IDEAS WE SHOULD STEAL

LEGAL HELP FOR GUN VIOLENCE SURVIVORS — AT THEIR BEDSIDES

A program in Chicago has helped patients access $1.2 million in benefits to which they are entitled, while cutting their risk of further violence. Now a Philly hospital wants to bring it here

BY ASHLEIGH N. DELUCA

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Daryl* had come to be known as "the mayor" of Temple University Hospital's eighth floor intensive care unit. An avid reader with a handsome face, he quickly charmed the nurses and hospital staff with his compassion, fondness for deep conversations, and encyclopedic knowledge of modern literature. One of these staff members was **Scott Charles**, the hospital's trauma outreach manager. "If you saw him in any other context, you would think, 'This guy is a mover and shaker.' He is simply one of the best people I know," Charles says. The doctors, too, came to develop a fondness for this resilient and gentle patient who they had worried would not survive his extensive injuries, and the unending surgeries they required.

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Daryl, who at the time was in his 30s, had used his body to protect a younger family member from multiple rounds of targeted gunshots, curling his body around them and pressing them to the floor. His quick thinking saved the young person's life and limited the severity of their injuries, but it left Daryl permanently disabled and fighting for his life. His injuries were so severe that he had to live in Temple University Hospital's intensive care unit due to the level of follow-up surgeries and recovery his survival required. Over a year later, the mayor of the eighth floor was finally discharged from the hospital, free and eager to enjoy his second chance at life. His freedom was short-lived.

A difficult childhood and a long list of mistakes in his youth left him with an arrest record that had already made finding employment challenging. Now, paired with his disability, it felt impossible. For two years, Daryl fought to build a better life for himself. "He was working out. He was really trying to get a job. He was trying to get himself together," says Charles. Not finding a path to a legitimate avenue of employment, he felt he had no choice but to resort to drug-related crime to provide for his family. He was eventually arrested and spent almost a decade in prison as a result.

"We're seeing people on their worst days, but those are also pivotal opportunities for change," says Charles of the unique position hospital trauma units have to support survivors of violent crime.

For the last four years, an innovative hospital program in Chicago has been trying — and succeeding — to make that change happen for their patients. It is considered the nation's first medical-legal partnership embedded in a trauma center, and it's a model that can be brought to Philadelphia hospitals.

Bedside legal care that aids patient recovery

In November 2022, the University of Chicago Medicine's trauma center launched **Recovery Legal Care** in partnership with Legal Aid Chicago to provide bedside civil legal support to survivors of violent crime.

Founders **Dr. Tanya Zakrison** and **Dr. Elizabeth Tung**, a trauma surgeon and an internal medicine physician respectively, view the program as an extension of health care. The program's team of lawyers and paralegals assist patients in obtaining and retaining public benefits like SNAP and Medicaid; Crime Victim Compensation; and cash assistance for families with children, the elderly, and the disabled.

"You'd think that just submitting an application is the way that people can get public benefits. The reality is that that is not the case," says **Mona Elgindy**, associate director of medical-legal partnerships at **Legal Aid Chicago**. A 2025 study by Tung and Zakrison found that **94.8 percent** of their patients had at least one health-harming legal need, and 89.3 percent required income support in particular. Elgindy says it is common for government benefits offices to inaccurately deny claims, lose applications or supporting paperwork, and give applicants incorrect information. Her team of lawyers, who specialize in civil law, are well versed in the intricacies of these programs, knowing when repeated appeals are necessary, and when they can even push for expedited benefits.

Zakrison, and Tung all emphasize that it **can feel impossible** for people without law degrees to he convoluted application processes of these benefit programs. They believe the mental and physical by a violent crime only makes it harder for their patients to succeed against this system on their

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a small demographic of patients, either. As of April 2026, there had been **1,522 non-fatal and 3[illegible]** gun violence-related injuries in the city over the prior 12 months. While many programs exist across the country that provide low or no-cost legal support to citizens struggling to navigate the benefits system, what makes Recovery Legal Care unique is that it is one of the first to focus exclusively on survivors of violent crimes. Similar programs now also exist in Atlanta and Washington, D.C.

> "We're seeing people on their worst days, but those are also pivotal opportunities for change." — Scott Charles

The main priority of the Chicago program is enhancing access to public benefits — typically the most immediate need for patient recovery. Of these, Elgindy says disability benefits and crime victim compensation claims can be the most time consuming and challenging to secure, even in the most obvious cases. But their work extends to helping patients secure safe housing (like preserving legal rights to change their residence when there is a concern of continued violence, or addressing illegal evictions from landlords), ensure personal safety (like restraining orders), and support employment efforts (like expungement of past criminal records). When patients need to navigate criminal matters associated with the violent nature of their injuries, which is common, Elgindy and her team will advise them on how to access no-cost defense attorneys.

The University of Chicago Medicine has an unending list of cases that could be referred to the Recovery Legal Care Program. But Elgindy's team of five legal representatives can accept only five new clients a week because these cases can take anywhere from two months to two years to resolve. Despite these capacity limitations, Elgindy says it is common for the program to win at least $10,000 in benefits for the clients they are able to take on. Elgindy **shared the story** of a recent client who won $45,000 in compensation after a four-year legal battle for the benefits to which he was legally entitled. Over the last two years, Recovery Legal Care has secured over **$1.2 million** in patient payments.

Tung and Zakrison shared that preliminary data also indicates survivors have a reduced rate of future re-injury and re-admission when they are able to access the benefits they need. What's more, they say the program has helped strengthen what had become a strained relationship between the University of Chicago and residents of Chicago's South Side.

Bringing legal care to Philadelphia's trauma units

In the 21 years that Scott Charles has worked on Philadelphia's frontlines to reduce gun violence, he has witnessed the power public benefits can have on survivors' recovery and overall health. He is part of a Temple team that has created **violence prevention programs** designed to reduce firearm injuries. One in particular, **Cradle to Grave,** has won awards for its innovative approach to educating young people. Another provides **around-the-clock access to case managers** who help patients obtain public benefits and address other health-harming legal needs. He has also **distributed gun locks**, to keep firearms from accidentally being discharged.

[illegible] these programs' positive impact, Charles is aware of his team's limitations as healthcare providers who [illegible] in medicine, not the U.S. legal system, or the dizzying intricacies of its benefits programs. "It is in the [illegible] interest to have somebody who can represent their [legal] rights at the very beginning," he says.

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ufman, a trauma surgeon at the University of Pennsylvania, agrees. As of October 22, 2026, there ha **68 nonfatal and 122 fatal victims** of gun violence this year in Philadelphia — 93 percent of whom were ack or Hispanic. Even though rates of violent injury have decreased in the city, Kaufman says they are **still too high** in neighborhoods where violence is concentrated. Her team has run a hospital-based gun violence intervention program since 2021. She has been working to bring a medical-legal partnership program like Recovery Legal Care to the trauma unit at Penn Presbyterian Hospital.

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"I'm excited about this idea, so is our whole team," says Kaufman, who is also the medical director for the **Penn Trauma Violence Recovery Program**. While she is currently limited on the information she can share publicly about her efforts, she hopes a legal aid program will come to fruition in 2027. Her primary focus right now is on securing an organization willing to be their legal partner. Her hope is that the same sources of funding that have supported Penn's hospital-based violence intervention program can be used to support a medical-legal partnership focused on survivors of violent crime — this includes the Penn health system, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, the City of Philadelphia, and private foundations.

Kaufman's medical team has become adept at supporting their patients where they can. She says this has even meant writing strongly worded notes or making forceful phone calls to utility companies to explain her patients' hardship, and ask that their utilities not be shut off. But she knows her patients need much more support. "There are times when a little more legal knowledge could help our team do that even better, and there are times when it gets beyond our capacity," she says.

Working within a broken system

Organizations like **Community Legal Services** and **Philadelphia Legal Assistance**, legal support nonprofits for low-income Philadelphians, already provide medical-legal partnership programs to healthcare practices in the city, including Rising Sun Health Center and CHOP Karabots Pediatric Care Center. According to a spokesperson for the Community Legal Services, their team of over 200 full-time staff members — the majority of whom handle legal cases — provided direct legal representation for 15,000 cases between July 2025 and June 2026. Yet the organization reports that residents' needs far exceed the organization's capacity.

Kaufman argues that additional medical-legal partnerships like the one she hopes to bring to Penn can only reduce this burden and expand the number of Philadelphians who are able to receive the benefits to which they are entitled. In addition, she says that "embedding someone with our team who develops that really specific expertise in the kinds of things that violently injured patients go through would be extra helpful."

very Legal Care's Zakrison believes the problem the in-hospital legal aid programs address boils down to oidable clerical errors and gross administrative mismanagement at the government level. Tung and proud that their program has been able to support so many of their patients, but they do not bout the problem at its core. "Paying lawyers to do this for patients is absolutely insane," says

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adds that "no trauma patient should need an attorney or a legal navigator to get the public be t they are legally entitled to."

As eligibility rules for Medicaid and SNAP continue to change, survivors of violent crime in Philadelphia, and across the nation, will feel its impact. This will likely only increase the amount of cases referred to medical-legal partnerships regardless of their capacities — and increase the amount of residents who fall through the cracks. And this can come at an unimaginable price to those least able to afford it.

Temple's Scott Charles says Daryl had wanted nothing more than to build a more stable life for himself and his family. "But without legal intervention, he was left to his own devices fighting against insurance companies, trying to navigate the healthcare system," Charles says.

He imagines that if Daryl had been connected to legal support "from the very beginning" of his time at Temple's hospital he would have had someone to call when he started facing insurmountable employment obstacles later on. Maybe it would not have changed Daryl's ultimate outcome, Charles muses. But, if so, at least he also would have had a legal advocate fighting for him to get the intensive on-going care in prison his disability and injuries required.

Spending a year at Daryl's bedside in constant, lively conversation highlighted to Charles that "there's somebody in this body who, despite all the circumstances in which he found himself — including the shooting that brought him to the hospital — was a really deep, compassionate, thoughtful person."

"He's special to me," says Charles. "He's special to a lot of the people he got to meet, but he's not unique by any stretch of the imagination."

MORE SOLUTIONS FOR GUN VIOLENCE

Recovery Legal Care Team members, in the Center for Care and Discovery on the University of Chicago campus in Chicago. Left to right: Carly Loughran, Tanya Zakrison, MD, MPH, and Christine Goggins. Photo by Nancy Wong.

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