



et al.: Medical-Legal Partnership Clinic

# MEDICAL-LEGAL PARTNERSHIP CLINIC: THREE DECADES OF SERVICE

**H**EALTH outcomes for people with HIV have improved significantly since the height of the AIDS epidemic when Prof. Emeritus Deborah Weimer founded the Medical-Legal Partnership Clinic 30 years ago. Still, more than 30,000 people in Maryland are living with the virus that causes AIDS. Poor communities in Baltimore City, says the current clinic director Sara Gold, are disproportionately affected by HIV as well as unmet legal needs.

That is why the Medical-Legal Partnership Clinic’s mission remains to provide free legal services to clients living with HIV, as it has since its inception. The services those clients need, however, have changed. In the early days when AIDS was considered a death sentence due to a lack of treatment and prevention options, clients more frequently sought what Gold calls, “help preparing to die”—wills, advance directives, future care for children. Now, as people with HIV are able to live the same as anyone in the general population, issues continue to involve advance care planning and have expanded more into areas including employment discrimination, Social Security

*continued on next page . . .*



*Djaq Rose Morris '21 (left) and Clare O'Donnell '21*



left to right: Sara Gold with collaborators Dr. Gregory Taylor (UMMS, UMMC), Steve Eveland (nurse practitioner, UMMC), and Dr. Ila Milasi (UMMS, UMMC).

Disability/SSI benefits, child custody, name and gender identity marker changes, and landlord-tenant disputes.

As the clinic’s title reflects, its approach is collaborative and interprofessional. Through long-standing partnerships with the University of Maryland Medical Center’s THRIVE Program for adults and the Pediatric AIDS Program (PACE), which serve HIV-positive patients, eight student lawyers a year work closely with healthcare providers and social workers under Gold’s supervision to provide trauma-informed legal services. This includes legal advice sessions at the medical clinics and representing clients in litigation and non-litigation cases. Additionally, clinic students participate in classes and interdisciplinary case conferences as part of the MidAtlantic AIDS Education Training Center’s Preparing the Future program, where they collaborate with students and faculty from across the University to develop skills working within interprofessional wellness teams.

Many students in the clinic also pursue a certificate in Maryland Carey Law’s renowned Law and Health Care Program. The year-long course is one of the clinical experiences approved within the certificate’s curriculum and satisfies the Cardin Requirement, which provides that all full-time

day students offer legal services for people who lack access to justice.

Djaq Rose Morris ’21 is one of those students. She spent her 2L year learning to build trusting relationships with clients, to understand professional responsibility and ethics, and to conduct cases from initial interview through court proceedings.

In her first appearance before a judge in Baltimore City Circuit Court last fall, Morris and her case partner Clare O’Donnell ’21 argued for their client to gain custody of her two teenage godsons. After extensive research, practice, and planning, Morris and O’Donnell felt ready for the hearing. “Prof. Gold asked every question that we could possibly be asked so that we were prepared,” says Morris. That work paid off with a successful outcome.

Just as the clinic has adapted to changing legal issues through the years, so too has it adjusted its

methods. When the COVID-19 crisis hit last winter, the clinic quickly pivoted to remote work and responded as new cases increasingly involved the virus. Student attorneys helped an immunocompromised client, whose employer had required him to stay home without pay, return to work. Another team advised an immunocompromised client on her legal rights under the Americans with Disabilities Act to request a reasonable accommodation in her healthcare workplace to minimize exposure to COVID-19 patients. And while restrictions on face-to-face meetings during the pandemic have presented challenges, Gold sees the shift as an opportunity to explore ways to make legal services more accessible, and may incorporate parts of the new “telelaw” model being developed in response to the crisis even beyond the pandemic.

“As we build on the clinic’s 30 years of work,” Gold reflects, “we will continue evolving to best train our students and serve our clients.” ■



left to right: Clinic students Alexandra Pritchard ’20, Frank Maldarelli ’20, and another student.