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### The Health Justice Project: Interdisciplinary Advocacy to Overcome Social Determinants of Health

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# The Health Justice Project: Interdisciplinary Advocacy to Overcome Social Determinants of Health\*

*Chicago, Illinois, United States*

## **Introduction**

Started in 2010, the Health Justice Project is a law school clinic at Loyola University Chicago School of Law in which JD, MSW, and MPH students and medical residents actively participate in a medical-legal partnership. By collaborating with medical, social work, public health, and other disciplines, the Health Justice Project addresses social determinants of health and improves the health and wellbeing of our clients.

The mission of the Health Justice Project is twofold: (1) Provide highly effective quality representation to low-income clients in order to resolve the legal needs that underlie, exacerbate, or could result in health disparity; and (2) provide law students with an intensive, challenging education in the fundamentals of legal practice, systemic advocacy and interdisciplinary collaboration necessary to becoming effective problem solvers and socially responsible, service-oriented attorneys.

To achieve its mission, the Health Justice Project offers students a variety of courses, including Introduction to Health Justice, Health Justice Project, Interdisciplinary Health Advocacy, Advanced Health Justice Project Policy, and Advanced Health Justice Project.

## **Interdisciplinary Approach**

The Health Justice Project works with several interdisciplinary partner organizations to meet complex patient-client needs. These include Erie Family Health Center, the Northwestern University School of Medicine, Loyola University Chicago School of Public Health, and Loyola University Chicago School of Social Work. The Health Justice Project also partners with several legal organizations in Chicago to provide patient-clients with expert legal representation. These include Aids Legal Council of Chicago, Lawyers' Committee for Better Housing, Equip for Equality, Heartland Alliance, Legal Assistance Foundation, and the American Bar Association Medical-Legal Partnership Pro Bono Project.

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In collaboration with the Northwestern McGaw Center for Graduate Medical Education, the Health Justice Project created a community medicine curriculum for the Northwestern University School of Medicine Family Practice Residency, focused on interdisciplinary collaboration in order to address the root causes of health problems. Law students work on-site to train experienced medical providers to screen for, and identify, social determinants of health. Once identified, law students represent the patient-clients, using legal strategy in order to improve patient-client health outcomes. During the representation, law students partner with medical residents to serve the patient-client. For example, a law student representing a patient-client in a Social Security Administration appeal will work with a medical resident to understand the patient-client's health impairments and gather evidence for trial.

In addition, law students collaborate with graduate students of other disciplines to serve patient-clients. Law students work with social work students, supervised by a Loyola University Chicago School of Social Work faculty member, to identify and address complex patient-client issues. Law students also work with Loyola University Chicago Public Health students to develop policy-based strategies to improve community health.

### **Overcoming Barriers to Health: Legal Practice Areas & Clients**

The Health Justice Project's medical partner, Erie Family Health Center, a Federally Qualified Health Center, serves 33,000 Chicagoans annually. The patient-clients are 84% Hispanic, 62% Spanish-speaking, 35% Without Health Insurance, and 96% below the United States Federal Poverty Line. Once Erie Family Health Center identifies a legal or social issue, Health Justice Project Student Attorneys provide advice and legal representation in order to overcome barriers to health. Law students in the clinic represent clients in a variety of legal matters related to health, using the "IHEAL" model:

- I:** Income Assistance & Insurance (Public Benefits, Social Security Benefits, Medical Debt Forgiveness, Medicaid)
- H:** Housing & Tenant Rights (Substandard Conditions, Evictions, Utilities)
- E:** Education (Enrollment, Special Education)
- A:** Advocacy & Appeals (Benefit Denials)
- L:** Legal Referrals

### **Improving Patient-Client Health: Health Justice Project Successes**

Since the fall of 2010, the Health Justice Project has served 1,054 patient-clients. The following stories illustrate the positive effect of Health Justice Project intervention on patient-client health outcomes.

Asthma: Erie Family health Center doctors suspected an environmental hazard after diagnosing two children under the age of five with asthma and respiratory distress. Student Attorneys confirmed that the family's apartment, coated in black mold, was the root of the health problems. The Health Justice Project worked with the family to break the lease, recoup damages, and obtain healthier housing. The children's asthma has since subsided.

Disability: D, a homeless woman in her fifties, was struggling to maintain her health on her limited food stamps income. As a result of her mental and physical health impairments, D was unable to work. D applied for, and was denied, disability benefits by the Social Security Administration. A Health Justice Project Student Attorney represented D in an appeal. In a hearing presided over by an administrative law judge, the Student Attorney argued that the Social Security Administration's denial was incorrect because the client's mental and physical health impairments constituted a disability. In a decision from the bench, the judge ruled in favor of the Student Attorney and the patient-client was awarded two years of back-benefits, totaling over \$32,000.00. D will receive \$1,230.00 each month going forward as well as become Medicare eligible. The Health Justice Project's intervention prevented the client from food insecurity, housing instability, and enables her to access critical medical assistance through her insurance coverage.

Sickle Cell Anemia: B and her children were referred to the Health Justice Project after her landlord initiated an eviction action under the Illinois Forcible Entry and Detainer Act. In an effort to dispossess B's family from the property, the landlord illegally cut heat and hot water to the apartment. As a result of the lack of heat and hot water, B's child, who has sickle cell anemia, went into pain crisis. A Health Justice Project student attorney asserted B's right to functioning utilities, resulting in the reconnection of the critical heat and hot water. The Student Attorney also successfully represented B during the eviction proceeding, negotiating an agreed order worth \$4,500.00, and helped the family relocate to healthier housing.

### **Overcoming Systemic Barriers: Policy Advocacy**

In addition to direct client representation, the Health Justice Project engages in policy advocacy in order to address systemic barriers to health. For example, in the spring of 2012, senior Health Justice Project students represented the National Coalition for the Homeless (NCH), a non-profit organization in Washington, DC, and developed a two-prong strategy to overcome American laws that criminalize homelessness. Under the first prong, the students developed litigation strategy and legislative reform; under the second, the students designed and implemented a study of stakeholders and individuals experiencing homelessness. According to NCH Executive Director, Neil Donovan, "I was so impressed and moved by the response and passion of your class. To start, your

passion, commitment and investment came through so clearly.... I think that the direction that you took the assignment was right on the mark. This will be very translatable for use in other sites.”

The Health Justice Project will continue to educate and train future public interest attorneys as well as work to overcome underlying social causes that create health disparities. We hope to live up to the words of one former client, who said “you open one door, and they open ten or twenty doors for you. You keep hope alive. I’m grateful for all that you do.”

To learn more about the Health Justice Project, visit:  
<http://luc.edu/law/centers/healthlaw/hjp/index.html>.



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