ground is raised and can be addressed. Ideas about improvements or changes to better address Veterans’ legal needs are discussed among all departments associated with the MLP, including frontline staff and leadership, which enhances interdepartmental collaboration and MLP buy-in from all clinical staff.

those who are at risk of homelessness, through the provision of free legal services for Veterans and training VAMC staff to identify legal issues related to the root causes of homelessness.” You should also consider including strategic goals for the VA MLP, which may range from broad (e.g., “provide legal services for homeless Veterans”) to targeted (e.g., “screen all homeless Veterans for unmet legal needs and track their legal outcomes”).

**Legal Partner(s) Responsibilities:** This section outlines the specific responsibilities of the legal partner(s), including: (1) leadership and staff, (2) allocation of resources and access, (3) insurance, and (4) privacy and confidentiality.

You should specifically describe the legal partner’s responsibilities, from director level through frontline staff. For example, you may explain the Executive Director will “provide leadership and expertise, raise visibility, and assist in budgeting and strategic planning in collaboration.” You should also specify the days and times when the MLP lawyer will be available to providers and Veterans. For example, a MLP lawyer might “conduct legal intake for Veterans referred by the health care partner, handle cases for eligible Veterans, and maintain an on-site presence at the VAMC on Monday and Thursday afternoons.” If the legal partner specifically allocates volunteers and staff for administrative and support purposes or draws upon other lawyer support to assist in MLP cases depending on caseload and available resources, state that in this section. You should also include those resources, such as case management, electronic equipment, or data analysis that the legal partner will be allocating to the MLP.

This section should also set forth the legal matters that your legal partner intends to handle and those that it will refer, as you determined while working through Steps 1 and 2. It is important to be specific about these expectations so that both partners understand the scope from the outset. Further, if the legal

partner will be conducting trainings on legal issues for the VAMC staff, the timing and general outline of the content should be delineated here.

The legal partner has the responsibility to maintain adequate malpractice insurance for MLP legal staff, which should be stated in this section. In addition, discuss the means to ensure privacy and confidentiality for Veterans who are referred for and/or receive legal assistance through the MLP. For example, you may set out the parameters of attorney-client privilege as occurring between the legal partner staff and any Veterans referred by the VA MLP, and that there is no such privilege between the legal partner and the health care partner (see Understand Information Sharing and Confidentiality below).

**Health Care Partner Responsibilities:** Just as you did for legal partners, here, you will outline the specific responsibilities of the VAMC. You should include the responsibilities of all participants within the VAMC, from leadership through front-line staff. Be deliberate in the level of detail you provide. If the goal is to have VAMC staff have a role in serving as point of contact to the MLP, or in MLP trainings, for example, this is where you need to describe those responsibilities. Be sure to clarify which VAMC staff members can and should refer Veterans to the MLP lawyer for legal assistance. Otherwise, the MLP lawyer may be the only staff with explicit, clearly written obligation to support the MLP.

Consider also the resources that the health care partner will be providing and set these out within the section (e.g., office space and use of office equipment). The use of VA space is subject to a revocable license (see VA Form 10-611), which you should include here.

You should also state how the health care partner will comply with the requirements of VHA Directive 2011-034: the health care partner must provide Veterans with a list of local legal

service providers when making a referral, not just the VA MLP legal partner. The health care partner must also state the Disclaimer that “VA assumes no responsibility for the professional ability or integrity of the organizations whose names appear on this list. This referral does not constitute an endorsement or recommendation by VA.”

**Plan for Evaluation/Metrics of the Partnership:**

This section discusses the VA MLP’s intentions for evaluating the partnership. How will you know if the partnership is successful? How will you evaluate progress on the goals of the partnership? Outline the specific plans for data collection and evaluation, including designating staff for this purpose. You may also want to include how often the program will be evaluated, a process for receiving feedback from staff on the MLP, and a means to implement changes. You may also consider setting forth intentions for publicizing the results of your evaluation.

**Eligibility:** List the eligibility requirements for receiving services from the MLP, such as provisions against conflicts of interest, income eligibility, type of legal matter, or other qualifications. Describe what the process is when a Veteran is referred to the MLP but does not meet these requirements. Including these eligibility requirements in the MOU will ensure that all partners are aware of them before the partnership begins.

**Term, Renewal and Termination of MOU:**

Include the beginning and end date of the VA MLP MOU. The beginning date may be the date that the MOU is signed by representatives of both parties. You may choose not to include an end date. You may also specify how the MOU can be renewed (if applicable), and how it can be terminated. For example, one MOU in the additional resources listed below specifies that the MOU “may be terminated by either party upon written notice” but that the termination “will not terminate any ongoing representation of clients” by the legal partner.

**Internal Review**

Make sure that all participants, in both partner entities, have the opportunity to review and give feedback on the contents of the MOU. Consider whether you should include any other provisions that will strengthen your partnership, like the formation of a VA MLP team or joint training of VAMC clinical staff by the MLP clinical champion and legal staff. Encourage participation in the process from those staff that will be involved in the day-to-day support of the VA MLP.

**Approval, Signature, and Implementation**

VA OGC must review and approve the MOU before it is signed. Once you have received approval, the MOU must be signed by the VA Facility Director and the Director (or equivalent) of the legal partner organization.

Because you have worked closely with your leadership and staff on the creation of the MOU, it should be utilized as a “standing agenda” throughout the life of the VA MLP - a means for discussing partner responsibilities and whether your goals are being met.

**ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

1. [National Center for Medical-Legal Partnership Toolkit.](#)
2. VA Maine Healthcare System/Pine Tree Legal Assistance MOU (See Appendix B1)
3. Homeless Aligned Care Team (H-PACT) of the VA Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System/Inner City Law Center MOU (See Appendix B2)
4. VA Directive 2011-34: [Homeless Veterans Legal Referral Process.](#)
5. VA Form 10-611: Revocable License Agreement for Use of VA Space by Legal Partner: (See Appendix)

## Understand Information Sharing and Consent

Communication and information sharing between health care and legal staff involved in a medical-legal partnership are essential to providing collaborative, Veteran-centered care. In order to ensure proper protection, handling, and use of protected health information and to ensure attorney-client confidentiality, a clear information sharing strategy must be established prior to the launch of any new medical-legal partnership.

### Complying with HIPAA

While specific consent processes may vary depending on the level of integration and coordination between health care and legal staff, under the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 (HIPAA), Veteran consent is central to any information-sharing model. Veteran consent forms are used to ensure compliance with HIPAA and protect Veteran confidentiality when sharing protected health information with medical-legal partnership lawyers within an MLP context.

Veteran authorization to share information with an MLP lawyer can be obtained:

- During the initial Veteran intake process at the VA health care site.
- When a legal issue is identified through a formal screening process and a Veteran is referred to the MLP lawyer.
- During the course of treatment when a legal need is identified and a provider would like to refer a Veteran to the MLP lawyer for legal assistance.
- MLPs often use standard VA Form 10-5345 pre-populated with the MLP legal partner information.

### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

1. VA Form 6211: Revocable License Agreement for Non-Federal Use of Real Property (See Appendix C1)
2. VA Form 10-5345: Request for and Authorization to Release Medical Records or Health Information- San Francisco VA MLP Consent Form (See Appendix C2)

### Attorney-Client Privilege

Confidential information shared between MLP lawyers and their clients is also protected by attorney-client privilege. The Veteran must also consent to sharing confidential information discussed with the legal partner with the medical team.

MLP staff should discuss the type of information or feedback that would be helpful to be shared with the medical team, and the type of information that may be best not to share to protect the Veteran. For example, some MLP lawyers will let providers know when a Veteran has been connected with a lawyer and when their issue has been resolved but will not provide further information about the legal services provided.

Consent to have an MLP lawyer share a Veteran's information with the VA health care team is often documented on the legal intake form. It can also be documented on a separate legal consent form. Some legal consent language authorizes specific types of information to be shared, such as the completion of an initial legal consultation or intake with a Veteran, an instance when the MLP lawyer cannot get in touch with a Veteran, or when a Veteran's problem is resolved by the MLP lawyer.

### **Types of Information Shared by MLP Health Care and Legal Staff**

The types of information shared among MLP staff members vary by partnership, but may include the following:

#### **Information from Health Care Partner:**

- Veteran name and contact information
- Results of legal screening
- Relevant clinical diagnoses (e.g. PTSD, mental health condition)
- Clinical notes about unmet social needs (e.g. unable to afford food, no place to live)

#### **Information from Legal Partner:**

- Lawyer connected with Veteran
- Lawyer resolved Veterans' legal problem
- Lawyer did not resolve Veterans legal problem, but provided information or other counsel
- Information about how the case was resolved (e.g. Veteran was not evicted, Veteran was awarded VA benefits).  
*Some MLPs provide this information from the lawyer, while others rely on the Veteran to keep the provider up to date on the result of the legal case.*
- No legal problem.  
*In this case, MLP lawyers might use this opportunity to provide additional information to the clinician about the types of legal issues that they can assist with.*

### **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

1. Thorpe JH, Cartwright-Smith L, Gray E, Mongeon M. [Information sharing in medical-legal partnerships: foundational concepts and resources](#). Washington, DC: National Center for Medical-Legal Partnership; 2017.

MLPs use a variety of ways to make their services known to clinical team members and Veterans. Even with growing numbers of MLPs nationwide, awareness about the availability of legal services at the health care site needs to be promoted among clinical team members and Veterans. In “Training and Marketing to Clinical and Other Staff on Meeting Veterans’ Legal Needs” you will find information on educating VAMC staff on how and when to use the MLP, and on promoting the availability of legal services to Veterans. In this Step, we will address how accessibility and visibility of the MLP is often touted as a linchpin in successful adoption and integration of the intervention into Veteran healthcare.

Co-location of legal services at the VAMC setting is one of the key features of VA MLPs. VA Directive 2011-034 encourages VAMCs to make space available for local legal services providers to assist Veterans who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless, when possible. According to national data, the average MLP lawyer(s) is typically on-site at the health care organization at least 1-2 days per week, or more. Benefits of co-locating legal services in health care settings may include:

- Greater convenience for Veterans who may have transportation challenges that prohibit them from traveling to see a lawyer, or have no way of communicating with a lawyer via telephone or e-mail;
- Increased trust among Veterans who are first introduced to the MLP lawyer through a “warm hand off” or referral via a trusted physician, social worker, or other member of the care team at a trusted place of care;
- Greater convenience for clinical team members who might consult with the MLP

lawyer on potential legal issues that may arise during a Veteran’s clinical visit;

- Increased awareness of the availability of the legal services intervention among busy clinical team members who often juggle long lists of phone numbers and websites for community resources;
- Ability for the MLP lawyer to become closely acclimated with Veterans, the health issues that may be impacted by legal problems, and the VAMC care team who can help to identify these problems and coordinate with the lawyer when appropriate to achieve a successful legal outcome.

Deciding where to house the MLP lawyer and determining how they can be easily accessible and visible to both the clinical team and your target Veteran population for MLP is often said to be critical for the launch and ongoing success of the partnership. MLP lawyers are commonly co-located in primary care clinics, mental health clinics, women’s clinics, or other specialty clinics focused on vulnerable populations, such as homeless Veterans or older Veterans.

#### *Finding the Right Physical Space for the MLP*

The physical space where the medical-legal partnership lawyer is located within the VA medical center can be incredibly important to the success of the MLP as a whole. Care and attention should be taken to ensure that the MLP lawyer is housed in a confidential location that is easily accessible to both Veterans and providers. Furthermore, the MLP lawyer should be placed in a location that ensures that Veterans will be comfortable accessing the lawyer in this location. For example, the San Francisco VA MLP focuses on providing comprehensive legal services to older Veterans. Their MLP lawyer is not only available within the geriatric outpatient clinic, but also meets with Veterans in the inpatient setting, long-term care setting, and makes home visits when necessary since this population may have some

difficulty with transportation. The MLPs at VA Long Beach and the VA NYHHS focus specifically on women Veterans' issues, including sensitive matters like military sexual trauma. They have placed their MLP lawyers within the women's primary care and mental health clinics to ensure that women Veterans feel comfortable engaging with the MLP lawyer.

*Note: VA Form 10-611 (a revocable license) must be completed by the legal partner in order to use VAMC space to provide legal assistance for Veterans. The ability to use VAMC space to provide legal assistance is open to any legal resource in the community, regardless of their participation in an MLP. Additionally, when making legal referrals, the VA must provide Veterans with a list of local legal services providers and include the disclaimer in VHA Directive 2011-034 which prohibits the VA from endorsing any one legal provider in the community.*

Though it is helpful to have a designated location where clinical staff and Veterans can expect to access legal services on given days and times, some VAMCs with co-located legal services may not have a permanent space available for the MLP lawyer. MLP lawyers may share office space or rotate through clinics, as needed. It is important to identify a private space where MLP lawyers and Veterans can discuss legal concerns. Keep in mind that MLP lawyers may also require access to a computer and/or printer. Other common areas may be used for Veteran outreach and legal information sessions (see Training section).

Though most MLPs would prefer to have the MLP lawyer on-site as much as possible, that is not always feasible. In many communities, there is not enough capacity to meet demand for free legal services. Additionally, in rural communities the "local" legal services organization may be miles away. In these cases, "telelegal" services might be considered. Phone, e-mail, or video conferencing should be explored by the VAMC and MLP legal partner.



*“When I first started, at that time all we had was the general [MLP] clinic and that was housed in behavioral health and so I originally was planning to start a Women Veterans’ Legal Clinic also in behavioral health. That had seemed to make sense because that is where people knew [the existing MLP legal services] were. But, in starting to do outreach and in talking to the women themselves, I learned that [behavioral health] was not a part of the hospital that women Veterans really enjoyed being in. The waiting room was very out in the open and there would be a lot of male Veterans wandering around and a lot of [women Veterans] had had issues with comments being made to them ... so they didn’t like that part of the hospital. They said, ‘If you’ve had people not show up [for legal assistance], we wouldn’t be surprised if that’s why.’ So now I [the MLP lawyer] am located in Women’s Health, which has its own waiting room in the hospitals and men are not permitted in the waiting room unless they have gotten the okay from the Women’s Health staff, and that seems to work much better.”*

Samantha Kubek, MLP Staff Attorney  
LegalHealth  
New York Legal Assistance Group





## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

1. VA Form 10-611 (Application for VAMC space to be completed by legal organization)
2. VHA Directive 2011-034: [Homeless Veterans Legal Referral Process](#).

### **MLP Lawyers on Homeless Patient Aligned Care Teams (H-PACTs)**

Medical-legal partnership lawyers have been integrated into Homeless Patient Aligned Care Teams (H-PACTs) to provide legal assistance to Veterans experiencing or who are at risk of homelessness. H-PACTs are an innovative treatment model implemented at VA medical centers nationwide. H-PACTs bring together medical care providers, social workers, mental health care providers, substance use counselors, nurse case managers, and homeless program staff to provide a comprehensive set of services for homeless Veterans.

At the West Los Angeles VA medical center, MLP lawyers are integrated into the H-PACT to address homeless Veterans' legal needs, including income stabilization, disability benefits, housing issues, and low-level criminal issues. The H-PACT clinic enables homeless Veterans to get all of the clinical care, legal services, and other supportive services that they need all in one place and enables the care team to provide all services in an integrated, collaborative way. The H-PACT model has been so successful that it has quadrupled in size and expanded its scope from targeting only homeless Veterans with complex medical issues and high ER utilization to all homeless Veterans in the region who qualify for care.

The VA Connecticut Errera Community Care Center (ECCC) is a psychosocial rehabilitation center, and homeless center, that offers multi-disciplinary, integrated care for Veterans with mental illness, substance use disorders, homelessness, and/or aging. As part of the array of services, the ECCC has an embedded H-PACT, which is often a front door for homeless Veterans who are seeking medical services. H-PACT addresses the medical, housing and social



*“From a MLP lawyer’s perspective, I feel we have a better chance of success because we have the support of [the Veteran’s] clinician and work together as a team. A prime example, a housing case, one financial emergency can cause a late or missed rent payment, or some people have a tough time sticking with a budget for an extended period of time. But if they can go to their clinician, or their caseworker, or us, when they have a problem, it’s that much more likely that we can help resolve the Veteran’s problem before the court system is involved. We are more successful lawyers and more able to achieve good legal outcomes because we get to work within a system that supports our clients on several levels.”*

Cindy Johnson, JD  
Deputy Director  
Connecticut Veterans Legal Center (CVLC)



issues with which Veterans present. MLP lawyers from the Connecticut Veterans Legal Center (CVLC) are co-located at the ECCC and work in close collaboration with VA staff to identify and resolve legal barriers to health and wellness, stable housing, and income. In collaboration with H-PACT, CVLC MLP lawyers improve access for Veterans to VA health care, help them obtain disability benefits that they need to access a range of other health care and supportive services, and avoid the emergency room. Furthermore, with such a close collaboration, lawyers are better able to provide legal services to vulnerable Veterans quickly, as part of the H-PACT. During FY 2016-17, 96% of CVLC housing cases resulted in increased housing stability for Veterans, benefitting both Veterans and members of the Veterans' households.



*Identifying the correct healthcare team for the MLP lawyer to partner with was crucial for the success of the MLP. That meant embedding the MLP lawyer with our H-PACT clinic: an interdisciplinary team where there is already frequent contact, coordination, and co-location across disciplines. H-PACTs include primary care providers, social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, and peer support, so adding a lawyer was just another piece to the puzzle. In particular, our social worker was crucial to connecting the dots, facilitating the initial discussions, and furthering the work.*

Anjani Reddy, MD, H-PACT Director  
West Los Angeles VA Medical Center



### **Integration of MLP Lawyer into VAMC Care Team**

There are many strategies to integrate the MLP lawyer into the clinical care team(s) at the VAMC. In addition to providing formal training, MLP lawyers can be included in the following activities:

- Clinical staff meetings
- Team huddles
- In-service programs
- Clinician education or rounds

Including MLP lawyers in these types of activities helps to build relationships between the MLP lawyer and other VAMC staff. These activities also serve as opportunities to increase the familiarity with the MLP lawyer and visibility of legal services available for Veterans among relevant staff members. MLP lawyers also learn more about the relevant clinical issues that Veterans face, VAMC clinical priorities, and other VA services available to Veterans.

#### ***Ongoing Legal Resource Support for Veterans***

Having additional resources available for Veterans to understand their rights may be a valuable way to reach more Veterans with unmet legal needs, and to introduce them to the VA MLP. Just as the VA MLP provides training to VAMC staff on how to identify and

address Veterans' legal issues (see IV. Training), the VA MLP can also provide trainings to Veterans. For example, legal trainings on specific topics like housing issues and rights, may help to educate those Veterans who may be unaware of their rights. Additionally, there are 143 VA legal clinics throughout the U.S. that often provide a number of trainings on important Veterans legal topics and may do so in the same VAMC setting as the VA MLP.

Websites and written resources that detail Veterans' legal rights and resources can be also adapted for the state or region where the VAMC is housed. These resources may enhance the work of the VA MLP by making a wide range of legal information available to the Veteran, even when the VA MLP lawyer may not be available or on-site.

#### **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

1. [New York City Veteran's Legal Guide](#), Third Edition. New York Legal Assistance Group (NYLAG), Legal Health; 2017.
2. [Veterans Legal Self-Help Guides](#). Swords to Plowshares. 2019.
3. [Stateside Legal](#).
4. [Free Legal Clinics at VA Facilities](#).

## USING VA LEGAL STAND DOWNS TO EDUCATE VETERANS AND VAMC STAFF

In 2014, Keith Hoffmann, at the time an Equal Justice Works Fellow with the New York Legal Assistance Group (NYLAG) LegalHealth division, created two new legal education and outreach initiatives for Veterans at the VA hospitals in New York City. First, Keith pioneered a series of “Legal Stand Downs.” The Stand Down concept originates from a practice used during the Vietnam War to provide safe retreat for units returning from combat and to create a sense of community and camaraderie. Stand Downs have been used nationwide to provide housing and other essential services to homeless Veterans. In the MLPs that NYLAG supports, Legal Stand Downs are opportunities for MLP lawyers to present information to Veterans about their legal rights related to a certain topic or population, including family law, housing, VA benefits, consumer debt and bankruptcy, women Veterans’ rights, LGBTQ Veterans’ rights, older Veterans’ rights, and post 9/11 Veterans’ rights. Veterans also have the opportunity to ask questions and make follow-up appointments with the VAMC MLP lawyer, if needed.

Legal Stand Downs have been an incredibly popular series at the Bronx and Manhattan VAMCs. Close to two thousand Veterans have received information on common legal issues that Veterans face. Legal Stand Downs are promoted widely across the hospital to Veterans directly with posters and signs on public bulletin boards. Clinical staff are also encouraged to let Veterans know about the Legal Stand Downs with email reminders and signs or flyers available in their clinical offices.

## PROVIDING WRITTEN LEGAL RESOURCES FOR VETERANS

The New York City Veteran’s Legal Guide is a valued resource for both Veterans and clinicians at all of NYLAG’s VA MLPs (the James J. Peters VA Hospital in the Bronx, the New York Harbor Health Care System (NYHHS) in Manhattan, and the Northport VAMC in Long Island). Now in its third edition, this legal guide provides basic information about many of the most common legal problems facing Veterans in New York. The guide covers common Veterans’ legal issues including advance planning, consumer law, discharge upgrades, employment law, family law, housing law, immigration law, LGBTQ Veterans’ legal rights, social security and other public benefits, VA benefits and programs, and more. The guide includes general information on the legal issue, basic eligibility information, self-tips for Veterans, as well as information about when to seek legal advice. Physical copies of the Veterans Legal Guides are handed out at Legal Stand Downs and at the clinics. The guides are also used by healthcare providers as a reference when basic legal questions come up during a clinical session and by other Veterans advocacy organizations.

# PART II: SCREENING

## VETERANS FOR LEGAL NEEDS

In Step 1, you identified your target population for legal services. Now, you will design a screening tool and a process for identifying unmet legal needs among this population. You will want to spend some time working as a team to refine your screening method. The quality of your screening tool and process by which it's administered will ultimately impact the quality of referrals received by the MLP lawyer(s). A tested tool and process will ensure that all MLP eligible Veterans with legal needs are referred to the lawyer. It will also help ensure that the MLP lawyer doesn't receive a number of referrals for which there is no legal remedy.

Once Veterans are referred to the MLP, the MLP lawyer will undertake an additional legal screening or intake process to determine how they can best address the Veteran's legal needs and if not, where they can refer the Veteran so that their needs can be addressed.

More broadly, screening informs the VA MLP about demand for services and any trends in legal needs facing the Veteran population. For example, a VA MLP may start its work expecting to deal with a number of benefits issues, but screening over time may reveal that housing issues have become more prevalent among the MLP target population. The VA MLP can respond by including more MLP lawyers with expertise in housing, or target community-wide policy interventions aimed at addressing those housing problems.

Below, we discuss the elements of designing a screening process. It should be noted that each of these steps requires buy-in from both the health care and legal partners, particularly the VAMC staff that are involved in screening.

### Design the Screening Tool

Screening for legal needs adds another set of questions to the many questions that Veterans are already asked during their VAMC visit. Your screening tool will be precise, but accurate, and it will need to be tailored to the Veterans in your target population. In designing your screening tool, consider:

#### ***Who will be administering the screening tool and what questions should you include?***

You may ask the Veteran to complete the screening tool themselves, or health care staff may complete the screening tool on the Veteran's behalf. Regardless of who is completing the screening tool, the questions should be easily understandable to a general audience. If the Veteran is completing the screening tool on their own, it is important that they understand the question so that they can answer it accurately. If health care staff is completing the screening tool on the Veteran's behalf, they should not have to explain unnecessarily sophisticated terminology as part of administering the questionnaire. In addition, the screening tool should be translated into languages spoken by the target Veteran population. Given the sensitivity around some legal issues, such as Military Sexual Trauma, it is important to be thoughtful in how questions are worded and presented. Ask for assistance from health care staff who have experience working with trauma to review the screening tool with this in mind.

It is generally recommended that you should only screen for issues that the MLP or someone else in the VAMC can assist with. Be as specific as possible in your questions (e.g., "Have you had a problem with your housing, such as bugs or rodents?" versus "Is the Veteran experiencing a housing problem?"). Make it


clear as to which responses constitute a potential “positive” screen for a lawyer, and consider including instructions in the screening tool that spells out the next step and process for referral.

Some MLPs use an informal screening process and do not rely on an administered screening tool. Instead, VAMC clinical staff are trained to listen out for key words or verbally as a short set of 1-3 questions to identify legal needs. In this case, it may still be beneficial to put your screening questions and process in writing for the purposes of training and as a reference for staff.

**Review Screening Examples in the Field**

There are numerous publicly available screening tools (e.g., from NCMLP, the National Association of Community Health Centers, and Health Leads), and many VA MLPs have developed their own screening tools. In designing your screening questions and process, we recommend that you review some examples of screening tools to get ideas on how to structure your own screening tool. You will note that many screening tools vary in terms of who they’re directed to, the legal issues included, and how the questions are presented. Care should be taken to ensure that all screening questions are presented in a way that is inclusive and sends a clear message to marginalized Veterans that they will be affirmed and cared for.

**Figure 2. Sample VA MLP Housing Screening Questions**



HOUSING			
Please indicate which of the following describes a problem(s) with your housing situation. You may select none or more than one answer.			
Facing eviction or threat of eviction	<input type="checkbox"/>	Landlord refusing to return security deposit	<input type="checkbox"/>
Landlord failed to make necessary repairs or maintenance	<input type="checkbox"/>	Government program denied application for housing assistance	<input type="checkbox"/>
Conditions in home unsafe or unhealthy (mold, rodents, etc.)	<input type="checkbox"/>	Home in danger of being foreclosed	<input type="checkbox"/>
Landlord failed to make accommodations for a disability	<input type="checkbox"/>	Homeowner passed away and need to get the property in your name	<input type="checkbox"/>

*Source: Southeast Louisiana legal Services; New Orleans Bar Association. Veterans Fellowship Screening and Referral Form, 2019. For the complete screening and referral form, please see Appendix D3.*

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### VA Legal Screening Tools

1. Bay Pines VAMC/Bay Area Legal Services Veterans Legal Prescreen Form (Appendix D1)
2. VA Connecticut Healthcare System Errera Community Care Center Clinician Legal Screening Form (Appendix 2a)
3. Southeast Louisiana Legal Services' Veterans Fellowship Screening and Referral Form (Appendix D3)
4. VA Maine Togus VAMC/Pine Tree Legal Services' Veterans MLP Screener (Appendix D4)
5. West Los Angeles VA Hospital MLP Intake Form (Appendix D5)
6. San Francisco MLP for Seniors Interviewing Outline (Appendix D6a)
7. San Francisco MLP for Senior Veterans Legal Needs Assessment (Appendix D6b)

### Screening Tools and Guidance from National Organizations

1. National Center for Medical-Legal Partnership [Screening Guide Template](#).
2. [The Protocol for Responding to and Assessing Patients' Assets, Risks, and Experiences \(PRAPARE\) Assessment Tool](#). Washington, DC: National Association of Community Health Centers; 2016.
3. [The Health Leads screening toolkit](#). Boston, MA: Health Leads; 2018.
4. Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS). [The Accountable Health Communities health-related social needs screening tool](#).

### Select Literature on MLP Screening

1. Cartier Y, Fichtenberg C, Gottlieb L. [Screening tools comparison](#). University of California, San Francisco Social Interventions Research & Evaluation Network (SIREN); 2018.
2. Narayan A, Raphael J, Rattler T, Bocchini C. [Social determinants of health: screening in the clinical setting](#). Houston, TX: Texas Children's

Hospital & Baylor College of Medicine  
Department of Pediatrics.

3. Gottlieb L, Hessler D, Long D, Amaya A, Adler N. A randomized trial on screening for social determinants of health: the iScreen study. *Pediatrics*. 2014;134(6):e1611-e1618.

## Implement the Screening Process

In conjunction with designing your screening tool, you will also need to develop a screening process to ensure that the screening tool is administered. The screening process will take place at some point during the Veteran's VAMC visit, so input from VAMC staff is important. Consider:

### ***Will the screening tool be electronic or paper?***

Your screening tool may be included in the Computerized Patient Record System (CPRS) or it may be a paper form that is completed by hand. Whether the screening tool is administered by the health care staff or completed by the Veteran will also be a factor in whether the screening tool is electronic or paper. Including the screening tool in CPRS has the advantage of streamlining the documentation process, because it does not require staff to separately document the screening. VA MLPs can submit a request to have a legal screening tool added to CPRS as a new note with a new note title.

### ***Where and when will the screening tool be completed?***

You will next have to decide at what point during the Veteran's visit the screening process should occur. For example, the screening tool/questions may be administered at registration when the Veteran arrives, in the waiting room while the Veteran is waiting to be called for their appointment, or at the point of care during the Veteran's medical or social work appointment. Where and when the screening tool will be completed will also be dependent on who is completing the screening tool (e.g., registration staff, the Veteran themselves, or clinicians).

It is also important to consider the amount of time it will take for the screening tool to be administered in determining where, and when, screening takes place. For example, if the Veteran completes the screening tool in the waiting room before their appointment, consider how many other forms or questionnaires is the Veteran expected to complete while waiting, as well as how much time Veterans generally wait to be called for their appointments.

### **Document the Screening**

Like many processes in health care, if it is not documented there will be no record of it taking place. In order to ensure that your screening process is working – and that every Veteran who should be screened for legal needs is in fact screened – it is recommended that the process be documented regardless of the results (i.e. regardless of whether or not there is a positive screen that prompts a referral to the MLP).

Consider how you will document the screening, who will document the screening, and where the information should be stored. For example, if you use a screening tool that is part of CPRS and administered by staff, the results of the screening will be part of CPRS. If, on the other hand, you use a paper screening tool, then someone will need to be tasked with collecting completed screening tools and recording the results. If this is too cumbersome, consider performing periodic tests of the screening process by picking one week or a month to track all screening tools. If less than 100%, the results of this “test” may afford you the opportunity to do some additional training and education of staff on screening for legal needs.

### **Refer to the MLP**

Next, consider how positive screening results are transferred to the legal partner for referral. Can you alert the legal partner through CPRS? Via email or phone? Or will you designate staff to deliver the positive results by hand to the

legal partner? Alternatively, will a clinician who administers the screening tool and who determines a positive result bring the Veteran to the legal partner’s office space for a legal intake (i.e., a warm hand-off)?

In order to be referred to the MLP, the Veteran must also complete the Request For and Authorization to Release Health Information (VA Form 10-5345). Keep in mind that is another form that must be included in your process and that it is required (see Step 4: Understanding Information Sharing).

### **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

1. [VA Form 10-5345](#).

### **Conduct the Legal Intake**

Legal intake (sometimes also referred to as legal screening) is a more in-depth assessment of the Veteran’s legal needs and takes place after the Veteran has been screened and referred to the MLP. Legal intake is the process used by legal professionals to confirm eligibility for legal services, and to pinpoint the exact details of the legal problem(s) and what legal remedies will be best for that specific situation. If the MLP lawyer is unable to assist, there should be a process by which they refer the Veteran to another legal professional, community-based resource, or VAMC staff member. For example, a Veteran may present with a criminal matter that is appropriate for VJO referral.

Training for the MLP lawyer in interview methods that will create a comfortable environment for the specific Veteran population that they are serving may be helpful (see below - San Francisco Medical-Legal Partnership for Seniors Interviewing Outline, which provides advice for law students when interviewing Veterans).

## IMPROVING ACCESSIBILITY TO MLP THROUGH A LEGAL INTAKE LINE

The New York Legal Assistance Group's LegalHealth division operates a number of medical-legal partnerships for Veterans in Manhattan and the Bronx. The medical-legal partnerships all use a single telephone number that is used for legal intake. If a Veteran needs legal assistance, he or she can call the intake line and leave their name, phone number, and a brief description of their legal issue. The staff then follows up with the Veteran within three business days to conduct a quick phone screening to ensure that the issues is something that they can assist with. If the MLP can provide assistance, they schedule a legal appointment for the Veteran with the appropriate MLP lawyer. If the MLP cannot assist the Veteran, they provide additional information or a referral. For criminal legal issues, Veterans may be referred to a Veterans Justice Outreach (VJO) coordinator.

Physicians, social workers, and other clinical staff are also given the MLP intake line phone number. If they identify a potential legal issue or concern from a Veteran, clinicians give the Veteran the legal intake phone number with instructions about how to get in touch with the MLP. Clinicians can also call on a Veteran's behalf, with the Veteran's permission, if they are concerned that the Veteran will not make the call themselves. Clinicians are careful not to promise the Veteran that their problem will be resolved, but are providing a resource that might be able to assist them.

The MLP legal partner organization may already have a well-developed legal intake process. Both health care and legal partners should work together to determine if there are any steps needed to customize this process for the VA MLP, or any additional staffing needed to support the legal intake process. In some cases, other staff such as paralegals are used to assist with this process so that lawyers can focus on case work that necessitates a lawyer.

### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

1. Connecticut Veterans Legal Center Legal Problems Screening Form (See Appendix D2b)
2. San Francisco Medical-Legal Partnership for Seniors Intake Form (See Appendix D6c)

### Test the Screening Tool and Process

The importance of involving VAMC staff and if possible, Veterans themselves, in the development of the screening tool and process cannot be overstated. It is essential to have all of the stakeholder's input and buy-in on the process so that they are willing to engage in it and ensure that legal needs are identified, documented, referred and addressed. Consider collecting input from a variety of staff who will be involved through pilot testing. You might ask staff and Veterans for their thoughts on the wording, format and length of the screening questions. If VAMC staff or Veterans find the screening tool difficult to use, they may simply not use it.

Additionally, find out if there are any points at which the screening process could be more efficient, from both a resource and time perspective. VAMC staff will have the best knowledge on where/when to administer screening questions.

### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

1. Trott J, Regenstein M. [Screening for health-harming legal needs](#). National Center for Medical-Legal Partnership; 2016.
2. Theiss J, Regenstein M. [Facing the need: screening for the social determinants of health](#). Journal of Law, Medicine & Ethics. 2017;45:431-441.



# PART III: TRAINING

## CLINICAL AND OTHER STAFF

### ON MEETING VETERANS'

#### LEGAL NEEDS

Training VAMC staff is an essential component of any successful medical-legal partnership. Though clinicians and other staff may be familiar with the types of social needs that Veterans face, few have a background in identifying civil legal issues and using legal services to assist Veterans. Most VA MLPs agree that training is a worthwhile activity not just for learning, but also for reminding VAMC staff of the availability of MLP services and for building staff engagement by providing a forum for questions, concerns, and input.

VA health care staff usually receive training directly from the MLP lawyer(s) with guidance from the VAMC MLP champion. Given that health care sites vary along with Veterans' needs, there is no standardized training for MLP. However, many VA MLPs use similar content to train staff on the following basic topics:

- The types of civil legal issues that Veterans face;
- How to identify/screen for civil legal issues;
- How the MLP can assist with these issues; and
- How the medical-legal partnership operates at that particular VAMC site (i.e. referral, availability of the MLP lawyer, how to contact the MLP lawyer with questions, etc.)

Although training VA staff is said to be important to the success of the MLP, it can be time and resource consuming, particularly in large VAMC settings. The VA MLP team should

think strategically about the target audience and roll out for any training, as well as the necessary frequency. The VAMC MLP champion and other VA staff members on the VA MLP team can also be a valuable partner in helping the MLP lawyer to design an effective curriculum and identify the right forums to train VAMC staff.

Below we lay out some steps and considerations toward building and delivering an MLP training curriculum to your VAMC:

#### **Define your Target Audience for VA MLP Trainings**

Many VA MLPs recommend taking a team-based approach and including a variety of VAMC staff in VA MLP training. If the VA MLP is in a specific clinic, you may include all staff in that clinic. If the scope and reach of your VA MLP is throughout a large VAMC, you may want to come up with an incremental plan for training priority staff, such as those most closely involved in screening for legal needs and referring Veterans for legal services (e.g. social workers and clinicians).

Key staff members who might benefit from MLP training include physicians, physician assistants, nurse practitioners, medical assistants, social workers, case managers, behavioral health specialists, registration staff, clinical leadership, and any other staff member at the clinical site that may assist Veterans with social needs. Literature shows that medical residents may also benefit from targeted trainings.

## Identify Content for your VA MLP Training

MLP training can encompass a lot of concepts and is usually delivered in a short amount of time given the busy clinical environment. The VA MLP champion should work with the MLP lawyer to identify the most important messages to impart, and to refine and tailor messaging for a VAMC audience, including what is most relevant for specific members of the clinical team. Any basic training designed for your VA MLP should include:

- Description of the most prevalent unmet legal needs among Veterans, including the top needs anticipated at the VAMC (see Step 1: Defining Your Target Population for guidance on conducting a legal needs assessment).
- Explanation of how the VA MLP lawyer can help with these needs. Some of the top social needs among Veterans, particularly homeless and at-risk Veterans, have legal underpinnings with potential legal remedies. Specific examples of how a lawyer intervenes, what the legal outcome may be, and how this might improve the Veteran's life and health are helpful. Circumstances and information required to put forward a successful legal claim can also be helpful for clinicians to understand.
- Brief summary what an MLP is and how VA MLPs are growing across the country. Be sure to mention VHA Directive 2011-034 and what it does and does not permit with respect to legal services (see "State of the VA MLP Field").
- Inclusion or exclusion criteria that might affect the Veteran's ability to get free legal services, including any income limits. Be sure to clarify any legal issues that the MLP

lawyer cannot address, such as criminal cases or specific categories of legal issues, and what to do in those instances.

- Discussion of patient/client confidentiality and the consent process (see Step 4: Information Sharing).
- Specific action steps for the audience:
  - How to connect with the MLP lawyer – include contact info, physical location on-site, and what to do during on-site and off-site hours.
  - How to screen for unmet legal needs among Veterans who might benefit and qualify for free legal services.
  - How to ask questions, raise concerns, or consult with the MLP lawyer on how best to assist Veterans at the VAMC.
- Tips:
  - Seek out help from a VAMC staff member or clinical champion who can help make the content relevant and digestible for a non-legal crowd.
  - Illustrate training sessions with success stories, examples, and data.
  - Don't expect that everyone will take notes. Consider leaving something with your audience (business card, one-page handout with the MLP lawyer's contact info, etc.)
  - Learning is a two-way street in a partnership. The MLP team should also use training as an opportunity to learn from staff, take suggestions, and improve the MLP.
  - If resources permit, you may want to take a baseline of your audience's legal needs knowledge prior to the training in order to anticipate questions and refine the content of the training.



*From the very beginning, I wanted to build a relationship with the medical staff. Because my appointments with the veterans are one-on-one, I knew I was not going to be interacting with the doctors and the clinicians regularly. Attending the weekly clinical staff meetings gives me regular face time with the clinicians. I learn the processes that they go through and what their daily life is like and they learn more about the work I do and are more informed to refer their patients to me.*

Melody Osuna, Staff Attorney  
Long Beach VA MLP



### **Identify Appropriate Forums and Opportunities for Training**

The VA MLP team should help the MLP lawyer identify potential forums for training sessions at the VAMC, any may even assist with delivering the training content. Some common forums for training include:

- Employee orientations;
- Clinical team meetings and huddles;
- Stand-alone training sessions on MLP (i.e. conference space is booked and staff are invited to attend an MLP training session);
- Funneling training information and materials through members of the VA MLP team and asking them to share with staff.

### **Maintain Awareness and Build on Your MLP Training Curriculum**

Ideally, training should be an ongoing activity. Staff turnover is one reason for needing additional training, while low referral numbers or confusion about the screening or referral processes are other common reasons for follow up training. Beyond the basic training curriculum, the VA MLP team may identify specific legal topics that are of interest to staff and conduct additional special topical trainings as a result – for example, if staff want to better understand legal issues related to military sexual trauma or housing problems.

A formal training session isn't always necessary to address these follow up questions and concerns. A regular forum for the MLP lawyer to touch base with staff, such as having the lawyer attend weekly or monthly clinical team meetings, can be a great opportunity to continue to build knowledge and awareness.

Lastly, keep the MLP visibility high with posters, e-mail reminders, handouts or other mediums that work best for your VAMC.

### **Consider Designing a Training Curriculum in Veterans' Health and Health Care for MLP Lawyers**

Though MLPs commonly emphasize legal training for VAMC staff, training for MLP legal staff in health and health care concepts – particularly those specific to caring for Veterans – is also important for enhancing the MLP lawyer's ability to serve Veterans. This type of training may take the form of a formal in-service and/or through consultations between clinical staff and the MLP lawyer over time. Important training topics for MLP lawyers include, but are not limited to:

- Understanding the VAMC organization, structure, and mission related to providing health care for Veterans.

- Understanding the specific health and health care issues face, for example PTSD and MST.
- How to phrase legal questions or statements in a non-triggering and supportive way, including using trauma-informed language, so that difficult conversations that are essential for the lawyer to have with the Veteran are easier and do not cause additional distress.
- How to effectively convey legal information to Veterans taking into account their familiarity with legal services and their unique health conditions, such as physical or mental disabilities.
- What clinicians can and cannot do for Veterans related to legal concerns in order to maintain the clinical treatment relationship.

#### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

1. Connecticut Veterans Legal Center MLP Introduction Slides (See Appendix E1)
2. Connecticut Errera Community Care Center VA MLP Leadership Meeting Slides (See Appendix E2)
3. VA Maine Healthcare System Togus VAMC Social Work Slides (See Appendix E3)
4. Tsai J, Middleton M, Villegas J, Johnson C, Retkin R, et al. [Medical-legal partnerships at Veterans Affairs Medical Centers improved housing and psychosocial outcomes for Vets](#). Health Affairs (Millwood). 2017; 36(2):2195-2203.
5. Manchanda R, Murphy S, Lawton E, Middleton M. [The invisible battlefield: Veterans facing health-harming legal needs in civilian life](#). Washington DC: National Center for Medical-Legal Partnership. 2016.
6. National Center for Medical-Legal Partnership [Training Webinars](#).
7. Klein MD, Kahn RS, Baker RC, Fink EE, Parrish DS, White DC. [Training in social determinants of health in primary care: does it change resident behavior?](#) Acad Pediatr. 2011 Sep-Oct;11(5):387-93.

## PART IV: KEYS TO

# VA MLP SUCCESS

In building the VA MLP Readiness Guide, we spoke with a number of diverse professionals involved in VA MLPS across the country. We asked them for practical advice on implementing a successful and sustainable MLP. Here are some common themes that emerged:

### 1. Gaining Buy-in and forging valuable relationships is critical to the partnership.

#### *Get support from the VA director and other leadership early on.*

Support from VAMC leadership for the MLP is not only great for the endorsement and visibility of legal services at the VAMC site, it's also required. The VA Facility Director will need to sign off on any new MLP memorandum of understanding, so get their support early on and look for ways that they might be able to help introduce the availability of on-site legal services. VAMC staff may be more likely to embrace the MLP intervention if it's important to leadership.

#### *Cast a wide net to form relationships with a variety of frontline staff.*

Equally important is a concerted effort by the MLP legal partner to build relationships from the ground up. The MLP lawyer(s) may be a new face to the VAMC and the success of their work depends upon a variety of individuals in the organization getting to know who they are and how they can help. Suggested staff to develop relationships with include physicians, nurses, behavioral health specialists, social workers, and other frontline staff – the more members of the clinical team that the lawyer can form relationships with, the more likely the MLP is to be embraced and receive referrals. That said, the value of knowing a point person who knows how to help the MLP lawyer navigate the facility – from getting a room unlocked for the MLP lawyer to meet with Veterans to getting a PIV card – should also not be underestimated.



*We have grown our MLP through relationships, which I think are the most important part of the model, both in terms of the joy of the model and also for its sustainability. The relationships are also crucial for getting appropriate referrals, education, and consult to the right place at the right time.*

Sarah Hooper, JD, Executive Director  
UCSF/UC Hastings Consortium on Law, Science & Health Policy



### **Engage Social Work.**

Of all the staff in a VAMC setting, social workers often have the best knowledge about Veterans' unmet social needs. Forming a close relationship with social work is a natural fit for MLP. There is potential for quality referrals to the MLP from social workers who are able to pinpoint those social issues that may have legal remedies, and there may be some valuable bidirectional learning regarding social and legal issues among Veterans.

### **Maintain These Relationships.**

In a busy clinical environment with competing clinical priorities, out of sight may mean out of mind. Most MLPs do not have the resources to have a lawyer onsite every day of the week – and the MLP lawyer cannot be in all places at all times. Make time to maintain ongoing communication between the MLP lawyer and clinical and administrative staff through training opportunities, having the MLP lawyer attending clinical team meetings, forming an MLP advisory council to help spread education and awareness of the MLP, sharing success stories or sending out MLP news updates.

### **Identify a Clinical Champion and Point Person to Help You Navigate All of the Above.**

VAMCs have different organizational structures, cultures, policies and priorities than a legal aid office, law school, or law firm. To be successful, the MLP lawyer needs a partner who is willing to explain how to navigate the VA organization and medical community, and vice versa. Also valuable to partnership is a clinical champion who can garner support and spearhead the implementation of the MLP, especially in the beginning when processes like screening for legal needs and referring Veterans to legal services are first being tested and refined among clinical staff.



*The medical champions at the VA were instrumental in the early success of our MLP. They helped establish a foundation and helped me navigate a lot of the administrative issues that I simply wasn't equipped to deal with as a non-VA employee. It's one thing for a VA Medical Center to say, 'Sure, we aren't opposed to an MLP,' but I think that the next step is the most important: identifying your medical champion, the provider on the VA side of things that is going to make this partnership work.*

Jon Killoran, JD, Homeless Veterans Project Supervising Attorney  
Inner City Law Center



## 2. MLP presence at the VAMC is everything.

### *Co-location is highly valued by Veterans and VAMC staff.*

One of the key features of an MLP is the ability to have legal services on-site to meet with Veterans and consult with clinical staff. Co-location is often touted by clinicians and social workers as being the key to more Veterans getting legal services when they need it – in some cases, for transportation challenged Veterans, it may be the only way to reasonably access legal services. It is not only convenient for Veterans and clinicians; it also serves as a reminder that free legal services are available. MLP lawyers and clinicians learn from each other about how legal needs can impact health, and the lawyer has the ability to become part of a team that assists Veterans during vulnerable situations.

### *Consistency is key.*

There are many community programs that come into VAMCs to assist Veterans, but clinical staff may be less likely to refer Veterans to those resources unless they can be counted on.

MLPs should be deliberate about the on-site presence of the MLP lawyer (i.e. a set schedule that makes sense for the target Veteran population) and have a plan for referrals when the MLP lawyer is off site.

### *Involve the MLP lawyer in activities beyond direct legal services.*

Though providing direct legal services to Veterans is the core work of the MLP, those services cannot reach the Veterans who need them if there is not ongoing education and awareness at the VAMC. Involve the MLP lawyers in regular clinical team meetings or leadership meetings and allow opportunities for the lawyer to conduct ongoing trainings for clinical staff and Veterans on important legal matters. These forums serve as important learning opportunities to communicate and identify ways to improve the MLP's services.



*Having our legal clinics in the VA hospitals is a form of outreach in and of itself. I have had a lot of Veterans come up to ask me about our services simply because they heard me calling for the next legal appointment in the waiting room. Being there, being able to build relationships with Veterans and their health care providers, is a great way to ensure as many Veterans as possible are aware of the clinic and the free legal resources available to them.*

David Titus, JD, Senior Staff Attorney  
LegalHealth, New York Legal Assistance Group





*One of the things to really pay attention to for somebody getting this off the ground is advertising it and making sure that information about the MLP is easily accessible to providers. [Also] doing a lot of education of staff to make sure they understand that the resource is there, and the kinds of issues the MLP can help with.*

Lee Lyford, LCSW, Social Work Executive  
VA Maine Healthcare System Togus VA Medical Center



### **3. Funding the MLP is essential, but it is also hard work.**

Since the VA cannot provide funding for VA MLPs, funding must come from legal resources and/or philanthropic sources. Legal resources can be subject to restrictions and may not be sufficient to fund the partnership. Grant writing and fundraising are commonly part of the job for legal staff supporting the MLP. MLPs should anticipate this additional work, ideally have a plan in place for alternative sources of funding should a funder fall through, and understand that fundraising can be critical to the sustainability of the partnership.

### **4. Start off on the right foot.**

Hind sight is 20/20. Do not rush through the important early phases of implementing the MLP at the expense of a thoughtful and strategic approach. Some regrets have included not building out infrastructure or a plan to track data on the impact of the MLP, not securing enough funding prior to the MLP's launch, not securing the right space or schedule for the MLP target population, and not including specific VAMC engagement requirements in the MOU.

### **5. Don't be afraid to ask for help.**

Though setting up a VA MLP may seem like a lot of work, there's no need to reinvent the wheel. As of 2019, there are 31 VA MLPs who can provide valuable advice on how to implement and sustain an MLP. The VA Taskforce can provide technical assistance and is available to clarify VA policies surrounding legal services and MLPs. There are several resources listed in this guide, including ways to connect with other MLP lawyers and VAMCs.

#### **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

1. National Center for Medical-Legal Partnership-  
[Resources For Veteran Populations.](#)
2. Contact VA MLP Task Force:  
[VAMLPtaskforce@va.gov](mailto:VAMLPtaskforce@va.gov)



# APPENDICES

**\*[Click here to download one file with all of the appendices listed below](#), or click on the name of a specific appendix to download it as a single file.**

A. VA Legal Needs Assessment

1. [VA Maine Healthcare System Togus VAMC/Pine Tree Legal Assistance MLP Needs Assessment](#)

B. VA MLP Memorandums of Understanding

1. [VA Maine Healthcare System/Pine Tree Legal Assistance MOU](#)
2. [Homeless Aligned Care Team \(H-PACT\) of the VA Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System/Inner City Law Center MOU](#)

C. VA MLP Information Sharing and Consent Forms

1. [VA Form 6211: Revocable License Agreement for Non-Federal Use of Real Property](#)
2. [VA Form 10-5345: Request for and Authorization to Release Medical Records or Health Information- San Francisco VA MLP Consent Form](#)

D. VA Legal Screening and Intake Forms

1. [Bay Pines VAMC/Bay Area Legal Services Veterans Legal Prescreen Form](#)
2. a) [VA Connecticut Healthcare System Errera Community Care Center Clinician Legal Screening Form](#); b) [Connecticut Veterans Legal Center Legal Problems Screening Form](#)
3. [Southeast Louisiana Legal Services' Veterans Fellowship Screening and Referral Form](#)
4. [VA Maine Togus VAMC/Pine Tree Legal Services' Veterans MLP Screener](#)
5. [West Los Angeles VA Hospital MLP Intake Form](#)
6. a) [San Francisco Medical-Legal Partnership for Seniors Interviewing Outline](#); b) [San Francisco Medical-Legal Partnership for Senior Veterans Legal Needs Assessment](#); c) [San Francisco Medical-Legal Partnership for Seniors Intake Form](#)

E. VA MLP Training Materials

1. [Connecticut Veterans Legal Center MLP Introduction Slides](#)
2. [Connecticut Errera Community Care Center VA MLP Leadership Meeting Slides](#)
3. [VA Maine Healthcare System Togus VAMC Social Work Slides](#)