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Bipartisan Group Of Lawmakers Seeks National Medical-Legal Partnership Demo

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A bipartisan coalition of lawmakers is looking to build on a trend of linking medical providers with attorneys as a way to help patients through the health care process, avoid preventable medical conditions and reduce health care costs. Senate health committee Chair Tom Harkin (D-IA) along with other senators last week introduced legislation that would set aside \$10 million for a federal demonstration and evaluation program to bring attorneys into health care settings and integrate preventive law and medicine, and provide legal assistance to providers and patients.

A House version of the bill was introduced on Thursday and was referred to the House Committee on Energy and Commerce.

The bill, The Medical-Legal Partnerships for Health Act, is the first federal legislation to address the issue, which is a new innovation that advocates say has been growing exponentially over the past several years and fits in with the goals of health reform. There are about 200 MLPs across the country, with legal services in hospitals and health centers, according to the National Center for Medical-Legal Partnerships.

"We think the bipartisan support really signals this is an innovation that is going to serve vulnerable families and this is really the missing link for families," said Ellen Lawton, the center's executive director.

The bill would authorize HHS to provide grants for MLPs "in a range of settings across the country," and would help set a standard of how medical-legal partnerships should be implemented, Lawton said. "The passion is there, the need is there and a lot of the tools are there, but we need some consistency," she said.

Physician, patient and lawyer advocacy groups have endorsed MLPs as a way to improve health care. An ongoing pilot study in Boston has shown a 50 percent reduction in emergency room visits after MLP intervention, according to the bill's sponsors. The bill encourages local buy-in by requiring that each MLP demonstration program match the grant funds by at least 10 percent.

Every year, between 10 and 17 million people face unmet legal needs, which could be remedied with legal assistance, according to a May report by the George Washington University School of Public Health and Health Services.

“Assistance in navigating our legal system is sometimes all it takes to prevent individuals and their families from making repeated trips to the doctor or hospital for a reoccurring condition,” said Harkin. “MLPs help people obtain legal aid necessary to ensure that they receive the care and benefits they deserve, to lead healthier lives and to avoid future injuries and illnesses.”

“Better integration of preventive medicine and pragmatic legal assistance will result in better care for individuals and a smarter deployment of our scarce health care resources,” said Sen. Evan Bayh (D-IN), one of the bill's sponsors. “Our bill will encourage medical experts and lawyers to work together to improve the health and wellness of families and cut unnecessary spending on preventable medical conditions.”

“No one should be denied the medical attention they need because they cannot navigate the labyrinth of our legal system,” Sen. Kit Bond (R-MO), also a sponsor, said. “Cutting the red tape between doctors and lawyers will not only save money, but by improving public health and awareness, will have the potential to save lives.”