



Health and justice

## Prescribing legal help: Intervening early to improve patient health

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Guest author Michele Leering, Executive Director of Community Advocacy & Legal Centre in Belleville, Ontario, joins us today to tell us more information about libraries and justice partnerships.

Justice and health partnerships have emerged as an important new strategy for improving “legal health”, and for increasing access to justice for people living on a low income. These partnerships, inspired by medical/ legal partnerships in the United States and in Australia, have legal staff working proactively with front-line primary health care providers to red-flag simmering legal problems that could impact adversely on patient health.



At the Community Advocacy & Legal Centre where I work, we believe that these partnerships have the potential to transform the way that we think about effectively providing legal help, and help us reach more people at risk, especially in rural and remote areas. In my view, there's a clear link with the concerns that health professionals have about issues of "health inequity", and the concerns that legal professionals have about access to justice in so many areas of the law that impact on health—like housing, income security, rights at work, family law problems, to name just a few.

Our non-profit community-based legal clinic has entered into agreements with six primary care organizations, including family health teams, community health centres, and a nurse practitioner clinic, to:

provide staff awareness sessions

consult on legal issues

offer a service providers' email and phone "hotline"

staff in-house legal clinics at the primary care organizations

Doctors, nurse practitioners, nurses, and social workers help connect our community legal clinic staff to the patients who need our help at the earliest moment, before legal problems begin to fester and multiply. Since we started collaborating, we've noticed a huge increase in the number of referrals we are getting for legal help from these partners – four times more referrals every month compared to the same month in the previous year. And, more than 75 percent of the patients referred to us had never used our services before – so, our justice and health partnerships have helped us expand our reach.

Our project is one of a few in Ontario taking this new approach to making justice more accessible for everyday legal problems. I'll blog here in future about some of the other projects and their approaches, and will also tell you more about how our collaboration got started in case you'd like to participate in a similar project in your community.

We feel the time has come to take a proactive and preventative approach. Will you join us in prescribing free legal help for patients in challenging circumstances? If you live or work close to us, consider attending our [public forum](#) on this project on November 17, 2016 - or email [calc@lao.on.ca](mailto:calc@lao.on.ca) for more details.



**Guest author**

**Michele Leering**

Michele Leering is a lawyer and works as Executive Director with the Community Advocacy & Legal Centre in Belleville, Ontario. She also holds a Master's degree in Adult Education, and is currently a PhD candidate in the Faculty of Law at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario. Her present studies focus on issues connected to access to justice and legal professionalism. In addition to the traditional practice of poverty law, Michele has engaged in community development and law reform work, including organizing injured workers, and instigating participatory action research

projects into local hunger/poverty, homelessness, and access to justice.

Michele has worked on diverse public legal education projects including developing a comprehensive guide to living on a low income, referral and resource guides, and “legal health checklist” approaches that reflect her passion for encouraging legal literacy/capability approaches and holistic legal aid service delivery. She is currently working on an article about the crucial role that “trusted intermediaries” play in increasing access to justice.

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