

Conducting pragmatic legal needs assessment in community health settings during the COVID-19 pandemic

Suzie Forell¹, Teresa Hall², Kate Paton², Huei Ming Liu³ & Harriet Hiscock²

¹ Health Justice Australia

² Murdoch Children's Research Institute

³ Sydney Local Health District

Background

Community health and legal services are increasingly seeking to partner to provide holistic care to common clients with intersecting needs. We report on a legal needs assessment tool to refine the legal help offered in two community health settings, enabling health practitioners to address clients' health harming legal needs.

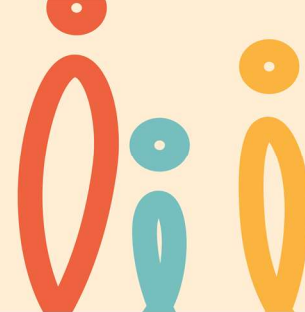
What is the problem?

COVID-19 has underscored the extent to which social determinants can contribute to poor health and wellbeing.¹ Legal assistance can help address these issues but is often not easily accessed by those who need it most.² Health and legal services are increasingly seeking to partner to provide holistic care of common clients with intersecting needs.³ Health services can provide a trusted access point to legal support, but that support needs to be tailored to population needs.

What is a legal needs assessment?

Legal needs assessment is used to match the assistance offered to population needs, recognising that legal needs such as support for family breakdown, tenancy, debt and employment differ depending on the socio-demographic and economic composition of the local population.² Legal needs assessment for health justice partnership involves: identifying legal issues that clients are most vulnerable to, and barriers to health practitioners effectively connecting clients with legal help; and mapping service networks to identify partnership opportunities. Legal needs assessment in health settings is a newly emerging practice that requires bridging interprofessional conceptual, cultural and language divides towards holistic care for shared clients.⁴



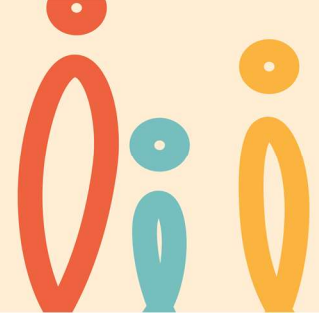


What did we do?

The Centre of Research Excellence (CRE) in Childhood Adversity and Mental Health aims to co-design, test and evaluate two integrated health, social and legal care Hubs in Wyndham Vale, Victoria and Marrickville, New South Wales (NSW). Legal needs assessment was used to tailor each Hub to meet local need. However, with this information required just as the COVID-19 pandemic erupted in March 2020, limited staff capacity and time prevented our conducting a full legal needs survey. Instead, in Victoria, structured key informant interviews were conducted using an abridged legal needs assessment survey outlined in Table 1. Interviews were conducted on Zoom and phone with seven Hub practitioners e.g., counsellors, allied health and a paediatrician well placed to detect health-harming legal issues. Informants rated the frequency and impact of a range of legal issues experienced by clients (e.g., housing, employment, family law). Practitioners described their level of knowledge, confidence and current practice in connecting clients with legal support.

Table 1. Abridged legal needs assessment survey questions: Victoria

Domain	Question
Practitioner role	What is your role at [Hub]?
Frequency of legal issues	How commonly do any of the following issues become apparent in your work with families? [a list discussed including money issues (e.g. debt, fines, pay day loans) housing/tenancy, immigration, family, family violence, care and protection, employment, discrimination, crime, others]. (Recorded rough proportion of clients/families seen with these issues, e.g. one in ten for each discussed).
Impact of legal issues on health and wellbeing	In your experience which of the above issues most affect the health and wellbeing of the patients and families you work with?
Time spent responding to legal issues	Overall, what proportion of your time with families is taken responding to these types of issues?
Referral pathways	Where do you send or refer people when they have these issues, if anywhere?
Ease of referral	How easy or difficult is it to connect people for support with these issues?
Impact on practice from lack of legal support	What does it mean for you when there are no options for legal help?



In NSW, needs assessment started in April 2021, partly due to the researcher team's response to COVID-19 in 2020. This enabled the NSW site to build on learnings from Victoria i.e., that open-ended questions led to the richest insights into legal needs in the community. As such, the pretested interview questions were embedded into broader health needs assessment interviews.

For example, "What needs do you see that are beyond your capacity to address?" was added as a probing question in a broader inquiry about the participants' role in responding to childhood adversity.

What did we find?

At both sites, interviews uncovered scope to increase health practitioner capability to address the social determinants by improving knowledge and trusted relationships with community lawyers through interdisciplinary training, co-location, and collaborative practice.

Where to next?

Findings indicate that legal needs can be pragmatically identified within contextual constraints, to appropriately tailor support to client needs and service capability. This may be particularly important for ensuring continued health justice partnerships in the next phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. The scope of legal assistance provided can be further tailored during the partnership to respond to emerging issues expressed by clients.

References

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