

CANCER LEGAL CARE: WHAT LAWYERS SHOULD KNOW

BY JEANNE STEELE



■ L TO R: JULIE OLMSTED, J. LINDSAY FLINT & LINDY YOKANOVICH

Last winter, an attorney contacted Cancer Legal Care because he didn't know where else to turn. Recently diagnosed with a potentially life-threatening malignancy, he said he was "more afraid of being broke and homeless than of dying from cancer." CLC staff attorney Julie Olmsted remembers that client—not because he was a lawyer but because his words underscored how gut-wrenching a cancer diagnosis can be, regardless of income, education or profession.

Lindy Yokanovich, founder and executive director of Cancer Legal Care, learned firsthand about the devastating effects of cancer when she was in high school and her mother was treated for colon cancer. Her family lost their health insurance coverage, but life-saving treatment continued thanks to the kindness of her mother's physician, Yokanovich recalls. "But her ensuing un-insurability and the fi-

ancial fallout caused incredible stress for years and years after she got better. I thought there just had to be a better way." Years later, after earning her law degree and starting a family, Yokanovich set about creating it.

Launched in 2007, Cancer Legal Care is a one-of-a-kind hub for addressing the legal and financial issues that keep too many cancer patients and their families awake at night. With a bare bones staff of six—three attorneys, a health insurance advocate, paralegal, and an office manager—CLC has helped more than 9,100 Minnesotans in 68 of the state's 87 counties with issues ranging from insurance appeals to employment issues to housing problems to estate planning. Regardless of cancer type or stage and where a referral comes from, CLC stands ready to help—for free.

CLC staff address nearly 90 percent of client needs themselves, while approximately 10 percent of cases are

CASE STUDY

Martie, who has worked for years as a registered nurse, knows more than the average person about health challenges – both physical and practical. Diagnosed with breast cancer last fall, she is stoic about the surgery and chemotherapy she has undergone in the past several months and optimistic about her full recovery. But, being told that neither her own health insurance plan nor her husband's plan would cover her hospital bills nearly derailed her faith in the health care system. She says she doesn't know what she would do without the assistance of Cancer Legal Care and Bill Foley, the organization's health insurance advocate.

As her Explanation of Health Care Benefits statements started to come in, Martie says she and her husband spent hours trying to understand what their options were and talking with their respective human resources offices. They went through the whole appeals process with their respective plans, but got no relief. At wit's end, Martie contacted Cancer Legal Care and laid out the intricacies of her admittedly complicated coordination of benefits situation. She says CLC's response has been "stellar," that Foley has stayed in close contact, via conference calls and email, as he works on her behalf.

"I can't say enough good things about them," she says.

handled by volunteer attorneys with expertise in a wide variety of legal areas. The organization maintains a robust list of 80-plus volunteer attorneys, but legal services director Lindsay Flint says they can always use more, especially in Greater Minnesota. “We never know what our clients’ legal needs will be nor where they reside,” she said.

Although being personally touched by cancer is not a requirement for the work, many lawyers are drawn to volunteer with CLC because they themselves or someone in their family has experienced the effects of cancer. Olmsted, whose mother died from cancer, first worked with CLC as a volunteer. Then and now as a staff member, she says she gets satisfaction from knowing she is “filling a very real need. It’s incredible to be able to validate a client’s experience – to affirm that it’s hard – and to give them some peace of mind when dealing with a very difficult situation.”

Stuart Deuring, recognized as volunteer attorney of the year at CLC’s annual Legal Care Affair fundraiser, is seemingly always ready and able to take a case. For example, Olmsted asked him on a Monday whether he could take an estate planning case. He said he would be happy to, but apologized for not being able to see the client until Wednesday. By Friday, he had all the paperwork written up and signed. “He’s efficient, effective, and clearly has the heart for this kind of work,” Olmsted says.

Deuring, other volunteer attorneys and CLC staff make house calls. They go to clients when needed. Olmsted says one of her most memorable cases was perhaps her “quietest one.” She visited a client in hospice who was worried about updating her will. Olmsted sat down with her, they talked, and she looked over the will. It included everything the client wanted. “This part is done,” she recalls saying. “You don’t have to worry.” Reflecting on that interaction, Olmsted says it is this “softer part of the law, the counselor-at-law part” that she and many CLC volunteer attorneys find most rewarding.

Theresa Hughes, director of pro bono services at Stinson LLP, does not disagree. She has found in almost two

decades of guiding the firm’s pro bono efforts that the “counselor” part of the law is what attracts many attorneys to the profession. “Law is a helping profession,” she says, “a tool to bring about change.”

Proud of Stinson’s Deinard Legal Clinic which operates in partnership with the Community-University Health Care Center, Hughes says the benefits of medical-legal partnerships are numerous. Increasingly, doctors and lawyers understand that they need to work as a team when financial and legal issues are intertwined. As evidence, she points out that 17 new medical-legal partnerships have been formed in Minnesota and North Dakota in the past five years.

Amidst all this activity, Cancer Legal Care stands out. Most medical-legal partnerships, she explains, are housed in communities that serve low-income people and are linked to a specific clinic or provider network. CLC, in contrast, serves clients statewide, regardless of income or where they receive their medical care. “I don’t know if there is anybody else in the country that does what they do. CLC is unique and successful,” she says, “in large part because of Lindy [Yokanovich] and Lindsay [Flint]. They’ve been working in the trenches, heart and soul, for as long as I’ve known them.”

Both Yokanovich and Flint, who served on Cancer Legal Care’s first board of directors, deflect such praise. They credit private foundation grants, the generosity of individual donors, and support from the Minnesota Department of Health and the Minnesota Judicial Branch’s Legal Services Advisory Committee for making Cancer Legal Care the dynamic and much-needed organization it is today. Yokanovich invites lawyers from large firms and small to let clients and colleagues know that “we’re here and ready to respond when having a lawyer on the cancer care team can make all the difference – for health and for peace of mind.”

EDITOR’S NOTE: CANCER LEGAL CARE IS A 501(C)(3) ORGANIZATION THAT PROVIDES FREE LEGAL CARE TO MINNESOTANS FACING CANCER. LEARN MORE AT WWW.CANCERLEGALCARE.ORG OR CALL 651-917-9000 TO OFFER YOUR PRO BONO ASSISTANCE.



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