



CCB: Can you provide a brief background on LegalHealth and the impact of its services on health?

Ms. Somoza: LegalHealth, a division of the New York Legal Assistance Group (NYLAG), provides free civil legal assistance to patients and trains healthcare professionals to understand the legal issues their patients face. We believe that our services set off a chain reaction resulting in better health and decreases in unnecessary hospital readmissions and healthcare spending.

CCB: What made you personally want to get involved with NYLAG?

Ms. Somoza: Coming from a family of immigrants, I entered the legal profession with the intent of using immigration law to empower families and ensure they have the best opportunities for success in this country. In the past, I have specialized in humanitarian-based immigration remedies, represented immigrant children in both immigration and family court, and educated communities through campaigns with the New York Civil Liberties Union.

Although I greatly enjoyed providing immigration services, I was often dismayed upon learning about the other complications my clients were facing in their lives such as substandard housing conditions, lack of resources, and a need for guidance through complex systems that they did not understand. I was quickly drawn to NYLAG, and specifically LegalHealth, because of our intersectional approach to a patient's legal questions that analyzes both the immediate need and how to help each individual improve their overall health and set them up for success. By working in partnership with health providers, we become part of a multidimensional team making sure each individual has both dignity and fair opportunities, no matter their health conditions, immigration status, or socioeconomic standing. I am able to not only be a guide through an intimidating legal system but also provide tools to stabilize and empower patients and their families.

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CCB: What services does the CCB NYLAG LegalHealth clinic provide for its clients? Who is eligible to become a client?

Ms. Somoza: The clinic provides civil legal services to low-income individuals who cannot afford an attorney. Among the services offered are: eligibility determination and appeals for government benefits; assistance with insurance eligibility and coverage disputes, including Medicaid, Medicare, or other commercial plans; remedies for housing conditions and potential evictions; family law; immigration remedies; debtor and creditor issues; workplace accommodations; and advanced planning through preparations of wills, assigning a health care proxy, power of attorney, and permanency planning.

To become a client, an individual must be a patient at a CCB network practice and be referred by a provider who has completed a LegalHealth training program on Social Determinants of Health and the Law.

CCB: Can you share a success story from your time working at the CCB NYLAG LegalHealth clinic?

Ms. Somoza: When I met Ms. Smith (*name changed to protect patient identity*) in December 2017, her health issues—an overactive thyroid with numerous debilitating and unexpected symptoms and a back injury resulting in a recent leave from her job—were interfering with her ability to work. Despite her best efforts, Ms. Smith fell behind in her rent and her landlord took her to housing court. Faced with a potential eviction from the Brooklyn apartment where she had resided for almost 10 years, Ms. Smith tried her best to represent herself in housing court. She could consistently pay her monthly rent going forward, but she did not have the funds to pay off the back rent of almost \$7,000.

I stepped in to help Ms. Smith identify and communicate with various charity organizations that could help pay for the arrears. I coordinated with the charities and ensured that they had the necessary documents to process her request. When additional time was needed, I helped her negotiate with the housing court judge and landlord's attorney to provide an extension. As a result, Ms. Smith was able to remain in her home. Shortly thereafter, Ms. Smith attended her citizenship interview and was sworn in as a U.S. citizen and has already registered to vote. Not only is Ms. Smith now able to focus on her health, she is now enthusiastically looking forward in life, focusing on new goals, and wants to go back to school.

CCB: Can you discuss the Social Determinants of Health and the Law trainings that NYLAG facilitates with CCB and 1199 TEF?

Ms. Somoza: The training is built on the expertise that LegalHealth has developed from training healthcare professionals for the last 17 years, and addresses topics such as achieving housing stability, income maximization and stability, behavioral health, immigration, and safe living environments.

Good health requires more than good health care. Much of a person's health is dependent upon social factors, some of which may be addressed with legal assistance. Our aim with this training is to empower the healthcare workforce to identify health-harming legal issues and advocate for their patients to prevent crises, making a referral for legal services when necessary. It also teaches healthcare professionals about their unique role in advocacy and provides tools they can use to better assist their patients.

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