

BRIGHT LIGHTS AWARDS



2017

Strengthening Partnerships

St. Michael's Hospital Academic Family Health Team

Health Justice Initiative



In a unique program that looked outside the healthcare system for partners, St. Michael's Hospital Academic Family Health Team created a Health Justice Initiative (HJI) that seeks to address and promote education about social determinants of health and to engage in system advocacy.

The innovative initiative is a partnership between St. Michael's Hospital Academic FHT, St. Michael's Hospital, ARCH Disability Law Centre, Aboriginal Legal Services of Toronto, HIV&AIDS Legal Clinic Ontario and Neighbourhood Legal Services. The project was created after a needs assessment found that more than half of the patients referred to social workers – 1,980 patients – had at least one legal issue and many had more. Removing significant ongoing stressors has been shown to have a positive impact on an individual's health.

The team approached potential legal service partners, and after 18 months of planning, the initiative launched in 2014, encompassing six sites.

It's supported by funding from Legal Aid Ontario; there's a memorandum of understanding that defines roles and responsibilities and an operations committee that oversees the project.

The HJI is a unique partnership that allows primary care teams to better address the social determinants of health. It accomplishes this at the patient level through direct services, adding an onsite lawyer; at the institutional level through interprofessional education; and at the systemic level through the advocacy project. The initiative sets a precedent for increased collaboration between the health and legal sectors in the service of patients' best interests across the province.

As the initiative got underway, the team provided an introductory education program to staff, and to provide them with information about poverty law. The program was well received, and the curriculum is currently being redesigned based on a rigorous review of the literature, referral patterns, as well as provider surveys and community legal partner input.

Over a two-year period beginning in December 2014, a total of 474 individuals received direct legal services from the HJI, representing 760 distinct legal issues and resulting in 1,574 legal services.



BRIGHT LIGHTS AWARDS



2017

HJI members have also been active on the advocacy front, targeting laws, regulations, and government practices whose modification has the potential to improve health outcomes. The current housing issues advocacy initiative will include extensive patient and community engagement; one goal is a community advisory committee to direct the design and implementation of the advocacy effort.

The partnership has secured funding through 2019 and is currently exploring ways to ensure future funding. The partners are currently in the midst of a rigorous evaluation of the project, analyzing patient outcomes and provider experiences. It's also received an educational grant from the University of Toronto to develop and disseminate a continuing professional education curriculum on health-harming legal needs.

Components of the partnership model have already been utilized by healthcare-legal partnerships, providing template materials to assist others seeking collaboration.

The creativity necessary to forge such a partnership has yielded positive results and will continue to do so.

Key Facts:

- 50% patients referred to social workers had one or more legal issues
- From December 2014 to December 2016, 474 people received direct legal services for 760 distinct legal issues
- Education program introduced clinic staff to legal issues
- Sets precedent for collaboration between health and legal sectors