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Characterization of a medical-legal partnership program in a neonatal intensive care unit

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Abstract

Context/Background:

Medical-legal partnerships (MLPs) are collaborations between health and legal professionals that aim to advance health equity by alleviating health-harming legal problems. In 2020, Doernbecher Children's Hospital (DCH) launched the nation's first MLP within a neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) and Fetal Therapy Program to address social determinants of health among the youngest and highest-risk patients.

Objective:

This study aimed to characterize the demographics and legal needs of the population served in a NICU-specific MLP.

Methods:

This is a retrospective study of all MLP-assisted families in the NICU between October 2020 and December 2022. Legal issues were identified with universal screening tools and face-to-face conversations between families and clinical staff. Race/ethnicity, insurance type, primary language, gestational age at birth, birth weight, length of stay, number of ED visits, and readmissions were collected from the electronic medical record to characterize the population. Descriptive statistics were used to characterize the client population and legal issues using standard MLP guidelines.

Results:

Sixty-five families were referred for MLP services. Most families identified as White (80%), non-Hispanic (69.2%), having public insurance (93.8%) and speaking English as their

primary language (86.2%). The average gestational age at birth was 33.5 weeks and the average length of stay was 62.2 days. By iHELP categories, the greatest proportion of cases involved family law issues (52.3%), followed by income/insurance/benefit issues (44.6%), legal status (23.1%), housing/utility challenges (20.0%), and education/employment (18.5%) needs. Nearly half (44.6%) of the families received assistance with multiple legal issues. Twenty percent of identified families were lost to follow-up or withdrew from the program.

Discussion/Conclusions:

A variety of treatable legal issues were identified in the NICU, with family law as the most prevalent need. This work highlights the opportunity for MLP to address the social-legal outcomes that affect the health of this community.