

EVALUATION OF THE CAMDEN COALITION'S MEDICAL-LEGAL PARTNERSHIP AT THE COOPER CENTER FOR HEALING IN CAMDEN CITY

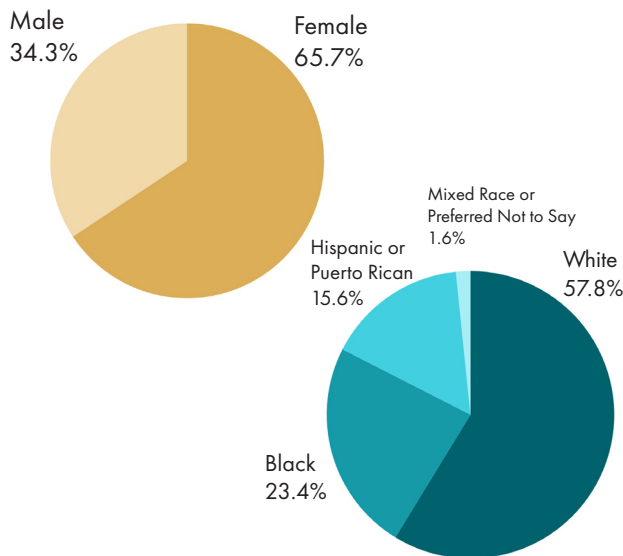
Evaluation Highlights – Fall 2024

Many people with active or former addiction often face complex legal situations. The Camden Coalition's Medical-Legal Partnership (MLP) integrates attorneys into healthcare settings to resolve needs that can undermine a patient's health and wellbeing and can be better met through the legal system.

The Senator Walter Rand Institute for Public Affairs (WRI)'s project aimed to understand the **experiences of MLP program participants¹ served through the MLP's partnership with Cooper University Health Care's Center for Healing (CCH)** and to understand **how the MLP is meeting the legal needs of its program participant population**. Goals included understanding how the MLP is operating, how the MLP is serving the needs of its program participant population, and how the MLP may continue to best serve its population.

Through interviews with MLP staff, interviews with MLP program participants, along with a survey of MLP program participants, data revealed how the MLP runs its daily operations, how program participants directly work with the MLP, and how both MLP staff and program participants view the program and its effects. Overall, program participants reported that the legal assistance they received from the MLP was a catalyst for significant change in their lives, helping them overcome obstacles and rebuild their lives with renewed hope and stability. During the study period (January 2024-April 2024), 70 MLP program participants completed the survey. Thirty-nine MLP participants engaged in interviews. Thirteen MLP staff engaged in interviews.

Program Participant Demographics (70 program participants²)



Participants' ages ranged from 22 to 64. The most common age was 36; average age was 41; and middle point was 39.

4.5% (3) of program participants had zero mental health diagnoses and 22.4% (15) had one. The majority (73.1%; 59) had two or more or two mental health diagnoses. The most common diagnoses were attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, and post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

20.9% (14) of program participants had zero physical health diagnoses and 28.4% (19) had one. The majority (50.7%; 34) had two or more or two physical health diagnoses.

"I couldn't have asked for a better outcome. I actually got a better outcome than I possibly expected. I had a driving while suspended that I assumed was going to be more of an issue, but whatever [the MLP attorney] said to the district attorney made them drop it. That's unheard of for me." - MLP Participant

The most common diagnoses were asthma, diabetes and/or obesity, hypertension and/or hyperlipidemia, and hepatitis c.

Type of Legal Needs Served by the MLP

Legal Needs	% of Participants	#
Criminal (e.g., warrant expungement)	43.8%	28
Municipal/County (fines & fees)	23.8%	15
Landlord-Tenant (eviction)	23.4%	15
Family Law (custody, visitation, child support)	17.5%	11
Disability (SSD/SSDI)	14.3%	8
Traffic / License	14.3%	9
Other	7.7%	5
Estate (wills, power of attorneys)	4.6%	3
Domestic Violence	3.2%	2
Employment/Wage/Labor	1.5%	1
Public Benefits (GA, SNAP, TANF, etc)	1.6%	1

Note: Self-reported MLP program participant data. Percents add over to 100% and frequencies over the full sample of 70 as individuals could select more than one / all needs served by the MLP, and each legal type was responded to by a varying number of individuals (e.g., 64 or 68 out of 70).

MLP Structure

MLP staff commented on the benefits of multidisciplinary collaborations, and the benefits of mission-aligned care in meeting program participant needs. The collaboration between the healthcare providers at CCH, social workers, therapists, and legal professionals is key to providing comprehensive support to patients. All those involved focused on their area of expertise but worked together by referring patients to the appropriate services as needed. This multidisciplinary approach ensured that patients' holistic needs—medical, psychological, and legal—were addressed, often leading to positive outcomes in their legal cases and overall well-being.

About the MLP Program

For people with complex health and social needs — especially those seeking treatment for addiction and substance use disorders, legal issues can be a significant barrier to health and recovery.

The three attorneys in the Camden Coalition’s Medical-Legal Partnership (MLP) work closely with the staff of Cooper Center for Healing, an innovative addictions medicine care center. The MLP takes direct referrals from Cooper for patient legal needs. Anyone who is being treated at Cooper Center for healing, typically for substance use disorder or other mental/behavioral health conditions, is eligible for the MLP. Cooper Center for Healing’s care team members, which include medical providers, patient navigators, and social workers, identify potential legal issues that come up in conversations with patients and ask patients if they are interested in receiving legal help.

Attorneys meet with patients, who become MLP participants/clients, to determine legal needs and collaboratively create a course of action. Attorneys also work with Cooper Center for Healing’s patient navigators to help MLP participants/clients fill out paperwork and navigate bureaucratic processes. The Camden Coalition MLP is unique among medical-legal partnerships across the country in that attorneys provide direct representation in defending criminal matters. Other legal services provided include representation for evictions and other housing matters, legal advice around securing public benefits, issues regarding court fines and fees, and other matters.

Working with the MLP

MLP program participants spoke to the professionalism and ease of access to both their substance use treatment and legal needs providers. The MLP staff answered program participants’ questions, guiding them through the legal process while supporting the client/patient to make their own decisions, and resolved their legal issues where feasible. Over two-thirds of respondents **strongly agreed** that the legal staff “listen to [their] issues and concerns” (70.6%; 48), “involve [them] in making decisions regarding [their] legal issues,” (67.6%; 46) “care what happens to [them],” (67.6%; 46) “have a comprehensive knowledge of the law,” (72.1%; 49) and are “able to effectively advocate for [them]” (70.6%; 48).

MLP clients/patients chronicled the various ways that the MLP staff helped them: through completing and submitting paperwork, making phone calls, providing court representation, and explaining the nuances of legal terms and options. They noted their appreciation for the MLP staff being friendly, offering them coffee, and being respected.

“We’re gonna meet you where you are and we want to always be prepared for whatever that is. We don’t judge, we wanna find out where you’re at and what legal issues cause barriers for you... Typically as a lawyer, you’re very focused on what the case and specific narrow legal issue is. And I think we try to do more [participant]-centered legal services, thinking about the whole person ... What can we do to position you so that when we address this legal issue, you’re gonna be in a better position?...” - MLP Attorney

Impacts from the MLP

Findings from MLP program participants emphasized the ways the MLP alleviated emotional and financial stress, removed legal records, and provided social support. Successes from working with the MLP included resolving pending eviction cases, expunging old warrants, and helping receive social assistance payments, among others.

Criminal/Domestic Violence. In working with the MLP, charges were downgraded, cases were dismissed, and records were expunged, which alleviated the stress and anxiety associated with ongoing legal battles. For some MLP program participants, this meant avoiding jail time, getting off probation, having charges that may have impacted their future removed from their records, or resolved interpersonal issues through restraining orders.

Employment. MLP program participants reported that they were able to regain basic rights and privileges – for instance getting driver’s licenses reinstated – essential for finding employment and achieving a sense of normalcy.

Fines and Fees. The MLP program provided crucial support in resolving legal fees and fines, which were substantive burdens for many participants. This financial legal assistance, including help with fine payment plans, eviction prevention, and navigating court orders, significantly reduced the economic stress on MLP program participants, allowing them to focus on rebuilding their lives.

Housing. The program played a critical role in preventing evictions and securing housing for participants. Legal intervention helped some program participants retain their homes, avoid eviction records, and transition to new housing arrangements, thereby ensuring stability in their living conditions.

Empowerment in Recovery. Beyond legal outcomes, the support provided by the program helped MLP program participants’ mental and emotional well-being. Many participants reported feeling less judged, more hopeful, and motivated to pursue positive life changes, including recovery from addiction and improving their economic and social circumstances. Several participants spoke about how the support they received gave them hope and a renewed sense of purpose. One participant explained how the lack of judgment and consistent support from their MLP attorney played a crucial role in their recovery journey. Majority (75%) of MLP participant survey-takers **strongly agreed** that they were “making good progress on their recovery journey.” Ninety percent also **strongly agreed** that “there are more important things in life than using drugs or alcohol,” while just under half (49.3%) **strongly agreed** with the statement that they “regard [their] life as challenging and fulfilling without the need for using drugs or alcohol.”

Over half (50%+) of respondents **strongly agreed** that they “have an understanding of the steps [they] need to take to resolve my current legal issue(s),” “[are] confident that [their] current legal issue(s) will be resolved through working with the MLP staff,” “[are] more likely to address legal needs in the future,” and “[are] confident that a future legal issue could be resolved.”

"[The MLP attorney] never judged me, never looked at me as a bad guy, which helped me open up to not only be honest with [them], but let [them] know what's really going on. And, you know, it was just- it was an amazing situation for me because I felt so hopeless. Like, I'm never going to get out of this, I'm never gonna be able to be in recovery. And, you know, with being on the streets every day and, you know, the temptation coming here, leaving here, you know, I was out of work, struggling to work. All types of chaos was in my life and [the MLP attorney] helped me slowly but surely get back on track. So, you know, that played a major part in my recovery." - MLP Program Participant

Overall Takeaways

The MLP program has removed legal barriers for program participants, and conversations with MLP program participants highlighted the respectful, considerate, and thorough support provided by MLP staff. The MLP's focus on criminal legal issues – an uncommon focus area among MLP programs, its co-location and collaboration with the Cooper Center for Healing and multidisciplinary team, and dedicated, knowledgeable staff contribute to the MLP's success.

The Camden Coalition and Cooper Center for Healing MLP is a model of integrated care that addresses the complex and interrelated needs of patients with substance use disorders. Through its focus on removing legal barriers, promoting dignity, and providing personalized support, the MLP not only supports improvement in individual patient outcomes, but sets a precedent for how healthcare and legal services can work in tandem to create a more just and supportive system.

Endnotes

1. Program participants that worked with the MLP were simultaneously patients of the Cooper Center for Healing and clients of the Camden Coalition MLP program
2. Data available for varying totals out of 70 individuals

About the Senator Walter Rand Institute for Public Affairs (WRI)

The [Senator Walter Rand Institute for Public Affairs \(WRI\)](#) at Rutgers-Camden has been a long-standing and trusted regional community partner for over 20 years. WRI honors former Senator Rand's dedication to Southern New Jersey and exists to produce and highlight community-focused research and evaluation leading to sound public policy and practice. With that as a foundation, WRI convenes and engages stakeholders in making the connections across research, policy, and practice in support of Camden City and Southern New Jersey residents. Using social science research methods, WRI specializes in transforming data into actionable information across a variety of areas, including workforce development, education, transportation, and public/population health. WRI reinforces and amplifies Rutgers' research, teaching, and service goals by connecting the multidisciplinary expertise of faculty to regional problems, developing research and professional skills in students, and linking the resources of higher education to communities in Southern New Jersey.

About the Camden Coalition (CC)

The [Camden Coalition](#) works to improve care for people with complex health and social needs in Camden, NJ, and across the country. The organization implements person-centered programs and pilots new models that address chronic illness and social barriers to health and well-being. Supported by a robust data infrastructure, cross-sector convening, and shared learning, its community-based programs improve outcomes for some of society's most vulnerable individuals. The Camden Coalition's National Center for Complex Health and Social Needs (National Center) connects complex care practitioners with each other and with data, tools, and other resources. For more information, visit www.camdenhealth.org.

About the Cooper Center for Healing (CCH)

The [Cooper Center for Healing](#) is an integrated center that provides innovative, compassionate care for patients with substance use disorder (SUD), pain, trauma, and psychiatric disorders. The center's medical specialists in addiction medicine, toxicology, emergency medicine (EM) and emergency medical services (EMS), internal medicine, family medicine, and psychiatry provide interdisciplinary specialty care in the hospital, ambulatory, and community settings. The center also has a robust interdisciplinary clinical team of behavioral health clinicians, nurses, and navigator specialists who offer wraparound services to patients in a biopsychosocial model, including helping them to address social determinants of health (SDOH). Patient services include but are not limited to: Inpatient SUD consultation; Outpatient SUD consultation; Empowering Mothers to Parent and Overcome with Resilience (EMPOWR) for pregnant and parenting women struggling with substance use and SUD; and full coverage services for SUD and mental health for uninsured and underinsured people, including people experiencing undocumentedation.