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## New law promotes medical, legal partnership

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People with major health issues are also likely to have ancillary legal issues in any number of areas, including disability, housing, insurance and benefits eligibility, domestic violence and employment.

In recent years, lawyers and health care providers locally and across the country have tried to coordinate their efforts to identify and assist individuals with health and related legal issues.

They now have the support of Gov. Andrew Cuomo, who recently signed into law The Health Related Legal Services Program Law to promote medical-legal partnerships (MLP) statewide.

The law was originally intended to be a grant-funded program but because of the state's economic situation, the new law simply sanctions and endorses MLPs, which essentially provide free legal service to patients at health care facilities. The law entrusts the New York State Department of Health to establish guidelines for the state MLP programs.

The New York Coalition of Medical Legal Providers will begin discussing what standards should be implemented by the health department at a meeting in Albany on Oct. 26.

Volunteer Legal Services Project has two MLPs in the Rochester area, and VLSP health law staff attorney Ann Williams will attend the meeting.

"The (health department) has always been interested in client input and in improving standards and expectations," Williams said. "They're not a hands-off agency, they're very involved with their programs."

Although the health department has funded disease-spe-

cific MLPs for some time, Williams hopes diverse funding from hospitals, health care insurance providers and other sources will allow MLPs to reach those with a broader range of issues and health situations that fall out of the health department's current range of assistance.

"It's an endorsement of the concept," Williams said of the new law. "We find it to be an effective holistic approach to solving problems and providing services to low income individuals who happen to be at the doctor's frequently."

Williams has been working in an HIV MLP in conjunction with Empire Justice Center and other legal service providers at the Telesca Center for Justice in Rochester for several years.

In addition to the MLP assisting HIV patients, Volunteer Legal Services also has its own MLP with Highland Family Medicine. As Williams and Carla Palumbo, director of the Legal Aid Society of Rochester's Civil Division, explained, it saves health care providers money in the long run when there is help available to resolve issues for the insured and uninsured.

The Legal Aid Society of Rochester used to have a MLP with Golisano Children's Hospital before the funding ran out. Palumbo said she would like to re-establish the program and hopes the health department issues requests for proposals.

"I think MLPs work well because they reach people that might not come in before they're impacted by outside legal issues that affect their medical situation," Palumbo said. "You need legal backup to pull things together."

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