

## Medical Legal Collaboration for Kentucky Children Established

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**LEXINGTON, Ky. (Jan. 21, 2009)** – A new program for pediatric patients at the University of Kentucky draws on the strengths of the medical and legal professions to reduce health care disparities for low-income families.

The University of Kentucky College of Medicine Department of Pediatrics and Kentucky Children's Hospital have collaborated with the Access to Justice Foundation through the Kentucky Volunteer Lawyer Program to establish Child Advocacy Today (CAT). The first program of its kind in Kentucky, CAT brings pediatricians and lawyers together, drawing on the strengths of the professions, to ensure that families can meet the basic needs crucial to a child's health and development. Through the program, patients are treated more holistically than in a typical medical exam room by making legal services available in order to help prevent dire consequences before a point of crisis.

Program directors are Dr. Kimberly Northrip, UK assistant professor of pediatrics; Dr. Thomas Young, UK professor of pediatrics; and Jacqueline S. Duncan, Kentucky Volunteer Lawyer Program.

According to Northrip, many families of patients need help with forms to apply for Medicaid and with issues related to housing.

"Patients with health insurance are more likely to get regular check-ups and childhood vaccinations, and seek early treatment for illnesses that otherwise become chronic or require hospitalization," Northrip said. "And, children seen at the UK Pediatrics Clinic often suffer debilitating respiratory illnesses or skin infections exacerbated by substandard housing conditions. Often these issues can be corrected by an attorney simply requesting the tenant's rights as provided by law. The examples of legal intervention are numerous and compelling."

In Fayette County alone, over 10,500 children live in poverty. Physicians generally know government programs exist to help with basic needs and laws exist to protect the health and safety of these children, but physicians often lack the time, advocacy skills, depth of knowledge, and resources necessary to intervene.

"As pediatricians we know that many social and non-medical factors influence a child's health," said Young. "Poverty is one of the most significant indicators of a child's well-being and affects all aspects of a child's life, from health to education and safety. Children living in poverty get sick more often and with greater severity than those children living in economically stable families."

"By partnering with the UK Department of Pediatrics, Access to Justice Foundation provides physicians a direct link to legal services so often needed to obtain government assistance, take action on violations of rights, hold responsible parties accountable, and enforce laws intended to protect vulnerable children," said Duncan. "In the medical-legal partnership, the lawyer is on-site in the clinical setting with the doctors who are well-positioned to screen patients for unmet legal needs through regular contact and their position of trust. The lawyer's knowledge, skills, and advice to both the physicians and patients bring a new type of expertise to the health care setting."

Funding for the initiative has been provided by the donations from law firms Ward Hocker & Thornton and Jackson Kelly, and by the Fayette County Bar Association.

Free preventative law assistance will be provided on-site to clinic patients through regular clinic hours. The Kentucky Volunteer Lawyer Program and the Fayette County Pro Bono Program will coordinate pro bono opportunities for local law firms to accept referrals.

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