

## **Veteran's Health Equity Podcast Transcript**

### **Health Equity and Medical Legal Partnerships**

>> I want to welcome everyone and thank you all for joining. My name is Lauren Korshak and I lead awareness and transition activities for V.A.'s Office of Health Equity. The Office of Health Equity was established in 2014 and it champions the advancement of healthy equity and the reduction of health disparities in veterans. My job means that I get to tell stories about the work the V.A.'s doing to help veterans and the data we have about veterans and their health.

Today on the Healthy Equity and Veterans podcast series, we'll be discussing V.A.'s Medical Legal Partnerships, what they are, and why they're so important have veterans. But first I'm really excited to introduce today's speakers.

As an attorney in V.A.'s Office of General Council since 2011, Lara Eilhardt, has led the department in connecting veterans with free legal services by assisting in the establishment of more than 150 free, legal clinics in V.A. facilities nationwide. Now as, Senior Medical Legal Partnership attorney, Lara serves as an advisor to the V.A. General Council and the Secretary of Veterans Legal Services and pro bono relationships to veterans through legal assistance. In 2016, she founded V.A.'s Medical Legal Partnership, MLP Task Force, which has nurtured dozens of V.A. MLP's at V.A. health care sites. Lara has presented on V.A. MLP's to a variety of essential audiences as well as the White House Legal Aid Interagency Roundtable and the Department of Justice. In developing V.A.'s MLP toolkit, she has established MLP as a best practice for V.A. health care facilities nationwide.

She graduated with honors from the University of Virginia and obtained her J.D. from the University of California Berkeley School of Law, where she worked in immigration, criminal sentence and medical legal clinics.

Madolyn Gingell has nearly 30 years of social work experience, with a primary focus in medical social work and health care leadership. She began her V.A. career in 2010 with Bay Pines V.A. Health Care System, formally as a social work section chief, overseeing patient aligned care team, PACT, mental health and HUD-VASH programs throughout the southern catchment area.

She joined the Homeless Program Office, Veterans Justice Program in October of 2021, as the National Coordinator for Legal Services for Veterans. Madolyn is working collaboratively with Lara to promote medical legal partnerships and V.A. affiliated legal clinics throughout the veterans' health administration and will be overseeing the newly authorized federal grant programs that will provide legal services to veterans.

Madolyn earned her B.S.W. from Lock Haven University and M.F.W. from Barry University in Florida. Madolyn was born in Pennsylvania, but has lived her entire adult life in Southwest Florida.

So I want to start with asking you all, what is the connection between unmet legal needs and veterans' health?

>> Thanks, Lauren. So, V.A. actually knows based on its own challenge study, that veterans who are homeless, at least five of their unmet needs are actually legal problems. So they're not health care, they're not even benefits claims assistance, but they're things like housing evictions, foreclosures and

family law issues. Also consumer law and debt issues. And these are legal problems that are not being met amongst homeless veterans and it definitely is a connection to the veterans' health.

And to give an example of this, one of our legal partners, they described a story where a veteran came into the V.A. for a counseling appointment and they actually brought up in the course of the appointment that they were really having a hard time with their mental health due to a divorce and a child support modification that needed to happen, in their family life. And that is actually a legal health issue, that is undiagnosed, that's affecting the veterans' health, that's causing them anxiety, that's causing them depression perhaps. And this distinctly legal issue has a direct link to this veterans' health and ability to thrive.

Another example that actually comes up a lot amongst veterans are revoked drivers licenses, which is a distinctly legal issue that prevents many veterans from being able to get to their medical appointments at the V.A. and certainly to obtain employment. So in those cases an MLP attorney can step in and provide an intervention to resolve those distinctly legal issues and remove that stressor from the veterans life.

And so these are the kinds of legal needs that are very much interactive with the veterans' health, housing situation and employment. And when they go unresolved, a V.A. study actually found that veterans with legal problems are 86% more likely to have suicidal ideation and 57% more likely to attempt suicide and that's even after adjusting for a mental health diagnoses. So these are social determinants of health that are actually legal problems.

>> Thanks. A medical legal partnership program is a joint endeavor with the Office of General Council and the Veterans Health Administration, can you all provide more information about how MLP's work and what exactly they do?

>> Sure, Medical Legal Partnerships, or MLP's as we refer to them also and V.A. affiliated legal clinics are two different approaches to increased veterans access to legal services and possibly legal representation. MLP's are interactive care collaborations between health care clinicians and legal service providers. They're generally co-located in the same facility and if appropriate and of course with the veterans consent, may see the veteran jointly. This allows the clinical providers to deliver holistic care to the veteran and the legal service providers to address veterans' health harming legal needs.

This is a veteran centered approach to care. It's great because it's imperative for the veteran to lead and direct their own treatment plan, especially understanding that legal issues present a unique set of social determinants of health.

Another key element of the MLP model is that the attorneys may provide training to be a facility staff, on how to identify legal needs with health implications, while the V.A. staff may provide guidance to the attorneys about how to best serve veterans, such as using trauma informed language when discussing legal issues. This is truly a team approach, while recognizing that there are legal issues that only an attorney can help resolve, which then allows the veteran to focus on their health.

The other approach is the V.A. Affiliated Legal Clinic. These are clinics in which legal service providers offer pro bono legal assistance to veterans and former service members on a variety of civil legal matters, often on a referral basis from V.A. staff. While some legal clinics have operated virtually during

the pandemic, these offerings are ideally held on V.A. property, but do not allow for the same degree of collaboration as an MLP. However the legal clinics still promote access to legal services.

>> Lauren, you had mentioned that this is an ongoing joint endeavor, for several years the VHA's Homeless Programs Office, specifically the Veterans Justice Programs and the Office of General Council, has helped facilitate and expand these legal clinics and MLP's with V.A. facilities, and lead the V.A. MLP TaskForce. Currently we have well over 120 pro bono legal clinics and over 25 Medical Legal Partnerships, that serve veterans throughout the V.A. facilities. To help, the V.A. staff are guided by the VHA directive 1510, which encourages V.A. medical centers and staff to make space available for the legal service providers to properly assist veterans.

An additional benefit of the MLP is the engagement between the V.A. and the community. It creates an environment that removes barriers to care and encourages all to embrace collaborative, veteran focused care, which ultimately benefits the veterans.

>> So, what have been the outcomes for veterans who received help through a Medical Legal Partnership?

>> So a V.A. MLP study has found that when veterans receive both health care and legal services from V.A. based partnerships, there are positive outcomes for veterans and in fact they found that when they received those MLP services jointly, it decreased veterans PTSD symptoms, reduced spending on substance abuse and increased veterans mental health and housing stability. So, this is truly the result of a collaborative approach to care, where legal aid providers are actually raising the competency of the clinical staff and hopefully easing their job of caring for the veterans physical or mental health, it's not just a one way street.

So if a veteran for example may walk in and have asthma and it may be due to mold in their apartment that their landlord refuses to remove. An attorney can step in, remove that health factor, risk factor in the apartment and immediately improve that veterans' health. So like Madolyn said, it's truly a joint endeavor that goes both ways.

>> Before we close, if someone wants to find out more about V.A.'s Medical Legal Partnerships, where can they find more information?

>> So we do have an MLP FAQ sheet which answers a lot of basic, initial questions about what they are and how you can find out more. And we also have, the National Center for Medical Legal Partnerships, is an outstanding organization that provides a multitude of resources including a V.A. MLP toolkit that they assisted in developing and the V.A. Office of General Council of course, where I work. We have a website where they can find a list of all our Medical Legal Partnerships and legal clinics and where they're located and points of contact for them on the website.

>> Fabulous. Thank you so much. I want to thank my guests for coming on and speaking about the work that they're doing. I want to thank everyone who listened in for joining us and I hope you all will join us on our next episode, take care.