

Statement by Senator Tom Harkin
Introducing the Medical-Legal Partnership for Health Act
July 29, 2010

Mr. HARKIN: Mr. President, today I join Senator Bayh and Senator Bond to introduce the Medical-Legal Partnership for Health Act. This legislation builds upon the great work that medical-legal partnerships are doing every day, all across the United States.

Medical-legal partnerships bring legal aid services into medical settings, such as hospitals and community health centers, to provide patients with legal help to address conditions that lead to poor health, lengthy hospital stays, and repeated emergency room visits. Imagine, for example, that your child develops chronic ear infections. You repeatedly bring your sick child to the local emergency room, struggling each time to pay the high costs of medical care and prescription antibiotics. Imagine further that you are the head of a low-income family, you don't have health insurance or the money to pay for the ER visits, and the hospital or community bears the brunt of the costs.

Medical-legal partnerships can help break this expensive and avoidable cycle. If the emergency room doctor is trained in screening for families who could benefit from legal intervention, the doctor may learn, for example, that the family's landlord refuses to turn on the heat in their apartment building. The frigid temperatures in their home have made their child more susceptible to illness, which explains the chronic ear infections. By referring the patient to the hospital's medical-legal partnership program, the family receives legal aid to go after the slumlord and require the heat to be turned on, and the children's ear infections stop. As a consequence, the family is healthier, their home is warm, and both they and the hospital save on health costs. And all of this is possible because of a low-cost, common-sense intervention.

Mr. President, the first medical-legal partnership was started in Boston in 1993, and since then, 85 more have sprung up in 38 States. These centers can serve multiple hospitals and clinics within a community. Currently, medical-legal partnerships support more than 200 hospitals, clinics, and health centers. They help vulnerable patients resolve social conditions that lead to poor health outcomes, such as getting a landlord to change air filters to help minimize asthma and allergies, assisting victims of domestic violence with preventing future abuse, and helping terminally ill patients make custodial arrangements for their dependent children.

In many cases, patients aren't even aware that their health challenges are caused by their living environment, or that their problem can be addressed through the legal system.

Mr. President, after graduating from law school, I served as a Legal Services attorney in Iowa. I learned first-hand how crucial this assistance is to struggling families and individuals who have no place else to turn when they are taken advantage of or abused. I know the invaluable legal help provided to battered women trying to leave abusive relationships while fearing for their safety and the safety of their children. I know that, without access to the legal system, the poor are often powerless against the injustices they suffer.

I'm very proud to say that my home State of Iowa has a particularly successful partnership. The Iowa Legal Aid Health and Law Project harnesses the talents of Iowa physicians and attorneys to improve the lives of vulnerable Iowans. Many times these situations involve substandard housing, discrimination, elder abuse, or problems accessing disability, Social Security, health, or veteran's benefits. By partnering with 17

hospitals and health centers across my State, the Iowa Legal Aid Health and Law Project is able to extend services from Sioux City to Dubuque, and from Council Bluffs to Fort Dodge. Last year, the program served 880 Iowans, and 94 percent of their cases had a positive outcome. The Iowa Legal Aid Health and Law Project does a remarkable job. And they're just one example of the great work going on across the country.

Mr. President, you may be surprised to learn that when it comes to medical-legal partnerships, a little money can go a long way. Iowa's program was started with a Federal investment of less than \$300,000. The program prevents hospital admissions and emergency room visits that cost hospitals and patients many thousands of dollars in health care costs and insurance premiums. A modest investment in these community programs can help people achieve healthier, safer lives and prevent future hospitalizations and health care costs. That sounds like common sense to me. And that's why, today, I'm proud to introduce the Medical-Legal Partnership for Health Act along with Senators Bayh and Bond: to give health care providers and lawyers across the country the opportunity to start such programs.

The Act creates a Federal demonstration program to help create, strengthen, and evaluate medical-legal partnerships. Overall, this legislation will support 60 MLP sites in community health centers, the Veterans Administration, hospitals, and other health care settings.

In the spirit of compromise and bipartisanship, we have taken contentious issues off the table. For example, the bill excludes Federal money from being used toward class action law suits, medical malpractice cases, representation of undocumented individuals, and abortion or abortion-counseling services.

In addition to having bipartisan support, medical-legal partnerships have been praised by prominent organizations representing physicians and attorneys. They've received endorsement from the American Medical Association, the American Bar Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Hospital Association, and the Accreditation Council of Graduate Medical Education, to name just a few.

Through this community-based, common-sense investment in addressing the social effects of poverty, we will be able to help so many of our most at-risk citizens to avoid illness and hospitalization.

I extend my sincere thanks to Senator Bayh and Senator Bond for their hard work and commitment to this bill. And I urge our colleagues to join us in supporting this investment in medical-legal partnerships. I request unanimous consent that this statement be entered in the Record, and that a copy of the bill be printed in the Record.