



# **NURSING-LEGAL PARTNERSHIP**

## *2019-2020 POLICY AGENDA*

The Nursing-Legal Partnership (NLP) is a unique collaboration between the National Nurse-Led Care Consortium (NNCC) and Health, Education and Legal Assistance Project: A Medical-Legal Partnership (HELP: MLP). A team of lawyers and public health nurses work hand-in-hand to ensure that pregnant women and new mothers have the opportunity to raise their children in safe, healthy homes, with uninterrupted health insurance coverage and other benefits. As public health nurses educate and support new parents through the evidence-based Philadelphia Nurse-Family Partnership (NFP) and Mabel Morris/Parents As Teachers (PAT) home visiting programs, lawyers offer concrete support to families with unmet legal needs, including issues related to housing, income, education, employment, immigration and domestic violence.

NLP goals include: improved housing conditions for families living in unsafe homes; health insurance coverage for pregnant women and children; improved economic well-being for families; and reductions in toxic maternal stress.

NLP nurses and attorneys have developed a policy agenda that incorporates client voices and nurses' experience in the field. The NLP team supports policies that promote the health and well-being of low-income families, and prioritizes the following issues for advocacy and education in 2019-2020.

### **Catalyze Collaboration Among Home Visiting & Family Support Programs**

Several home visiting programs in Philadelphia address the needs of pregnant and parenting low-income women by offering comprehensive family supports over time. A strategic alliance of maternal-child home visiting programs has the potential to create a collective impact that benefits the families we serve. Since 2016, NLP has hosted the Brunch and Learn series, which brings together home visiting providers citywide for networking, resource sharing, training and systemic advocacy. The NLP seeks to catalyze and further support strategic collaboration among home-visiting and family support programs in the city.

### **ACTION STEPS**

- NLP will continue to sponsor the Brunch and Learn series, which offers a venue for networking and resource sharing among family support providers, as well as training on how unmet legal needs can harm the health of mothers and babies.

## Improve Housing Stability and Quality for Families

According to a 2015 report by the Philadelphia Department of Public Health, poor housing quality and housing instability are the most consistent and strongest predictors of emotional and behavioral problems in low-income children and youth. Many Philadelphia families live in unsafe and unstable living conditions contributing to their poor health and well-being. Of particular concern are high blood lead levels among children living in homes with lead exposure, which carries a significant risk of impaired cognitive functioning and behavior. Unsafe housing can also contribute to high maternal stress levels.

Housing instability for low-income families is driven by limited access to affordable housing. Rental costs continue to increase across the city while low-income renter's wages have stagnated and access to supports has not kept pace. Dramatic tax increases in rapidly gentrified neighborhoods force longtime homeowners out of their homes and communities. While programs exist to help families remain in their homes, they often have long waitlists and the most vulnerable Philadelphians often lack the support needed to successfully access these programs.

Inadequate funding and complicated processes present overwhelming barriers for many families attempting to access the city's preventive services like rapid rehousing and emergency financial supports. Too often, families that do qualify for assistance are unable to access the funding in a timely enough fashion to prevent the loss of their housing. Emergency housing for homeless residents, particularly pregnant and parenting women who are victims of domestic violence, is scarce and significantly underfunded. Assisting families in maintaining and remaining in their home needs to be prioritized. The NLP supports policies to increase the availability and affordability of safe, stable and sanitary housing options for low-income families.

### ACTION STEPS

- Support and contribute to systemic advocacy work to improve housing conditions for families, including addressing residential health hazards like lead paint and bedbugs.
- Educate policymakers on the impact of unsafe and unsanitary housing conditions on family health and well-being, and the need for revised housing policies and increased funding to meet existing needs.
- Support the work of community-based organizations and city-wide agencies focused on creating bold public health and housing policies, including the preservation of existing affordable housing.
- Partner with coalitions in support of improved housing conditions and a city-wide response to the emergency housing needs of the homeless and victims of domestic violence.
- Protect the rights of tenants and homeowners to safe and healthy living conditions through NLP legal services and referrals to community resources.

## Ensure Access to Public Benefits for Mothers and Babies

Many low-income families rely on public benefits, including Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Medical Assistance, and Early Learning Resource Center (ELRC) subsidies, to supplement their incomes. These supports are currently inadequate to provide the assistance that low-income families truly need. Home visiting clients frequently report miscommunication and confusion when navigating County Assistance Office services. Efforts to improve communication can foster mutual understanding and ultimately benefit home visiting clients and their babies. The NLP supports policies to ensure that low-income families have uninterrupted access to public benefits, especially during the critical early years of child development.

### ACTION STEPS

- Develop better relationships with County Assistance Offices to improve accountability and service delivery to clients.
- Advocate for enforcement of already existing protections, such as the Family Violence Option.
- Encourage implicit bias and trauma-informed trainings for County Assistance Office staff.
- Advocate for the improvement of TANF delivery and policies, including increased funding and modification of time limits and income requirements.
- Support increased funding and resources for ELRCs to support quality and affordable childcare.

## Address Disparities in Maternal Mortality and Improve Maternal Health

Over 22,000 Philadelphians give birth each year. Despite having strong community-based organizations and excellent academic medical centers, the city's maternal mortality rate is far above the national average. In recent years, drug overdoses have significantly contributed to this rate. Over the last eight years, there were at least 155 maternal deaths. Three in 10 were directly related to pregnancy – over half caused by cardiovascular conditions or cardiomyopathy, hemorrhage, or infection.

Racial disparities in maternal health outcomes are stark and persistent. Non-Hispanic black women experience maternal deaths at a rate three to four times that of non-Hispanic white women. Maternal deaths have tragic physical, emotional and socio-economic impact on children, families and our communities. In 2018, nine state maternal mortality review committees estimated that over 60% of pregnancy-related deaths are preventable. The NLP seeks to support all programs and policies working toward reducing health disparities, improving maternal health and preventing maternal deaths.

### ACTION STEPS

- Support the provision of implicit bias training to maternal-child health providers across the city.
- Train home visiting program staff on unmet legal needs that can harm maternal health.
- Advocate for improved screening, treatment, and care coordination for women with substance use disorders.
- Support citywide interagency communication and case management for pregnant and postpartum women.

## Improve Job Stability and Employment Conditions for Low-Wage Workers

Philadelphia ordinances protecting workers, such as the Promoting Healthy Families and Workplaces law, which requires employers to provide sick leave, often go unenforced because of the workers' fear of retaliation and lack of knowledge of their rights. The city recently passed a Fair Workweek Employment Standards bill, which guarantees employees of the retail and hospitality industries advance notice of their work schedules, among other things. The Fair Workweek ordinance is scheduled to go into effect on January 1, 2020. The NLP seeks to inform stakeholders and support the implementation of city ordinances offering worker protections.

### ACTION STEPS

- Inform city officials on implementation, and communications strategies to ensure that the Fair Workweek and other worker protections are effective.
- Educate nurses, clients, and advocates on existing worker protections and how to enforce their workplace rights.
- Educate legislators on issues faced by low-wage workers, especially those that disproportionately affect women and parents.

## Eliminate Food Insecurity and Improve Access to Healthy Food

Poor access to healthy food in the home, school and community, contributes to obesity, chronic health conditions, stress and poor health. Most clients of Philadelphia home visiting programs live in neighborhoods with limited options to purchase healthy food. The NLP supports the development and funding of healthy nutrition initiatives in childcare centers and schools, and efforts to ensure the availability of healthy food in all neighborhoods throughout the city.

### ACTION STEPS

- Support activities of community-based organizations focused on eliminating food insecurity experienced by low-resourced individuals and families.
- Educate policymakers on the impact of food insecurity on the health and well-being of individuals, families and the community.
- Support the increased presence of large grocery chains, farm markets and healthy food-provision organizations in vulnerable neighborhoods to enable access to healthy, affordable food choices.

## Expand Access to High-Quality Pre-K Programs

High-quality pre-kindergarten (Pre-K) programs are especially important to those who are economically disadvantaged or dual-language learners. Pre-K programs encourage development of language, cognitive, and motor skills, and children begin to master social and emotional skills fundamental to kindergarten success. However, many families do not understand the importance of Pre-K or are unaware that free or affordable programs exist. While quality Pre-K has become accessible to more families, barriers persist. Program applications are often lengthy and require extensive supporting documentation. Many neighborhoods still lack high-quality Pre-Ks and those that exist often have lengthy waitlists. The NLP support policies to increase families' access to affordable, high-quality Pre-K programs.

### ACTION STEPS

- Support ongoing citywide efforts to expand the number of free Pre-K seats, develop high quality curricula, and train early childhood educators.
- Support the School District of Philadelphia's efforts to simplify the Pre-K application process.
- Collaborate with families enrolled in home visiting programs to help them voice their experiences and influence policy improvements related to early childhood education.

## Advance Policies That Support Lactating Students

Most schools in Philadelphia and throughout Pennsylvania do not provide adequate support for lactating students to pump milk and feed their babies while at school. If students are not able to regularly express milk, their supply decreases and health complications may ensue for both parent and baby. Due to actual or perceived lack of institutional support, parenting students often must choose between continuing their education and nursing their infants. In 2018, the NLP established the Coalition for Lactation-Friendly Schools with several other organizations. In the 2018-19 school year, the School District of Philadelphia enacted Policy 234, which aims to support lactating students. However, this does not reach students in other educational institutions. The NLP supports policy changes that remove barriers to lactating students in support of their ongoing pursuit of their education as well as the health and wellness of their families.

### ACTION STEPS

- Educate lactating mothers about their rights and support their efforts to advocate for themselves within their academic institutions.
- Inform stakeholders on the benefits of lactation accommodations on educational outcomes.
- Continue to play a leadership role in the Coalition for Lactating-Friendly Schools and support students' right to pump at school.
- Educate lawmakers and institutions about the needs of parenting students and encourage them to take proactive steps to ensure student success.

## Protect Public Health from Climate Change

Climate change is a serious public health issue that impacts the life of every person. Globally, the number of deaths directly related to weather-based events has tripled since the 1960s. Climate change due to increasing global temperatures affects public health in many ways: increased respiratory and cardiovascular disease, injuries and premature deaths related to extreme weather events, changes in the prevalence and geographical distribution of food- and water-borne illnesses and other infectious diseases, and threats to mental health. Children, the elderly, people with chronic illnesses, and low-income and racial and ethnic minority communities are especially at risk.

In order to diminish the effects of climate change, a coordinated effort is needed to mobilize individuals within the public and private sectors to establish a sustainable and healthy future. Public health professionals can be powerful educators and advocates for climate-smart policies that build community health and resilience to the effects of climate change. The NLP seeks to support policies and emerging legislation that protects vulnerable populations from the burden of climate change.

### ACTION STEPS

- Advocate for environmental policies that improve health outcomes, such as sustainable and energy-efficient housing, mold abatement, and better air quality.
- Educate clients on the health impacts of climate change and what they can do to mitigate the impact on their community.
- Support the recommendations of the report issued by the Philadelphia Mayor's Office of Sustainability entitled Growing Stronger: Toward a Climate-Ready Philadelphia.

## Promote Community Revitalization and Active Civic Engagement

Since 2016, the Philadelphia NFP and Mabel Morris-PAT home visiting collaborative has sponsored Community Action Day, where clients come together to talk about the vitality of their communities and describe issues needing to be addressed, including unsafe and unsanitary abandoned buildings and outdoor public spaces. Families said they need greater safety and improved sanitation in public spaces like parks and playgrounds. This includes: more public trash cans that get emptied regularly; streetlights in parks; environmentally-friendly street cleaning; and fully-funded and open local libraries. The NLP supports family civic engagement and calls for increased funding for revitalization activities by city agencies, foundations, and community-based organizations to improve the safety and cleanliness of public areas.

### ACTION STEPS

- Work with partners and stakeholders in support of activities to improve the safety and cleanliness of vulnerable communities.
- Educate policymakers about the impact of unsafe and unsanitary public spaces and abandoned buildings on family health and well-being, child safety and child development.
- Support collations to increase library funding and support recreation center structural updates (including accessibility for people with disabilities).
- Continue to host Community Action Day as an annual event for Philadelphia families, including local resources and opportunities for civic engagement.
- Develop tools to assist nurse home visitors in discussing voter registration and election information with families.
- Facilitate opportunities for clients and communities to become more civically engaged, and advocate for the changes they wish to see in their communities.

### CONTACT US

The Nursing Legal Partnership is a collaboration between the National Nurse-Led Care Consortium (NNCC) and Health, Education & Legal assistance Project (HELP:MLP).

For more information and to sign up for the Nursing-Legal Partnership newsletter, visit:

<https://nurseledcare.org/programs/nursing-legal-partnership>

