



Editorial: Public initiative links law and medicine

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Legal challenges often translate into health problems.

That is the premise of a new partnership that will launch publicly Saturday in north Sarasota.

The initiative, led by Sarasota Memorial Hospital's new Internal Medicine Practice in Newtown and Legal Aid Manasota, is a welcome response to the deleterious effects of stressful conditions related to legal matters and barriers to health care that can often be eliminated by good counsel from an attorney.

The Internal Medicine Practice was created by SMH and the Florida State University College of Medicine. Health care in the historic African-American community will be provided by FSU medical-school residents enrolled in a three-year training program, with aid and oversight from local doctors.

The program will help bring vital medical services to an underserved community, provide physicians-in-training with real-life experience and possibly encourage graduates of the residency program to practice medicine in Sarasota or elsewhere in the region.

Some of the illnesses encountered at the clinic are driven by the stresses that affect everyone: work or unemployment; budgetary constraints; family disputes and the like. But patients in pockets of poverty may face additional health challenges caused by, say, mold in rundown apartments or inadequate access to healthy foods. At times, however, proximity to a public clinic is not enough to overcome challenges.

Sometimes would-be patients lack access not only to primary care but to specialists and medication because they have been wrongly denied Medicaid benefits, Social Security disability payments, workers compensation claims or private-insurance reimbursements. Other times, the pressures associated with zealous debt collectors who overstep their bounds or with minor litigation can have significant impacts on health.

So, thanks to a one-year grant from the Sarasota Memorial Healthcare Foundation, enter Legal Aid Manasota — an invaluable nonprofit organization that provides counsel to low-income residents through the utilization of a small staff and private-sector attorneys who offer their services without compensation.

Numerous studies have shown that effective legal aid reduces social-service costs in communities and supports economic growth — both for employees and for employers. And, the leaders of this partnership believe, legal assistance will promote better health and eventually contain treatment costs.

“Health & Law: A Newtown Community Effort” will be presented Saturday from 9:30 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. at the Robert L. Taylor Community Complex in Sarasota.

Representatives from Legal Aid Manasota, the Sarasota County Bar Association Diversity Committee, the Internal Medicine Practice, the Newtown Alive! project, the judiciary and the city of Sarasota will make presentations.

The event is open to anyone interested in learning how local medical providers and lawyers are working together to reduce barriers and increase access to essential medical care in the Newtown community, according to SMH and Legal Aid Manasota. A question-and-answer session will follow; organizers say people who attend will be able to meet some of the physicians and volunteer lawyers.

We commend the partners and participants. This outreach is important, and must continue regularly in order to raise awareness, build trust, expand access to care and, we hope, attract more support for legal aid.



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