

April 2025



# Offering Holistic Support

Findings from the Camden Coalition's Medical-Legal Partnership Evaluation



# Executive Summary

Medical-legal partnerships (MLPs) represent a transformative approach to addressing the complex challenges faced by individuals with substance use disorders. By integrating legal services directly into healthcare settings, these partnerships aim to dismantle systemic barriers that impede recovery and health outcomes. The Camden Coalition's Medical-Legal Partnership is a model of holistic, patient-centered intervention.

## Program Effectiveness

- Legal Resolution: 60.9% of participants successfully resolved at least one critical legal issue, demonstrating the program's tangible impact on participants' lives
- Recovery Support: 75% of participants reported significant progress in their recovery journey, highlighting the interconnected nature of legal and health interventions
- Legal Needs Addressed:
  - » Criminal matters (e.g., warrants): 43.8%
  - » Landlord-tenant issues (e.g., evictions): 23.4%
  - » Municipal issues (e.g., fines and fees): 23.8%

## Client Experience

- 70.6% of participants reported feeling genuinely heard and supported
- 67.6% felt actively involved in decision-making processes
- 70.6% acknowledged effective advocacy on their behalf

## Distinctive Program Features

- Nationally unique direct representation in closed criminal matters
- Comprehensive legal support
- Innovative co-location with Cooper Center for Healing, an addiction medicine care center
- Trauma-informed, person-centered approach
- Emphasis on participant dignity and empowerment

## Research Methodology

The comprehensive evaluation (January - April 2024) encompassed:

- Surveys from 70 MLP program participants
- In-depth interviews with 39 MLP participants and 13 staff members
- Detailed analysis of MLP program data from February 2022 through April 2024

## Participant Voices: The Human Impact

Participants consistently emphasized the transformative nature of the support:

“Honestly, like I said, [MLP attorney] was great. Like I said, [MLP attorney] was very informative. [MLP attorney] was patient. [MLP attorney] didn’t just push me on to the next person or give me short answers. [MLP attorney] took [their] time. [MLP attorney] called back when [they] said [they] was going to call back and [they] stayed in communication with me. I can’t complain or say anything bad about the service provided.” (MLP Participant)

“Just kind of everything. I mean like what made the program, [they] would call me any single time [they] had any kind of like update...and [they] had no problem answering every question I had, and just basically it was like that you can breathe again feeling. You know what I mean? So like through the whole entire process having that like I can breathe again feeling, and not have like all that stress and weight on my shoulders. Like that’s all I could have even asked for with that because it was already stressful enough...” (MLP Participant)

## Implications for Replication

- Deep understanding of the specific care context
- Careful staff selection and training
- Addressing structural and systemic challenges
- Flexible approach



## Introduction and Program Overview

Legal issues can present significant barriers to health and recovery, particularly for people with complex health and social needs. To address this challenge, the Camden Coalition and Rutgers Law School launched a Medical-Legal Partnership (MLP) in November 2017, integrating legal services into healthcare settings to better serve community members involved in the Coalition’s complex care interventions. The program began with a consulting attorney joining the Coalition’s complex care team of nurses, social workers, and community health workers, and has since expanded to include additional attorney fellows.

Currently, three MLP attorneys work in close partnership with the Cooper Center for Healing, an innovative addiction medicine care center. This collaboration facilitates seamless data sharing and referrals between the organizations. When healthcare providers at the Cooper Center for Healing identify potential legal issues during patient appointments, they can directly refer patients to the Camden Coalition MLP legal staff. All patients receiving treatment at Cooper Center for Healing—typically for substance use disorder or other mental/behavioral health conditions—are eligible for MLP services.

The referral process begins when care team members (including medical providers, navigators, and social workers) identify potential legal issues during patient conversations and gauge interest in legal assistance. Following referral, attorneys meet with patients—who become MLP participants—to assess their legal needs and develop collaborative action plans. MLP attorneys also partner with patient navigators to assist participants with paperwork and bureaucratic processes. Notably, the Camden Coalition MLP stands out among medical-legal partnerships nationwide for providing direct representation in criminal matters. Additional services include representation for eviction and housing issues, guidance on securing public benefits, assistance with court fines and fees, and other legal support.



## Project Process

The focus of this research project, led by the Senator Walter Rand Institute for Public Affairs at Rutgers University – Camden, was to understand the experiences of MLP program participants<sup>1</sup> served through the Camden Coalition’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 participants.

Information was collected from January - April 2024 with both MLP program participants and Camden Coalition MLP and Cooper Center for Healing staff. Data collected included:

- **Survey of 70 MLP Participants.** A survey was sent to 242 individuals who were current or former MLP program participants (from February 2022 through April 2024). Seventy individuals completed the survey.
- **39 Interviews with MLP Participants.** MLP program interviewees were current or former MLP program participants.
- **13 Interviews with MLP Staff.** Staff interviewees included current addiction medicine physicians, behavioral specialists, psychiatrists, Cooper Center for Healing directors, patient navigators, MLP attorneys, and the MLP main supervising attorney.

Interview data were reviewed for MLP staff and MLP participants, and the survey data was analyzed for MLP participants.

---

<sup>1</sup> Program participants who worked with the MLP were simultaneously patients of the Cooper Center for Healing and clients of the Camden Coalition MLP program.



## MLP Participant Demographics

Understanding the demographic<sup>2</sup> makeup of Medical-Legal Partnership (MLP) participants is crucial for contextualizing program impact and tailoring interventions to meet complex individual needs. The participants represent a diverse participant group with significant health complexity, intersectional challenges, and a women majority navigating substance use disorder recovery. The self-reported demographic data<sup>3</sup> underscores the critical importance of holistic, person-centered support that addresses multiple interconnected health and legal challenges.

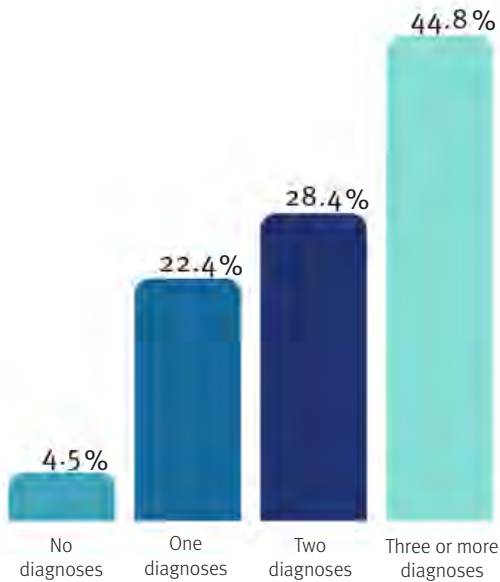
<sup>2</sup> Survey conducted January-April 2024 with 70 respondents from a pool of 242 eligible MLP participants who were involved with the program between February 2022 and April 2024. All participants were Cooper Center for Healing patients who had been referred to the MLP program.

<sup>3</sup> Demographic data reported here represents self-reported responses from 70 of 242 eligible MLP participants who were involved with the program between February 2022 and April 2024.

### Self-reported Demographic Characteristics

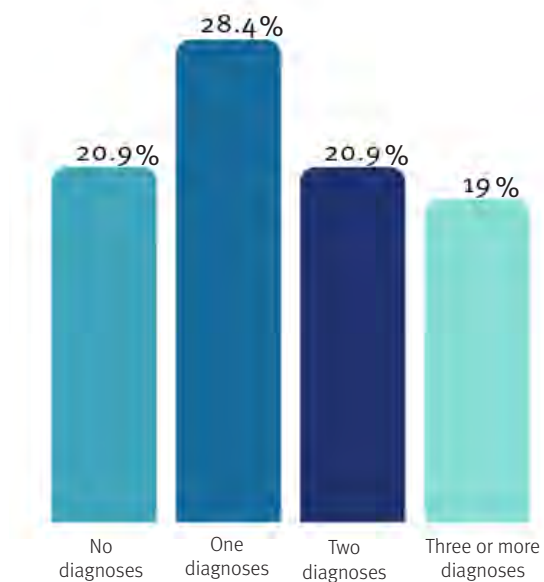
- Gender Identity**
  - Woman: 65.7%
  - Man: 34.3%
  
- Race/Ethnicity**
  - White: 57.8%
  - Black: 23.4%
  - Hispanic or Puerto Rican: 15.6%
  - Mixed race or preferred not to say: 1.6%
  
- Age Distribution**
  - Average: 41 years
  - Median: 39 years
  - Most Common Age: 36 years
  - Range: 22-64 years

### Mental Health Diagnoses



Most common conditions: ADHD, depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, and PTSD

### Physical Health Diagnoses



Most common conditions: asthma, diabetes, obesity, hypertension/hyperlipidemia, and hepatitis C

## MLP Participant Legal Needs

Once Cooper Center for Healing patients connect with the Camden Coalition Medical-Legal Partnership, they typically present with multiple legal needs. Of the 69 survey respondents who provided information, most had one (37.7%) or two (30.4%) distinct legal needs to address. The MLP successfully served these needs, with 60.9% of participants having one main legal need resolved and 21.9% having two legal needs resolved through the MLP (based on 64 respondents).

The legal assistance provided covered a wide range of issues, with most cases focusing on:

- Criminal matters (e.g., warrants) (43.8%)
- Landlord-tenant issues (e.g., evictions) (23.4%)
- Municipal/county matters (e.g., fines and fees) (23.8%)



## Length of MLP Program Engagement

Most participants (86.8%) had one engagement with the MLP program between February 2022 and April 2024. Engagement refers to the duration of time that the MLP program worked with a client on a specific legal issue. During this period, eight participants had two separate engagements, and one participant had three engagements. For those with a single engagement, the average duration was approximately three months (93 days), with a median of 27 days. Engagement periods ranged from as brief as one day to as long as 2 years and 9 months.

| Length of First MLP Engagement |                                         |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| Average Engagement             | 93 days (3 months, 3 days)              |
| Median Engagement              | 27 days                                 |
| Range                          | 1-935 days (1 day to 2 years, 9 months) |

## A Person-Centered Approach to Integrated Care

The Camden Coalition Medical-Legal Partnership (MLP) represents an innovative approach to integrated healthcare, strategically embedding legal services within the medical treatment of Cooper Center for Healing patients struggling with substance use disorders. This model addresses the web of challenges that impact recovery, recognizing that legal, social, and medical factors deeply influence health outcomes.

### Holistic Care

The MLP’s foundational philosophy extends beyond traditional medical interventions. As one staff member articulated: “Our goal is to provide care that’s not just about treating the addiction but also addressing the underlying legal and social issues that contribute to it. By working together, we can help [MLP participants] stabilize their lives in a more comprehensive way.” (MLP Staff Member)

This approach directly confronts the systemic barriers that impede recovery. Legal challenges can profoundly disrupt an individual’s path to healing. As another staff member emphasized: “Many of our [MLP participants] face legal issues that are directly tied to their health. If they’re at risk of eviction or can’t access benefits, it can derail their recovery. The MLP helps remove these barriers so they can focus on getting better.” (MLP Staff Member)

### Restoring Dignity and Hope

Central to the MLP’s mission is the restoration of human dignity for individuals often marginalized by their experiences. The program seeks to transform feelings of hopelessness into empowerment. As one staff member shared: “For so many of our [clients/patients], they feel like the world has given up on them. We want to show them that we care, that they matter. When they see us fighting for their rights, it gives them a reason to keep going, to believe in themselves again.” (MLP Staff Member)



### Personalized, Person-Centered Support

Recognizing the unique journey of each participant, the MLP delivers highly individualized support. As one staff member noted: “Every [client/patient] is different, and their needs are unique. Our goal is to meet them where they are, whether it’s helping them with an immediate legal issue or just being there to listen. It’s about making sure they know we’re on their side.” (MLP Staff Member)



## Working with the MLP: A Person-Centered Approach

MLP staff provided multiple forms of assistance to participants including documentation management, legal education and empowerment, clear communication, and court representation. While working with participants, data revealed how the MLP staff demonstrated several key elements of professionalism that contributed to program success, including accessible and responsive communication across multiple channels (e.g., text, phone calls, in-person), respect and compassion, and persistent advocacy on behalf of the participant. MLP staff also exhibited holistic support through providing emotional and social support beyond legal assistance.

Of the MLP participant survey respondents, over two-thirds strongly agreed that the legal staff:

- Listen to their issues and concerns (70.6%)
- Involve them in decision-making (67.6%)
- Care about what happens to them (67.6%)



## MLP Impact: Legal Resolutions and Life Changes

The MLP’s impact extended beyond legal resolutions, alleviating emotional and financial stress while providing crucial social support. Four key areas of impact emerged from participant feedback:

### Record Clearance and Case Resolution

- Successful expungements
- Downgraded and dismissed charges
- Implementation of protective orders (e.g., restraining order)

“I mean, 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. So that’s like unheard of for me... I never heard of them ever dropping a driving while suspended so kudos to [the MLP attorney] for that.” (MLP Participant)

### Employment and Basic Rights

- Driver’s license reinstatement
- Removal of employment barriers

“So I was like, ‘All right, well, I can kiss like all my professional goals goodbye.’ And so the effect that it [the MLP program] had was it made it took a huge barrier away, to help me to thrive... just to get back to a normal level of functioning society, right?” (MLP Participant)

### Financial Relief

- Resolution of existing legal and municipal fees and fines
- Development of manageable payment plans
- Free legal service delivery

“Nobody realizes how much of a weight that is taken off of somebody’s shoulders because of the legal fees on top of fines and stuff. You just end up, like, those numbers become nauseating.” (MLP Participant)

### Housing Stability

- Prevention of evictions
- Protection of tenant rights

“[The MLP attorney is] focusing on giving us our life back. That’s all we need. Give my grandkids a fighting chance so they can go to school normally. Knowing that they got hot water... I thank God for [the MLP attorney] taking my case... [they] gave me another chance at life. That program was an inspiration and it works. It works for me.” (MLP Participant)

## The MLP’s Role in Supporting Recovery Progress

Recovery from substance use disorder is a complex, multifaceted journey that extends far beyond simply abstaining from drugs or alcohol. By addressing the legal and social barriers that often impede recovery, data highlighted how the MLP offers participants a pathway to healing.

Participant survey responses<sup>4</sup> revealed strong indicators of recovery progress:

- 75% strongly agreed they were “making good progress on their recovery journey”
- 90% strongly agreed that “there are more important things in life than using drugs or alcohol”
- 49.3% strongly agreed they regarded their life as “challenging and fulfilling without the need for using drugs or alcohol”

Recovery Capital Assessment Survey results measuring recovery capital showed positive outcomes:

| Recovery Capital <sup>5</sup> Metrics (n=60) |                              |
|----------------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Average Score                                | 49.3                         |
| Median Score                                 | 51                           |
| Most Common Score                            | 55                           |
| Range                                        | 28-60 (out of a possible 60) |

A weak to moderate positive correlation<sup>6</sup> (.245) was found between MLP support<sup>7</sup> and recovery capital ( $p < 0.05$ ), suggesting that increased MLP support may be associated with higher recovery capital among participants. While this progress cannot be solely attributed to the MLP program, it provides a snapshot of participants’ recovery status.

### Impact of Non-Judgmental and Comprehensive Support

The MLP’s approach of providing consistent, non-judgmental support proved crucial for many participants’ recovery journeys. As one participant explained: “[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 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 the temptation coming here, leaving here, you know, I was out of 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 Participant).

Another MLP staff member explained, “[We] had sat down with the participant for like 45 minutes, even though [we] weren’t able to represent [them]... I think those small acts of communication, empathy and compassion [when] being able to tell them we care about you and we have your best interests in mind, it just makes such a large difference.” (MLP Staff)

4 Responses were captured from a 6-point scale of strongly disagreed to strongly agreed for each question

5 Recovery Capital was a composite score of ten items (each ranging from 0-6 of strongly disagreed to strongly agreed) about how the assets and resources the respondent has related to their recovery.

6 Analysis used Spearman’s rank correlation to account for ordinal data.

7 MLP Support was a composite score of seven items (each ranging from 0-6 of strongly disagreed to strongly agreed) about how the program staff assisted the respondent.

## Confidence and Knowledge in Addressing Legal Needs

Self-advocacy is a critical component of personal empowerment, particularly for individuals navigating complex legal systems while in recovery from substance use disorders. Data highlighted how participants cultivated their ability to understand, engage with, and confidently address their legal challenges.

Participants reported high levels of legal self-efficacy on the survey, with substantial percentages strongly agreeing<sup>8</sup> that they:

- Understand steps needed to resolve current legal issues (55.1%)
- Feel confident their current legal issues will be resolved through the MLP (58%)

| Legal Confidence <sup>9</sup> Metrics (n=67) |        |
|----------------------------------------------|--------|
| Measure                                      | Score  |
| Average Score                                | 31.4   |
| Median Score                                 | 32     |
| Most Common Score                            | 36     |
| Range                                        | 0 - 36 |

Overall confidence among participants in addressing legal concerns was high, averaging 31.4 out of 36 possible points, with the most common score being the maximum of 36.

Two significant correlations<sup>10</sup> emerged from the data: (1) MLP Support<sup>11</sup> and Legal Confidence<sup>12</sup> had a moderate positive correlation (.595;  $p < 0.001$ ), therefore higher levels of MLP support were associated with increased confidence in addressing legal concerns, and (2) Recovery Capital<sup>13</sup> and Legal Confidence had a moderate positive correlation (.472,  $p < 0.001$ ) and this suggests mutual reinforcement between recovery resources and legal self-efficacy.

These findings suggest that the MLP’s support not only builds participants’ immediate legal knowledge but contributes to a broader foundation of confidence and self-advocacy skills that can support both legal empowerment and recovery progress.

8 Responses were captured from a 6-point scale of strongly disagreed to strongly agreed for each question

9 Legal Confidence was a composite score of six items (each ranging from 0-6 of strongly disagreed to strongly agreed ) about legal knowledge and confidence

10 Analysis used Spearman’s rank correlation to account for ordinal data.

11 MLP Support was a composite score of seven items (each ranging from 0-6 of strongly disagreed to strongly agreed ) about how the program staff assisted the respondent

12 Legal Confidence was a composite score of six items (each ranging from 0-6 of strongly disagreed to strongly agreed ) about legal knowledge and confidence

13 Recovery Capital was a composite score of ten items (each ranging from 0-6 of strongly disagreed to strongly agreed ) about how the assets and resources the respondent has related to their recovery.

## The Camden Coalition MLP: An Innovative Model

The Camden Coalition MLP has developed several features that create an innovative model that serves individuals with substance use disorders while maintaining operational flexibility and person-centered care.

### Comprehensive Legal Representation

- Engagement in both civil and closed criminal cases, unlike many MLPs that only take civil cases
- Direct, in-house handling of legal issues rather than referral to external services
- Broad scope of practice (e.g., criminal, municipal, housing, family, estate)

### Strategic Organizational Structure

- Independent nonprofit status separate from healthcare institution
- Ability to assume legal risk for criminal cases
- Reduced bureaucratic constraints
- Flexible funding structure

### Integrated Co-Location Model

- Shared building space with Cooper Center for Healing
- Daily attorney presence on clinical floors
- Enhanced accessibility for participants

“We feel like there has to be that presence in order to generate familiarity. Familiarity between the staff and the attorneys and with the [MLP participants] and the attorney. So I think that’s a key component is being integrated not just theoretically, but actually the physical co-connection.”  
- MLP Staff Member

### Multidisciplinary Collaboration

- Integration of healthcare providers, social workers, therapists, and legal professionals
- Mission-aligned care approach
- Coordinated referrals

### Client-Centered Program Design

- Free legal service delivery
- Flexible scheduling and communication
- Coaching model (COACH<sup>14</sup>) emphasizing participant autonomy
- Focus on empowerment and independence

<sup>14</sup> [COACH](#) is the framework for how Camden Coalition builds authentic healing relationships with individuals that empower them to take control of their health. The acronym describes the tools and techniques that team members use to work with program participants towards sustained behavior change.

---

“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 are the legal issues that are barriers for you...I think typically as a lawyer, you’re very focused on what is the case and what is the specific narrow legal issue. And I think we try to do more sort of person-centered legal services, thinking about the whole person and also like, okay, we’re gonna help you with your legal issue that you have, but where does that fit in with your broader wellbeing and what can we do to position you so that when we address this legal issue, you’re gonna be in a better position?...” (MLP Staff Member)

---

## Implementation Considerations for Medical-Legal Partnerships

The Camden Coalition’s Medical-Legal Partnership offers a case study of how interdisciplinary approaches can support individuals struggling with substance use disorders and related challenges. In implementing Medical-Legal Partnerships, organizations might consider the following:

**Holistic Understanding of Complex Care.** MLPs can recognize the intricate relationship between social determinants of health (SDOH) and legal challenges. Staff highlighted the critical importance of addressing comprehensive needs beyond medical care, including housing instability, food insecurity, and mental health concerns.

**Addiction-Related Stigma.** Research participants candidly discussed how societal stigma surrounding addiction creates barriers to both program effectiveness and individual recovery.

**Sustainable Funding.** Securing consistent funding is a critical challenge for MLP programs. Current funding models rely heavily on grants, which provide uncertain financial sustainability. Staff proposed innovative funding strategies, such as integrating MLP services into Medicaid reimbursement structures. MLPs would benefit from systemic, long-term financial support.

**Staffing Considerations.** Participants emphasized that MLP staff represent a crucial intervention point for people experiencing disadvantage. Data suggested that MLP staff have compassion and accessibility, mission-aligned commitment, first-hand understanding or extensive knowledge of substance use disorders, and a harm reduction-informed approach.

**Legal Limitations.** MLPs face operational challenges, including complex legal frameworks restricting attorneys’ ability to intervene, difficulties coordinating cases across multiple townships and counties, and limitations in handling certain legal domains (e.g., child welfare, immigration).

These considerations underscore the need for flexible, adaptive legal support strategies that prioritize participant needs while working within existing systemic boundaries.

## Project Team

### **Senator Walter Rand Institute for Public Affairs at Rutgers University - Camden (WRI)**

Devon Ziminski, PhD | Senior Research Administrator

Madeliene Alger, MA | Research Project Coordinator I

### **Camden Coalition**

Ya'Shauna Bosley | Program Assistant, Triage & Operations

Dawn Ericksen, JD | Medical-Legal Partnership Attorney

Landon Hacker, JD | Medical-Legal Partnership Attorney

Amadly Remias | Senior Program Manager, Care Management Initiatives

Jeremy Spiegel, JD | Medical-Legal Partnership Supervising Attorney

Aaron Truchil, MS | Senior Director of Analytics & Informatics

Dawn Wiest, PhD | Director for Research and Evaluation

### **Cooper Center for Healing (CCH)**

Matt Salzman, MD, MPH | Attending Physician, Department of Emergency Medicine; Medical Director, Addiction Medicine Consult Liaison Service, Cooper University Health Care; Associate Professor, Department of Emergency Medicine, Division of Toxicology and Addiction Medicine, Cooper Medical School of Rowan University



## About

### **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. WRI specializes in qualitative research and believes that community voice is at the heart of facilitating policy, systems, and environmental change.

### **About the Camden Coalition**

The [Camden Coalition](#) is a multidisciplinary, community-based nonprofit working to improve care for people with complex health and social needs in the city of Camden, across New Jersey, and around the country. We develop and test care management models and redesign systems in partnership with consumers, community members, health systems, community-based organizations, government agencies, payers, and more, with the goal of achieving person-centered, equitable care.

As one of New Jersey's four Regional Health Hubs, we work with regional partners, New Jersey's Medicaid office, and other state agencies to expand data-sharing and collaboration between organizations so that patients across South Jersey experience seamless, whole-person care.

### **About the 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.

### **Funder**

This research is funded through an Urban Innovation Fund Grant from Rutgers University- Camden's Division of Diversity, Inclusion and Community Engagement (DICE). The Division advances, promotes and advocates for inclusiveness, diversity and equity as key elements to achieve Rutgers' strategic vision.

**R** | RUTGERS-CAMDEN  
Senator Walter Rand  
Institute for Public Affairs

 Camden  
Coalition

 Cooper  
University Hospital