

Evaluation of the Medical Legal Partnership Program: Mid-Evaluation Summary



In 2019, the American Institutes for Research (AIR) was contracted to conduct a process evaluation and return-on-investment study of the Medical Legal Partnership (MLP) between the Legal Aid Society (LAS) and Mount Sinai St. Luke's Child and Family Institute (CFI). At the midpoint of the four-year evaluation, the findings from the process evaluation indicate that:

- *Youth with special needs, specifically those with disabilities, often require legal advocacy to pursue educational services that they would not otherwise receive.*
- *Collaboration between staff and the integration of services into programming are integral to the success of the MLP.*
- *Training that LAS provides to CFI staff is essential, as it helps clinicians understand how the partnership works, and provides a better sense of when, how, and why to refer clients to the MLP.*
- *The co-location of legal services within the clinic is essential, and respondents believe that expanding the MLP's working hours could allow them to better serve families.*
- *Social workers play an important role in implementation of the MLP.*

The findings from the return-on-investment (ROI) study indicate that the benefits of the MLP outweighed the costs for 11 of the 12 educational milestones. Except for the milestone "Obtained advice on educational issue," the return on investment for MLP's work was positive, with some benefits measuring just under 30 times the costs.

Overview

The Medical Legal Partnership (MLP) is one of the initiatives funded by the New York County District Attorney's Office (DANY) Criminal Justice Investment Initiative (CJII). Within the CJII's Prevention Portfolio, DANY funds nine Family and Youth Development Programs, which collectively aim to expand social service providers' capacity to implement programs for youth and families at elevated risk of poor life outcomes, including eventual justice system involvement.

The MLP is a partnership between the Legal Aid Society (LAS) and Mount Sinai St. Luke's Child and Family Institute (CFI), which serves children with psychiatric conditions and developmental or learning disabilities. Through the MLP, LAS provides training to CFI clinicians about how to identify youth in need of education advocacy (e.g., youth facing superintendent suspension hearings, in restrictive settings, and/or with frequent classroom removals). CFI clinicians use this knowledge to identify and refer patients to LAS for civil and educational legal advocacy and services. LAS then matches each

family with an attorney who advocates for them to pursue special education and other supportive educational services. The MLP aims to positively affect the community by (a) improving functioning among families of youth at high risk for criminal justice involvement, and (b) improving coordination between mental health services and legal services for youth at high risk for criminal justice involvement.

Purpose of the Evaluation

The American Institutes for Research (AIR) was contracted by DANY in 2019, following a competitive solicitation, to design and conduct both a process evaluation and a return-on-investment (ROI) study of the MLP. The goal of the process evaluation was to understand how the partnership was working from multiple perspectives, including those of legal advocates, clinicians, and families. The process evaluation responded to research questions about how families were referred, how many youth and families were served, facilitators of and barriers to implementation, and indicators of program success. The ROI analysis measured the dollar value of the MLP's activities with families, compared with the value of subsequent services provided to these families and youth. This report summarizes findings from the initial data collection, which was conducted in 2019 and 2020. AIR will also produce a final report in 2022 that summarizes findings from data that will be collected in 2021.

Methods

The process evaluation used three data sources: Interviews with 13 staff, focus groups with 22 unique family members, and administrative records. AIR analyzed these qualitative data using a grounded theory framework. This framework uses inductive reasoning to allow researchers to develop a theory that explains the main concerns of a population and how those concerns can be resolved or processed.

The ROI study used three data sources: Administrative data, interviews with four staff, and surveys of families. This analysis identified the costs of the resources used to implement the MLP and the monetized value of the benefits (i.e., the services received by participating youth and their families).

Characteristics of Families Served



Most of the families that the MLP serves live in upper Manhattan (i.e., Washington Heights, Central Harlem, West Harlem, and East Harlem), which is geographically close to the LAS office. In these neighborhoods, close to half of the population is living in or near poverty.



Most families are headed by a parent/guardian with a high school diploma/equivalent or below and almost all families have a household income of less than \$60,000.



The MLP serves youth from birth through age 18, the majority of whom are ages 6–16. Almost all youth who participate in the MLP are Black or Hispanic. A majority of the youth served by the MLP are male.

Process Evaluation Findings

The process evaluation findings are organized in five sections: (a) outreach and enrollment, (b) supports for implementation, (c) barriers to implementation, (d) indicators of program success, and (e) sustainability.

Outreach and Enrollment

The MLP served fewer families than originally planned. Overall, the program was successful in reaching and referring potential clients. However, the MLP served fewer families than initially intended. As of March 2020, the MLP served 219 unique families, which is about two thirds of their goal of 315 families. The MLP had the most success in meeting their targets for legal screenings and Parenting in Stress groups, and less success in meeting targets for Know Your Rights workshops and Positive Parenting groups.

Intensity of engagement varied according to families' needs. On average, LAS worked with families for 6 months, but MLP staff explained that the duration of interactions with families varied based on client needs. In some cases, staff met with families seven times or more to address complex issues, while other cases were easily resolved and required less contact.

Youth who experience complex mental health problems need education advocacy. Respondents explained that the MLP provided educational advocacy for youth with disabilities and those who have experienced trauma (e.g., domestic violence or child custody battles). These clients require support from legal advocates to pursue educational services from the school district. Some of the educational

services that clients receive as a result of LAS advocacy include private school tuition, increased services related to an individualized education plan (IEP), classroom placement, or educational evaluations.

These children, they often need psychiatric therapeutic help and they need a legal advocate to help them get those services from the Department of Education. Sometimes they need to be placed in different schools. ... They may need paraprofessionals to be with them in the classroom. They may need speech language therapy, occupational therapy. They may need assistive technology ... there are a lot of services, a lot of supports that they may need in order to thrive educationally.

– Legal Advocate

Multiple modes of program referral connect families to the program. Respondents mentioned that there are multiple ways in which clients and families are referred to the MLP, including self-referral, CFI staff referral, and referrals through parenting groups.

Facilitators of Implementation

CFI and LAS staff were motivated to incorporate the MLP into their work. CFI and LAS staff had a strong commitment to the youth and families they serve, and this commitment drove their motivation to incorporate the MLP into their practice. This commitment was critical to ensuring that CFI staff refer families.

Staff trainings were critical for introducing staff to new information. LAS provided a variety of training to CFI staff, including School Discipline and Suspensions, Special Education 101, and an Overview of MLP Client Outcomes. LAS staff also provided continuous training on client identification and referral as part of their bimonthly meetings. CFI staff were satisfied with the content and delivery of program training. In general, interview respondents reported that the trainings introduced them to useful information about client rights, the referral process, and education law.

Parents facilitated successful service delivery. Parents understanding of their youth's mental health needs and mental health interventions was critical to their children's academic improvement. MLP staff played an important role in educating parents on how to understand the range of educational interventions, how to identify potential issues, and how to address issues as they arise.

I'm not saying that we're saviors and that's not at all how I view our job, but I do view it as being able to provide options that our clients never knew about. To me, and it ties into ... empowerment of parents. I think when you are poor, you're not super empowered [and I try to] make it very clear that you have the same exact rights as a rich parent does.

– Legal Advocate

The proximity of services, collaboration, and rapid intervention facilitated successful service delivery.

CFI and LAS staff said that the co-location of clinical and legal teams was integral to success. Cases were handled collaboratively, and issues were resolved quickly because interactions between CFI and LAS staff were frequent. Biweekly meetings also provided a regular space for staff from both organizations to address specific challenges and barriers.

Staff dedication and strong working relationships facilitated program success. Respondents indicated that dedicated staff and strong, positive working relationships were the primary facilitators of program implementation. Respondents noted that program staff from LAS and CFI continuously learned from one another and were truly invested in the collaboration.

It really helps share or shoulder part of the burden of individual therapists but help push things forward that we simply do not have time and don't really have nearly as good expertise in. And so I think it's hugely helpful ... the families get much better services because of it.

– Clinician

Data tracking and sharing helped staff monitor cases and program success. The MLP had systems in place to allow LAS and CFI to share information about clients. This sharing of records helped staff from both organizations: CFI staff could compare educational and clinical assessments, and LAS staff could use the records to develop a strategy for legal advocacy.

Challenges to Implementation

Demand for the program outweighed staff capacity in some roles. The legal intake process benefited from the skills and perspectives of social workers, who helped to identify and treat client needs efficiently and comprehensively. However, LAS only had one social worker on staff, and that person was not able to attend every intake meeting at certain points in the year.

Clinicians' referrals to the MLP were uneven. Interview respondents reported that the number of referrals and clients at intake remained steady. Although staff said that the trainings were helpful, referrals were inconsistent across providers—most referrals come from the same group of physicians; several clinicians at CFI do not make any referrals. LAS staff indicated that they provided additional staff training on client referrals so that all CFI clinicians had a clear understanding of when and how to refer clients to the MLP.

I think there has been the idea that clients have to have something intense going or a significant situation that's impacting them to be referred to us, and we really don't see that. We have told them if the client has an IEP, basically, refer them to us so we can at least have a conversation with the parent. Even if it seems like everything is going well, we can at least talk with them about what their rights are and make sure that they know what they can do if they have issues arise in the future.

– Legal Advocate

Access to the program was limited by scheduling constraints. LAS staff were at the clinic 2 days a week, and interview respondents noted that families in need of MLP services sometimes attended the clinic on days when LAS staff are not available. Clinicians may help families navigate this barrier by scheduling clinic appointments on days when LAS staff are present. The MLP could better serve current and potential clients with increased funding, expanded LAS staff hours, more LAS staff, and additional social workers.

Parents' engagement in trainings and meetings was limited and likely constrained by competing demands and accessibility. Respondents explained that it was difficult to maintain parent attendance at Know Your Rights, Positive Parenting, and Parenting in Stress events. Attendance was higher at the beginning of the program, when an average of five to six parents would attend each event. Later, parents signed up for these events but often did not attend. This could be, in part, because of families' busy schedules and competing priorities. Staff tried adjusting the timing of the meetings, providing childcare during the meetings, and catering the meetings, but attendance did not improve. Another challenge was that parent events held in Spanish were scheduled during the workday, which was a barrier to attendance for Spanish-speaking working parents.

Indicators of Program Success

The MLP helped families access services to better support their youth. Families were pleased with the services that their youth received through the MLP. MLP staff helped them identify their youth's educational needs (including needs they were not aware of) and ensured that families received appropriate interventions that they may not have otherwise received. Examples of supports included home instruction, referrals to private schools or schools that better addressed the needs of the youth, and special education services.

The MLP gave families a voice in their children's education. The MLP advocated for low-income clients who may not otherwise have access to legal representation in the education system. Legal advocates from LAS accompanied parents to IEP meetings or disciplinary hearings as needed, and adjusted and navigated the services that their youth receive from the Department of Education (DOE). This was especially helpful for parents who had more than one youth receiving services at the clinic because it helped them keep track of information regarding their cases.

I really learned a lot from [attorney] and not only that, I learned how to educate myself and I learned of the services my daughter was required [to receive but] wasn't getting. My daughter goes to a private school now ... and she's doing so much better.

– Family Member

Families learned from one another in the MLP. Group training and information sessions provided parents with the opportunity to build community with other families navigating similar circumstances. The MLP created a space for parents to ask questions, share stories, and receive support.

Return-On-Investment Findings

The findings from the ROI analysis are organized into three sections: (a) costs, (b) benefits, and a (c) comparison of costs and benefits.

Costs

The overall, per-family cost—including staff time, family time, and nonpersonnel resources—was \$2,154. On average, LAS worked with families for 6 months, but MLP staff explained that the duration of interactions with families varied based on client needs. The cost of the MLP is defined as the dollar value of all resources (personnel and nonpersonnel) devoted to all activities involved in developing the case strategy. Specifically, this included all the effort put into the intake meeting and the subsequent collaboration between the family and MLP staff in creating the case strategy. The costs included staff time, nonpersonnel resources (i.e., office supplies and office space), and the time and resources of families. Each of these resources was essential to the pursuit and eventual achievement of a student’s educational milestones.

Benefits

The benefits vary for each of the milestones. The dollar value of the benefits associated with a family *pursuing* a milestone ranged from \$1,149 (for the “Obtained advice only on an educational issue” milestone) to \$8,742 (for the “IEP designates school and state pays tuition” milestone). The range of benefits stemming from a family *achieving* a milestone ranged from \$1,149 (for the “Obtained advice only on an educational issue” milestone) to \$64,536 (for the “IEP designates school and state pays tuition” milestone). The benefits are the dollar value of all services a youth and their family receive after they are officially enrolled in the MLP and a case strategy is created for their educational milestone(s). Benefits included attorney time devoted to educational advocacy and IEP meetings, as well as the monetary value of services rendered in achieving the educational milestones.

The educational milestones that MLP staff pursued were grouped into 12 categories: (a) City pays tuition to private school, (b) obtained initial IEP, (c) IEP designates school and state pays tuition, (d) obtained private evaluation at district expense, (e) received compensatory education services, (f) obtained evaluation via related service authorization, (g) obtained or increased related services on IEP, (h) obtained appropriate class placement, (i) suspension dismissed, (j) manifestation determination meeting won, (k) obtained advice only on educational issues, and (l) parent reimbursed for services. The cost study tracked these 12 categories for educational milestones.

Comparing Costs and Benefits

The benefits outweighed the costs for most of the milestones. The findings show that when we examine the ROI for milestone *pursuit* only, all but two of the milestones had returns that are greater than zero, indicating that the average benefit of pursuit outweighed the average cost. Once the

additional benefits associated with *achieving* the milestones were taken into account, the corresponding ROI calculations associated with all but one milestone (“Obtained advice on educational issue”) increased and were greater than zero. The average benefit calculated for each educational milestone showed the variation in the overall dollar value of the services that individual families received, based on the unique needs and circumstances of each family’s case. In some cases, the ROI of pursuing and achieving a milestone was quite large, with some benefits measuring just under 30 times the costs.

The study team did not calculate an overall average ROI for the MLP in this phase of the evaluation. However, an overall ROI measure will be provided in the final report, using more detailed and up-to-date information. Specifically, using data beyond the second quarter of 2020, the study team will obtain information on the number of families who are pursuing but have not yet achieved their educational milestones, as well as those who have achieved their milestones, and will assess an average ROI that takes into account the relative frequency of the milestones.

Recommendations and Sustainability

AIR makes the following recommendations in response to the study’s findings.

Tailor outreach to reach Spanish speakers. Language may contribute to low parent engagement. The program team should ensure that measures are implementing to close the language gap (e.g., hiring Spanish-speaking attorneys proportional to need).

Ensure sufficient staff capacity. Social workers play an important role in the referral process, but there are times when MLP referrals exceed the social workers’ capacity. Consider adding additional social workers to the team who can provide support during busier times.

Create additional opportunities for family engagement. One of the biggest challenges that the MLP has encountered is getting families to attend the trainings. That said, family members explained that they really appreciated opportunities to meet with other families in the MLP and meaningfully discuss their youth’s experiences. LAS may consider offering trainings at varying times and different locations (including virtual options) to ensure that they are accessible to families. They may also consider offering opportunities for families to speak with each other during the trainings, and consider allowing families to present during the trainings.

Embed the MLP in CFI policies and practices. Some clinicians are not fully aware of the program’s referral requirements and therefore do not refer families to the MLP. CFI should more completely embed the MLP into its policies and practices. One way to do this is to include the MLP in standard onboarding procedures. During the trainings and ongoing meetings, LAS should reinforce and discuss the requirements so that all clinicians know which families are eligible.

Expand access to the LAS clinic. The proximity of MLP services in the clinic allowed attorneys to efficiently conduct intake meetings and meetings with families. However, families sometimes required services on days when LAS staff are not available. The MLP could better serve current and potential clients with increased funding and expanded LAS staff hours. Alternatively, the MLP should consider flexible work schedules that allow staff to be in the clinic every day, but for more limited hours (e.g., half days).

Seek additional funding to support program sustainability. The MLP should consider leveraging findings from the ROI analysis to pursue additional grant funding to sustain the program. Given that program benefits are high relative to the costs, this program may be enticing to other funders.

The MLP team is working to identify ways to financially sustain the program as the CJII programmatic grant period ended in 2020. The team has partnered with the Mt. Sinai Medical Legal Partnership Non-Profit¹ to identify additional funding and is planning to apply for multiple grants. Currently, the future of the program is unknown, as post-CJII funding has not been secured. For now, the program is continuing in a limited capacity with just the attorney staffing. All respondents expressed a strong desire to continue the MLP.