

# Civil Legal Aid in Health Care

The COVID-19 crisis has disproportionately impacted low-income people, who face greater obstacles to accessing medical care and mental health treatment.

## Legal Aid helps low-income people access health care by:

- Identifying and correcting errors that jeopardize access to treatment
- Addressing the improper denial, termination, or reduction of public health benefits
- Appealing denial of coverage for life-sustaining medications or procedures
- Advocating for the rights of children, immigrants, asylum seekers, older adults, people with mental illness, and others so that they can make the best medical decisions for themselves and their families
- Participating in medical-legal partnerships that help address social determinants of health (*see page 2*)

Low-income people at or below 125% of the federal poverty level (\$34,688 per year for a family of four) qualify for civil legal aid.

## Mr. Babu's Story



Mr. Babu\*, a man in his late 80s originally from India, owed a significant amount of money to the nursing home where he lived because his Medicaid coverage had not been approved, and faced discharge from the facility for nonpayment of rent. He had multiple health conditions, required skilled nursing

care 24/7, and his ability to speak English was limited. An attorney from MetroWest Legal Services filed an appeal of the discharge on his behalf and represented him at the appeal hearing, while at the same time helping him secure the required documentation for his Medicaid application. At the hearing, the nursing home agreed to rescind the discharge notice and Mr. Babu was able to stay. His Medicaid application was approved with three months of retroactive coverage.

*\*Name has been changed.*

## 517 health cases closed in FY21, including:

MassHealth	157
Medicare	168
Private Health Insurance, and Other Cases	115
Long-term Health Care, Home and Community-Based Care	55
State and Local Health	21

Last year, legal aid provided  
**\$103 million**  
in economic benefits to the  
Commonwealth and its residents,  
including  
**\$3.7 million**  
in health benefits



**“As patients’ health-harming legal needs continue to grow as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, legal advocacy is an increasingly important component of patient care in the medical setting.”**

**- Betsy Soule, Metrowest Legal Services**

## **Medical-Legal Partnerships**

Medical-legal partnerships place civil legal aid attorneys at hospitals, clinics, and community health centers to work alongside medical professionals and help address the root causes of an illness that a doctor alone might not be able to fix. For example, while a doctor can treat the symptoms of a child’s breathing problems caused by mold in their apartment, a legal aid lawyer can help ensure the landlord complies with public health and safety laws and regulations so that the child has a healthy place to live. Working in medical institutions also makes medical-legal partnership attorneys easily accessible to patients who seek help with other civil legal issues.

Medical-legal partnerships are an important part of the Commonwealth’s response to the opioid epidemic, which creates many medical and legal challenges. Civil legal aid attorneys in a medical setting can work to address barriers to health care, housing, and employment, which can help individuals with substance-use disorders find stability to sustain recovery.

During the COVID-19 crisis, access to patients in medical-legal partnership clinics has been challenging because of remote visits. Advocates use innovative strategies to connect with clients and address legal issues that cause health problems during the pandemic.

**Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation**  
18 Tremont St., Suite 1010  
Boston, Massachusetts 02108  
617-367-8544

**Lynne Parker**  
MLAC  
lparker@mlac.org  
617-391-5640

**Elaine O’Reilly | Mary Ann Walsh**  
Governmental Strategies  
eoreilly@governmentalstrategies.com | 617-447-5174  
mawalsh@governmentalstrategies.com | 617-447-3711