



BRIDGING DIVIDES

From Strengths-based Care to Rights-based Care: Legal Problem-Solving as Part of Perinatal and Early Childhood Systems

By:

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Nationally, significant resources and energy are being dedicated to:

- screening families for barriers to [concrete supports](#) (sometimes called [health-related social needs](#) in the healthcare context); and
- strengthening referral protocols to assure successful “hand-offs” of families to community-based resources.

However, less attention has been paid to **problem-solving strategies that assure families can secure the resources and legal protections they seek**, especially when those resources are bound up in complex and intimidating laws, policies, and legal/court processes.

Whether a family is navigating access to familiar resources (like food, housing, utility service, unemployment, health insurance and transportation) or more nuanced legal protections (like reasonable accommodation in school or housing, freedom from violence through restraining orders and asylum, or strengthened family unity through a range of family law and immigration law processes), all concrete supports/social needs are embedded in law and policy. **This means that the problem-solving “toolbox” assembled and replenished by perinatal and early childhood systems calls for tools that align with the architecture of law and policy.**

Over the last decade, several organizations have been [innovating](#) at the intersection of early childhood/health and flourishing/access to justice. Inspired by this work and the evidence it is generating, in 2021 MLPB invited three partner communities to create a national Learning Community with us: **First 5 Orange County; the Rhode Island Department of Health Office of Family Visiting; and Smart from the Start**. This planning process was made possible by generous support from [The JPB Foundation](#), which in recent years has invested in early childhood innovations that advance [goal-concordant care](#).

The three communities collectively reflect structural and geographic diversity as well as “early adopter” cultures relating to legal-problem-solving.

Want to learn more about how these partner communities connect the dots between perinatal and early childhood flourishing and access to justice?

Check out this May 2022 [MLPB Interview Series – Rights, Resources and the Next Generation](#) – featuring interviews with partner community ambassadors!

Local liaison teams assembled diverse ambassadors to the Learning Community’s two active bodies, a Planning Advisory Committee and a Content Advisory Committee. The work of these Committees:

- Facilitated 140 responses to a first-ever multi-state survey on early childhood sector perspectives on legal problem-solving;
- Prioritized three topics for a pilot *Unlocking Access* training series (Immigration Status, Family Court Involvement and Educational Access), on which MLPB later delivered customized training series in each partner community;
- Generated insights that will advance the field through preliminary, formative research that was subject to Institutional Review Board oversight; and
- Produced a *Handbook being released publicly today, September 29, 2022.*



The Learning Community’s Handbook confirms that – in addition to external collaborations with public interest law resources – systems themselves can engage with legal problem-solving in a range of scope-of-practice-aligned ways. So a system can *fill* their toolbox with existing assets, while also *expanding* their toolbox through external partnerships. It’s not either/or!

What does a rights-based system of care look like? According to the Learning Community, it’s one that elevates these legal problem-solving functions in its partnerships with families:

- Policymaking
- Direct legal services (representation) that takes different forms/intensities
- Rights education that supports people to assert their power
- Coaching on system navigation and strategies to reduce barriers to resources and legal protections
- Facilitating coordinated hand-offs to responsive resources
- Clear expectation management about the responsiveness of specific resources, and how a particular decision could generate trade-offs or unintended consequences
- Community organizing

A rights-based system of care also is attuned to two conditions, the absence of which can render legal problem-solving – *really any problem-solving efforts with families* – unsuccessful from the start:

1. Communication and relationships that promote the building and maintenance of trust with families:
2. Communication and operations that account for the language diversity of families.

These are big ideas, and systems need guidance in moving from theory to practice. That’s why **the Handbook features nine (9) tools for system-builders** to use when exploring (or integrating) legal problem-solving as an element of care.

Interested in learning more about how legal problem-solving can strengthen your community of care? Join us today at **2pm EST / 11am PST** for ***Legal Problem-Solving & Flourishing: Wisdom for Perinatal and Early Childhood System-Builders!***

[REGISTER HERE!](#)