



Rx: Tender Legal Care

A NEW EBCLC PARTNERSHIP HELPS EASE LEGAL PAINS

Tears streamed down the mother's cheeks as she described her daughter's trauma. Weeks after the young girl's uncle had entered their apartment and molested her, 15-year-old Michelle (a pseudonym) was crying constantly and unable to sleep. She no longer felt safe in her own home.

Immediately after the assault, the mother had whisked Michelle to the walk-in clinic at Children's Hospital & Research Center Oakland. Now the mother had returned to the same facility, but this time to seek a legal way to break the lease to her apartment.

A hospital may seem an odd place to look for legal assistance, but thanks to a new partnership launched by Children's Hospital and the East Bay Community Law Center (EBCLC)—Boalt's poverty law clinic—low-income youth and their families in the East Bay can now see a doctor and a lawyer at the same facility. After receiving medical treatment, a patient can walk down the hallway and consult with a lawyer or law student about obtaining welfare benefits, dealing with a negligent landlord, or handling a nasty custody fight.

In this case, it was Madeline Howard—a third-year Boalt student and one of the project's two student advocates—who negotiated with the landlord to release the family from its lease. "It was amazing to see the impact that advocacy had on their lives," Howard says. "I visited them after they moved into a new apartment. They felt safe, and Michelle was able

Article published in the Boalt Hall *Transcript*, Spring 2007, Vol. 39 No. 1, pp. 12-13.

For the full magazine see:

http://www.law.berkeley.edu/alumni/transcript/spring_07/Transcript-Spring07.pdf



LEGAL CHECKUP: A client discusses her legal rights with (from left to right) Sheila McLaughlin Hall '84, health law practice director at EBCLC; student intern Tova Wolking '07; and Dr. Kelley Meade, a pediatrician at Children's Hospital.

to resume a normal life. She was able to sleep at night, and stopped crying all the time. Even though she'll be scarred by the experience, it was great to be able to help her and her family make a new start."

Launched in June 2006, the Alameda County Medical-Legal Partnership is patterned after a similar collaboration of pediatricians and lawyers in Boston. In fact, it was Howard's stint with the Boston program—three years as a volunteer advocate and outreach coordinator—that sparked her decision to attend Boalt and get the legal credentials necessary to be as effective a medical-legal advocate as possible.

Sheila McLaughlin Hall '84, legal director of the project, notes that many of the program's clients would be wary of going to a law office. "There's an increased trust because we've been referred by their doctor," she says. "We actually feel like part of the medical team." It's not surprising that Hall and her students refer to their initial consultation with a client—usually held in a small examining room—as a "legal checkup."

The new program is only one of many advocacy projects carried out by

EBCLC. Founded by Boalt students in 1988, EBCLC is the largest provider of free legal services in Alameda County. Each year, 14 staff attorneys guide more than 100 law students in their efforts to assist clients with housing, jobs, and health care issues.

The ultimate goal of the EBCLC-Children's Hospital partnership is to improve the health of disadvantaged families. "There's a long and unfortunate correlation between poverty and poor health outcomes," says Jeff Selbin, clinical professor of poverty law at Boalt and former executive director of EBCLC. "Our experience is that lawyers can help do a host of things that stabilize families and increase their access to health care."

Dr. Gena Lewis, a pediatrician at Children's Hospital, agrees emphatically. She had been so impressed with EBCLC's legal intervention programs for HIV sufferers that she initiated the conversation that resulted in the partnership. Lewis notes that the alarming number of cases of asthma and other

chronic diseases endemic among low-income youth has been linked to poor nutrition and inadequate living conditions. "If you fix those problems, hopefully you fix the medical ones as well," she says.

In one recent case, a 19-year-old woman came to the clinic to be treated for a serious flare-up of her psoriasis. She had been living in her car—aggravating her chronic skin condition—because her landlord had refused to fix plumbing problems that had made her apartment uninhabitable. A legal checkup with Howard followed her treatment, and she is now living with a cousin while Howard negotiates the return of her apartment security deposit.

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Such legal interventions "can help reduce the health disparities created by living in poverty," Hall says. "We've been doing this for 16 years or so in the area of HIV-AIDS. Now it's time to give the same attention to the problems of youth. We've been wanting to do this for a long time."
—*Transcript Staff*