Health Justice Practicum

Law, Policy, Identity & Access to Care as Social Determinants of Health

Social determinants of health—the conditions into which people are born, grow, work, live, and age—account for at least half of health outcomes. In this experiential practicum, you will work with front-line health care providers to solve important legal and policy problems getting in the way of family health and wellbeing ventures. Clinic students get a hands-on chance to develop a broad range of legal skills, with a focus on business and transactional work.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

New in Spring 2022, the Health Justice Practicum is an experiential course addressing the interplay of law and policy with health systems, social identity, and population health inequities. The Practicum works on “upstream” interventions to address systemic problems affecting the health and wellbeing of a specific marginalized population.

In 2022-23, the Practicum is partnered with Boston Medical Center’s Project RESPECT, a medical and behavioral health home-base for low-income pregnant/postpartum people in all stages of recovery from substance use disorders (SUDs), with particular focus on opioid use disorder.

For example, Project RESPECT providers have identified an issue in Massachusetts law and policy that significantly harms low-income parents in recovery and their children, disproportionately harming Black, Indigenous, or other people of color (BIPOC) families. Massachusetts law arguably requires health care providers to report children born to people in medication-assisted recovery (e.g., methadone treatment) at birth to the Department of Children and Families as if the birthing parent were an active substance user. Children born to BIPOC parents are more likely than children born to white parents both to be reported to child welfare authorities and to be separated from their families as a result. The trauma of custody disruption has demonstrated serious effects on both recovering parents and child health and development.

In collaboration with physicians, social workers, public health experts, and directly-affected people, we explore and advocate for possible legal and policy advocacy solutions to problems like this one—for example, modernized legal mandates and reformed agency practices to eliminate discriminatory decisionmaking.

In weekly seminar, we practice key lawyering skills, discuss ongoing work, and learn about the broader context of our systems change projects.

The Practicum is a one-semester program available for two credits.

We warmly welcome all applicants and remind students that Boston University policy prohibits discrimination against any individual on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, age, national origin, physical or mental disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, genetic information, military service, pregnancy or pregnancy-related condition, or because of marital, parental, or veteran status, and acts in conformity with all applicable state and federal laws. This policy extends to all BU Law academic programs.

PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

Current Practicum students are working on:

- Drafting model state legislation to support safe, healthy, whole families with parents in recovery across the country.
- Organizing a campaign to reform Massachusetts law to ensure that babies born to patients in evidence-based medication treatment for SUDs are no longer automatically reported to child welfare authorities.

http://bu.edu/lawclinics-apply