

CLICK PHOTO TO ENLARGE



GARY GAYNOR/Tucson Citizen
Emma McKenzie, a client of the Tucson Family Advocacy Program, jokes with her 12-year-old daughter, Joy, as they shop for groceries.

Published: 06.19.2006

Program revives hope, puts food on the table

UA law students help low-income families

[SHERYL KORNMAN](#)

Tucson Citizen

Emma McKenzie was "getting nowhere" trying to get government help for herself and the daughter she's raising on her own. She was in constant pain and unable to work after a car accident. But through a unique program in which people help people maneuver through the maze of bureaucracy, McKenzie received free legal help that literally put food on her table. "I can actually shop for food now," she said.

It's called the Tucson Family Advocacy Program, and it's the only one of its kind in Arizona. Its aim is to improve the health and long-term well-being of low-income families, said Anne Ryan, the program's director. And it does this by melding medical and legal services under one roof at the University of Arizona College of Medicine's Department of Family and Community Medicine clinic, 707 N. Alvernon Way.

So far, the services have helped more than 100 clients get resources they would normally be without. Mostly, it's UA law students who do the legal research and interview clients - who may not have known they are eligible for state and/or federal assistance. Some already receive publicly funded health care. But most have never had legal help with their problems, said Ryan, the program's only full-time attorney and a former staff attorney for a federal agency in Washington, D.C., who knows her way around a bureaucracy. Many cases also involve a disability, she said.

Clients are also referred to the program by the medical clinic's sole full-time social worker, Laura Neely. "Long-term poverty creates despair, apathy and feelings of hopelessness" Neely said. "TFAP gives patients hope and also helps put food on the table."

That is what the program did for McKenzie and her daughter Joy, 12. McKenzie, 49, said she "worked all the ways up till November last year." A truck driver for many years before moving to Tucson, McKenzie said she worked here doing minor repairs and painting and laying tile in apartments. But after the car accident, "I was 37 percent disabled and up against a brick wall," she said. "You can only do so much with beans and rice."

It was too much. She couldn't sleep and got depressed. "I was jumping through hoops, and it was very overwhelming" trying to get public assistance," she said. "At the drop of a hat, I'd sit down and cry. I was at the point where I didn't know where to go. I had already applied for food stamps and cash assistance from DES (Department of Economic Security), but they kept turning me down. They said I wasn't financially eligible."

McKenzie's help began when her physician referred her to Neely, who referred her to Ryan. Now, McKenzie is receiving emergency cash assistance for her needy family from the state. She and her daughter live in a small duplex, and McKenzie said she is able to keep up with her bills. She's glad she can afford to keep her daughter, whose father is not involved in their lives. "I wouldn't give up my daughter for nothing in the world," McKenzie said.

Neely said the program provides "immediate benefits" for a patient's health and also impacts a child's future. "If you can help parents get adequate housing, nutrition and health care, you can begin to change the cycle of abuse and neglect caused by poverty," she said.

Kevin S. Ruegg, CEO of the Arizona Foundation of Legal Services and Education in Phoenix, agreed that legal services are the key to helping low-income patients overcome some of their difficulties. "Legal assistance breaks down that brick wall," she said.

It sure helped Patricia Wimberly, another TFAP client. Wimberly, 42, had her first child at 15 and, with an eighth-grade education, worked as a deli clerk, stocker and cashier until she was hurt in a car crash and then in an on-the-job fall. Ryan helped her with medical documents she needed so she could get food stamps. She also helped her apply for Social Security Disability Insurance. Wimberly now has both. "Anne just did everything," Wimberly said. "I can care better for myself now. I can pay everything right when I get my money."

The program also helps to appeal decisions by the federal government, such as rejected applications for Social Security Disability Insurance. "Their physician can refer them to us because they believe they have a medical disability and need help applying for Social Security assistance," Ryan said. "Or they may have been turned down for food stamps, and we help them with an appeal. "A client might have a problem with a roach infestation their landlord won't fix. Most patients we see have more than one issue."

The program got its start last year as a pilot program supported by private funding. Its budget from July 1, 2005, through June 30, 2006, is \$55,929.

The program is modeled after one in Boston that began in 1993 to help low-income children. It is the brainchild of pediatrician Barry Zuckerman, who was frustrated by his attempts to berate landlords to provide heat for low-income families and rid their apartments of roaches, which aggravate asthma in children. The legal advocacy program Zuckerman created is based at the Boston University School of Medicine's Boston Medical Center.

In kind support for the Tucson program comes from University Physicians Healthcare and the UA Department of Family and Community Medicine. Money comes from the Arizona Foundation for Legal Services and Education, funded by members of the Arizona Bar Association.

Dr. Tamsen Basford, head of the UA Department of Family and Community Medicine, welcomed the program last fall as a boost for patients and a new training opportunity for medical residents in family medicine. They're taught to take a multidisciplinary, holistic approach to health care, she said.

Funding for TFAP

- Arizona Foundation for Legal Services and Education, a program of the Arizona Bar Association
- The Strauss Foundation
- The Walter and Juliet Absolon Foundation
- UA Department of Family and Community Medicine

Donating to TFAP

Tax-deductible gifts to the nonprofit program can be made through the University of Arizona Foundation/Tucson Family Advocacy Program, 707 N. Alvernon Way, Suite 101, Tucson, AZ 85711. Call Anne Ryan at 694-1624.

On the Web

www.familyadvocacyprogram.org