



HEALTHY PRACTICES

A DOCTOR DISCOVERS BRUISES on her patient. Repeatedly. It is apparent she is the victim of domestic violence. It is also clear her physical injuries and health issues will not be cured by medicine alone. Sometimes, in cases like this, legal action may be the most important resource needed.

In Kansas City, Kansas, at the Southwest Boulevard Family Health Care Clinic, medical and legal services are delivered together. The clinic, located in Wyandotte County, serves an ethnically diverse population in one of the poorest neighborhoods in metropolitan Kansas City. The Family Health Care Legal Services Clinic is a unique program in which law students, under the direction of faculty from the University of Kansas School of Law and in collaboration with staff from the health clinic and Kansas Legal Services attorneys, help resolve legal issues that greatly impact the health of the patient. For instance, in the area of family law, a guardian learns he is able to authorize immunizations for a toddler. In the area of housing, a family may need assistance with landlord-tenant conflicts as they attempt to bring a substandard living environment up to code to help an asthmatic child. Other areas of help include public benefits, disability benefits, education access, immigration, consumer law, employment, wills, and help in facilitating workforce re-entry. The project is modeled, in part, after the Medical-Legal Partnership for Children, established in Boston, in 1993.

At the Southwest Boulevard clinic, Sunflower Foundation dollars help support a staff attorney, law school supervision, and technical support for KU law students who volunteer on site.

Elizabeth Weeks Leonard, JD, associate professor of law at KU, coordinates the school's participation. "The combination of medical and legal help makes sense to a lot of people," says Leonard. "People often say, 'Why aren't we already doing this?' It's important to look at patients' total needs, not just medical needs."

According to Leonard, the legal services clinic has seen tremendous growth since its beginning in January 2008. "I'd have to say we're inundated."

The Kansas City legal clinic is one of three projects spearheaded by the University of Kansas School of Law and supported by Sunflower Foundation grants to establish medical-legal services in community



health clinics across the state. A pilot project to replicate this service is underway in Pittsburg at the Community Health Center of Southeast Kansas.

For Elizabeth and many of her students, the projects connect them to lifelong desires to help the underserved. “One of our law students is a former army nurse. She learned about medical-legal clinics and, combined with her concern for the underserved, she found a new way to apply her medical and legal training. The project brought it all together for her.”

Elizabeth says it is exciting to be part of a larger movement as the concept of medical-legal partnerships attracts more attention. “Here in Kansas, we are truly a leader in this area. We’re among the first in the country to introduce these services in rural areas.”

For Elizabeth, her colleagues and students, practicing law has also become a way to practice healing.

SIDEBAR:

Taking part in the Advocacy Fellowship has been an opportunity for me to enhance my advocacy skills so that I can help promote and grow the project. Good ideas like the medical-legal clinics we are developing in Kansas will require effective advocacy to build partnerships and secure long-term public and private support. I feel better prepared to take on this challenge.

Elizabeth Weeks Leonard,
Sunflower Foundation
Advocacy Fellow