



Advancing Evidence.  
Improving Lives.

# Evaluation of the Medical Legal Partnership Program

*Beginning in 2019, the American Institutes for Research® (AIR®) was contracted to conduct a process evaluation and return-on-investment study of the Medical Legal Partnership (MLP) between the Legal Aid Society (LAS) and Mount Sinai St. Luke's Child and Family Institute (CFI). At the end of the 4-year evaluation, the findings from the process evaluation indicate the following:*

- Youth with special needs, specifically those with disabilities, often required legal advocacy to pursue educational services that they would not otherwise receive.*
- The MLP serves youth who are predominantly Black and Hispanic.*
- Collaboration between staff and data sharing were integral to the success of the MLP.*
- Training that LAS provided to CFI staff was essential, as it helped clinicians understand how the partnership worked and provided a better sense of when, how, and why to refer clients to the MLP.*
- The colocation of legal services within the clinic was essential.*

*The overall return on investment (ROI) was greater than zero, indicating that the benefits outweighed the costs. For some of the educational milestones, the benefits were nearly 40 times the costs. The findings also show that even for youth who never achieve their intended milestone, the pursuit benefits exceed the cost of providing them in most cases.*

## Overview

---

The Medical Legal Partnership (MLP) is one of the initiatives funded by the Manhattan District Attorney's Office (DANY) Criminal Justice Investment Initiative (CJII). Within CJII's Prevention Portfolio, DANY funded nine Family and Youth Development Programs, which collectively aimed to expand social

service providers' capacity to implement programs for youth and families at elevated risk of poor life outcomes, including eventual justice system involvement.

The MLP is a partnership between the Legal Aid Society (LAS) and Mount Sinai St. Luke's Child and Family Institute (CFI), which serves children with psychiatric conditions and developmental or learning disabilities. Through the MLP, LAS provides training to CFI clinicians about how to identify youth in need of education advocacy (e.g., youth facing superintendent suspension hearings, in restrictive settings, and/or with frequent classroom removals). CFI clinicians use this knowledge to identify and refer patients to LAS for civil and educational legal advocacy and services. LAS then matches each family with an attorney who advocates for them to pursue special education and other supportive educational services. The MLP aims to positively affect the community by (a) improving functioning among families of youth at high risk for criminal justice involvement and (b) improving coordination between mental health services and legal services for youth at high risk for criminal justice involvement.

## Purpose of the Evaluation

The American Institutes for Research (AIR) was contracted by DANY beginning in 2019 to design and conduct both a process evaluation and a return-on-investment (ROI) study of the MLP. The goal of the process evaluation was to understand how the partnership was working from multiple perspectives, including those of legal advocates, clinicians, and families. The process evaluation responded to research questions about how families were referred, how many youth and families were served, facilitators of and barriers to implementation, and indicators of program success. The ROI analysis measured the dollar value of the MLP's activities with families, compared with the value of subsequent services provided to these families and youth. This report summarizes findings from the final data collection, which was conducted from 2019 through 2021.

## Methods

**The process evaluation used three data sources:** interviews with eight staff, focus groups with eight family members, and administrative records. AIR analyzed these qualitative data using a grounded theory framework, which uses inductive reasoning to allow researchers to develop a theory that explains the main concerns of a population and how those concerns can be resolved or processed.

**The ROI study used three data sources:** administrative data, interviews with four staff, and surveys of families. This analysis identified the costs of the resources used to implement the MLP and the monetized value of the benefits (i.e., the services received by participating youth and their families).

## Characteristics of Families Served



**Most of the families that the MLP served live in upper Manhattan** (i.e., Washington Heights, Central Harlem, West Harlem, and East Harlem), which is geographically close to the LAS office. In these neighborhoods, close to half of the population is living in or near poverty.



**Most families were headed by a parent/guardian with a high school diploma/equivalent or below, and almost all families had a household income of less than \$50,000.**



**Almost all youth who participated in the MLP were Black or Hispanic.** The MLP served youth from birth through age 18, the majority of whom were ages 6–16. A majority of the youth served by the MLP were male.

## Process Evaluation Findings

---

The process evaluation findings are organized into five sections: (1) families served and types of services, (2) supports for implementation, (3) addressing challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic, (4) indicators of success, and (5) growth areas and opportunities.

### Families Served and Types of Services

***The MLP served fewer families than originally planned.*** Overall, the program was successful in reaching and referring potential clients. However, due in part to the COVID-19 pandemic, the MLP served fewer families than initially intended. As of December 2021, the MLP served 242 unique families, which was about three quarters of its goal of 350 families.

***Intensity of engagement varied according to families' needs.*** On average, LAS worked with families for 12 months, but LAS staff explained that the duration of interactions with families varied based on client needs. In some cases, staff met with families seven times or more to address complex issues, while other cases were easily resolved and required less contact.

***Youth who experienced complex mental health problems needed education advocacy.*** The MLP provided educational advocacy for youth with disabilities and those who had experienced trauma (e.g., domestic violence, child custody battles).

***Multiple modes of program referral connected families to the program.*** Families were referred to the MLP by themselves, CFI staff, and parenting groups.

## Supports for Implementation

The evaluation identified the following supports as critical for successful implementation of the MLP.

- Adequate colocation space and funding
- Adequate staffing
- Collaboration between legal and clinical staff members
- Data sharing, including medical records and legal documents
- Trainings that legal staff provided to their clinical colleagues about advocacy
- Legal staff developing positive relationships with families
- Using multiple methods to encourage clinical staff to make referrals to the legal team, such as training clinical staff, making referral forms readily available, and designating a point person to manage referrals

## Addressing Challenges Related to the COVID-19 Pandemic

Staff and families described challenges they encountered as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, the pandemic made it difficult for clinicians to make referrals despite the fact that children and families had greater needs due to the shift to virtual learning and the interruption of school-based services. Some MLP programs for parents and family members (i.e., Know Your Rights, Positive Parenting) did not occur during 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

To address these challenges, the MLP provided services virtually and proactively responded to families' needs for technology and reliable internet. LAS staff worked with schools to identify strategies that would maximize youth engagement in remote learning through the Plan for Adapted Delivery (PAD; a form required by the New York City school system). The MLP advocated for youth to ensure that all PADs included access to a functioning device and connectivity so that all youth had the opportunity to participate in school to the greatest extent possible. LAS staff also provided support and documentation to explain why youth were struggling and worked to find solutions, instead of punishments, for youth's lack of participation for families who dealt with stressors that made participation in school difficult.

## Indicators of Success

The evaluation found that family members were very satisfied with the services that they received from the MLP. Further, the MLP provided families with access to services they otherwise would not have received. For example, LAS represented parents during individualized education program (IEP) meetings, attended suspension hearings, and secured appropriate services and school placement. In addition, families said that they received assistance with Administration for Children's Services cases, housing-related issues, and accessing community resources (e.g., Office for People With Developmental Disabilities).

The MLP amplified the voices and perspectives of parents and families. Staff reported seeing notable improvements in how families advocate for themselves. For example, one family member reported that, because LAS staff “pointed [parents and families] in the right direction,” they could be more effective advocates.

## Growth Areas and Opportunities

The evaluation identified some areas for growth to improve families’ ability to participate in the program. Family members recommended that MLP staff should conduct parent and family outreach in New York City public schools and publicly disseminate information regarding the MLP using, for example, social media platforms, local radio stations, and community notice boards (specifically in those with emergency shelters and temporary housing facilities). They also recommended that the MLP foster relationship building among the families they serve. Families expressed the importance of feeling like they are part of a community where they can hear other families speak about their experiences, but that they did not have many opportunities to do so through the MLP. Finally, despite the end of grant funding, staff described an ongoing informal partnership between the two organizations, allowing CFI staff to continue referring clients to LAS. However, LAS staff can only serve families on a much smaller scale. Therefore, additional funding is needed to continue to implement the program as it was.

## Return-on-Investment Findings

---

The ROI analysis provides an understanding of how funds are leveraged by the MLP to improve youths’ educational outcomes. The analysis provides an overall ROI for two approaches. In both approaches, the overall ROI was greater than zero, indicating that the benefits outweigh the costs.

### ROI Approach 1

ROI Approach 1 assumed that the value of pursuing an educational milestone<sup>1</sup> is a benefit of the program, as families would not receive those supports or advocacy (e.g., referrals to other available support programs) without enrollment in the MLP. In this way, the cost of the program (i.e., staff training, initial intake meeting, development of a case strategy, and family time on the intake process) is compared with the perceived benefits (i.e.,

“[The MLP] helped me advocate for more services for my [child], so that [they] can be placed in a better placement that’s suitable for [their] behavior IEP [goals].” – Family member

---

<sup>1</sup> The educational milestones that MLP staff pursued were grouped into 12 categories: (1) city pays tuition to private school, (2) obtained initial IEP, (3) IEP designates school and state pays tuition, (4) obtained private evaluation at district expense, (5) received compensatory education services, (6) obtained evaluation through related service authorization, (7) obtained or increased related services on IEP, (8) obtained appropriate class placement, (9) suspension dismissed, (10) manifestation determination meeting won, (11) obtained advice only on educational issues, and (12) parent reimbursed for services.

inclusive of both interaction with the MLP in the pursuit of an educational milestone and the value of achieving the milestone).

***The benefits outweighed the costs for most of the milestones.*** The benefit of pursuing and achieving a milestone outweighed the costs for all but one milestone (“Obtained advice on educational issue”). In some cases, the ROI of pursuing and achieving a milestone was quite large, with some benefits measuring just under 40 times the costs. The benefit of the *pursuit only* also outweighed the cost (albeit to a smaller degree).

***The overall ROI under Approach 1 was 819%.*** This means that for every dollar invested in the MLP for 2019, the program generated \$9.19 in services for youth and their families. The overall benefit per youth was \$15,088, which is \$13,447 more than the per-youth cost of \$1,641.

## ROI Approach 2

ROI Approach 2 assumed that the pursuit of an educational milestone is an additional cost of the program. In this way, the cost of the program also includes the value of the pursuit activities (e.g., staff time allocated toward pursuing an educational milestone).

***The overall ROI under Approach 2 was 27%.*** The overall benefit per youth (based solely on the value of milestone achievements) was \$9,366, which was \$2,003 more than the per-youth cost of \$7,363 (based on the combined value of the intake meeting, case strategy development, and pursuit efforts). This means for every dollar invested in the MLP in 2019, the program generated \$1.27 in services for youth and their families.

***There was variation in the ROIs based on milestones.*** Under this approach, four of the milestones yielded substantial estimated ROIs ranging from 103% (“Received compensatory education services”) to 571% (“City pays tuition to private school”). An additional four milestones showed small, negligible, or slightly negative ROIs. Finally, for three of the milestones, the costs associated with intake, case strategy plan development, and pursuit efforts dominated the benefits. However, for two of these three milestones (“Manifestation determination review won” and “Obtained advice only on educational issue”), this finding would be expected given that there were no services rendered subsequent to pursuit and eventual milestone achievement.

Both approaches are likely an underestimate of the benefits actually received, due to the number of services to which families were referred by staff in the MLP that were not captured in this analysis. For example, although not accounted for in this analysis, MLP staff provided general support through referrals and information sharing throughout the program. Moreover, starting in the last 4 months of 2019 and through the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, additional specialized referrals were provided but not consistently recorded.

## Recommendations and Sustainability

---

AIR makes the following recommendations to program administrators, policymakers, and potential funders.

***Tailor outreach to reach families that speak a language other than English at home.*** Interview respondents reported that challenges in communication due to language differences may contribute to low parent engagement. MLPs should ensure that the program team comprises staff members who can provide translation or interpretation services on-site and off-site.

***Ensure adequate staff capacity to implement trauma-informed services.*** Respondents explained that the MLP serves families who have experienced trauma such as homelessness, worries stemming from their undocumented immigration status, and systemic poverty; therefore, future MLPs should include full-time social workers or other program staff who can not only provide holistic services for clients and their family members but also help the program team understand how family trauma can influence program engagement.

***Foster a sense of community among families receiving services.*** Interview and focus group responses revealed the importance of community building for parents and family members of children and youth receiving special education supports and services or experiencing mental and behavioral health challenges. Facilitating a support group for parents and families allows participants to feel that they are not alone in their experience, increasing their sense of belonging and empowerment.

***Include funding for miscellaneous expenses.*** Interview respondents suggested that parents and families who engaged in the program incurred expenses related to transportation, school supplies, and early deposits to secure their child's school placement. Future MLPs should therefore include a budget for such miscellaneous expenses.

***Seek additional funding to support program sustainability.*** The MLP should consider leveraging findings from the ROI analysis to pursue additional funding to sustain the program. Given that the benefits are high relative to the costs, this program may be enticing to grant makers. This program may also be of interest to government agencies because preventing youth from entering the juvenile justice system saves them the cost of incarceration and costs associated with victims and communities.