



THE PLAIN DEALER

With friends' help, MetroHealth expands Legal Aid program

Friday, August 11, 2006

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Plain Dealer Reporter

Children, the elderly, the homeless and ex-convicts who are patients at MetroHealth Medical Center in Cleveland will receive \$1.27 million-worth of free legal help aimed at improving their lives.

The money will pay Legal Aid attorneys -- armed with letters from MetroHealth doctors -- to navigate bureaucratic mazes that often stand between the neediest residents and their getting Social Security benefits, special education, welfare assistance, food stamps, Medicaid, child care help and decent housing.

Four attorneys and a paralegal will, by mid-August, begin meeting with patients at MetroHealth and its three Cleveland neighborhood clinics -- MetroHealth Broadway, Buckeye and McCafferty.

Dr. Robert Cohn, a pediatrician, said "teaming up with Legal Aid attorneys will help us resolve economic, environmental and social problems that can have a negative impact on health."

This Community Advocacy Program is an expansion of one that began in 2003 at MetroHealth with just one young and passionate attorney, Mallory Curran, assisting families with ill children.

"What we learned from the pilot program is that there is tremendous demand for this type of service," Curran said.

She and MetroHealth pediatricians also learned how much they could do to raise a struggling family's quality of life.

Jacqueline Torres and her three children, one with muscular dystrophy, adore Curran.

"She is more than a lawyer," Torres said. "She became a supportive friend, an emotional support when I felt overwhelmed, depressed and suicidal."

Curran helped Torres get welfare when she couldn't work because her ill youngest son couldn't go to day care. Curran convinced the Social Security Administration that the boy deserved disability benefits. She successfully argued for Torres to get food stamps. And she helped get Torres' son into a preschool for disabled children.

MetroHealth and the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland are contributing \$270,000 to the program. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, based in New Jersey, contributed \$500,000, which was matched collectively by the Eva L. and Joseph M. Bruening Foundation, Saint Luke's Foundation of Cleveland, the Callahan Foundation, the George Gund Foundation, the United Black Fund of Greater Cleveland, and these local law firms: Benesch, Friedlander, Coplan & Aronoff; Thompson Hine; and Calfee, Halter & Griswold.

MetroHealth is the first and only Cleveland hospital offering such a program. Two other Ohio hospitals, in Toledo and Cincinnati, are following Cleveland's efforts, which are modeled after the first such program in the nation, created in 1993 at Boston Medical Center. Since then, hospitals in more than 20 states have started legal-advocacy programs.

"It only makes sense that doctors with low-income patients and Legal Aid attorneys for low-income families work together," said Melanie Shakarian, spokeswoman for Cleveland's Legal Aid office. "We hope to help more than 400 patient families over the next year."

For more information: www.lasclev.org or call 216-861-5217.

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