

Lawyers for a Healthier Start: Increasing Family Advocacy to Achieve Healthy Start Strategic Goals

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Presentation Objectives

- Discuss the importance of medical-legal partnership in maternal child health
- Discuss the Health, Education, and Legal Assistance Project: A Medical-Legal Partnership

Highlights

At a time when the United States' Black-White infant mortality rate (IMR) gap continues to persist despite considerable gains in understanding its root causes,¹ free civil legal assistance is an underused tool shown to impact factors significantly related to IMR, such as maternal stress.

Between 2011 and 2013, babies born to Black mothers were 2.2 times more likely to die than those born to White mothers.² Research shows that many drivers contributing to this gap are entrenched social and political factors that increase maternal stress and cumulative allostatic load.³ These factors are often better addressed with the aid of an attorney than that of a healthcare professional and/or social service provider, and require a holistic approach that includes individual services, advocacy, and systemic policy change.

Healthy Start participants and their families often face many challenges, such as poor housing conditions, lack of insurance, difficulty accessing quality health care, family violence, lack of public benefits, and family stability issues. These issues often have underlying legal implications that are challenging for non-attorneys to resolve. Furthermore, these issues impact participants' lives significantly, often resulting in increased maternal stress.

Current literature has identified the importance of addressing such social and political factors. According to Lu, *et al.*, of the 12 actions recommended to close the Black-White IMR gap, eight

¹ Kaiser Family Foundation. Available at: <http://kff.org/other/state-indicator/infant-mortality-rate-by-race-ethnicity/>.

² Matthews, TJ, M.S., et. al. Infant Mortality Statistics from the 2013 Period Linked Birth/Infant Death Data Set. Division of Vital Statistics. National Vital Statistics Report, Vol 64, No. 9, August 6, 2015.

³ Closing the Black-White Gap in Birth Outcomes: A Life-Course Approach, Lu et al. Available at: <http://www.unnaturalcauses.org/assets/uploads/file/ClosingTheGapBWBirthOutcome.pdf>.

focus on social, political, and community-level changes. Only four deal directly with access to and quality of health care.⁴

In 2010 the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) supported a pilot project that integrated civil legal aid attorneys into Healthy Start teams in order to improve family advocacy efforts. Crozer-Keystone Healthy Start (CKHS), an initial awardee, has developed a medical-legal partnership model in which attorneys, case managers, and other staff work collaboratively to address participants' most challenging issues in an effective manner.

CKHS' integration of free civil legal representation into its continuum of services contributes to achieving the five Healthy Start goals: 1) improving women's health, 2) promoting quality services, 3) strengthening family resilience, 4) achieving collective impact, and 5) increasing accountability through quality improvement, performance monitoring, and evaluation.

On-site attorneys work closely with case managers to screen all participants for unmet legal needs, increase the knowledge and advocacy capacity of all staff, engage in collective impact and systemic policy advocacy activities, and measure the impact of services on clients' overall health and well-being.

Since its inception, the CKHS team has identified and resolved hundreds of legal issues. Participants reported increased access to or recovery of needed entitlements and resources, decreases in stress, overall improvements in health, improvements in sleep, and increased self-efficacy.

The integration of civil legal aid attorneys as part of the Healthy Start team has shown to be an effective model to resolve complex social and legal needs. This model is replicable in other maternal and child health settings and could lead to the improvement of birth outcomes and maternal stress over time.

⁴ Closing the Black-White Gap in Birth Outcomes: A Life-Course Approach, Lu et al. Available at: <http://www.unnaturalcauses.org/assets/uploads/file/ClosingTheGapBWBirthOutcome.pdf>.