

**“BATTLING**

**FOR MY LIFE”**

**MARCH 2018**



## ***“Battling for my life”***

### ***A patient story***

Charlie Vazquez, a participant in our care management program<sup>1</sup>, is a 58-year old Camden resident with a steady gaze and a determination to stabilize his health and improve his wellbeing. During a recent visit, he talked openly about the challenges he has faced and the impact that working with a Camden Coalition care team has had on his health, motivation, and outlook on life.

“I started with heroin when I was 13 or 14,” he said. “I felt a lot of rejection from my family and I started running away from home. I didn’t feel love from my family.” After Charlie’s family moved to Camden from New York City when he was 17, things got even worse. “[My parents] got involved in lots of drugs in Camden, to the point that their way of showing us love was through material things and drugs,” he said. A long criminal history related to his substance use disorder followed, resulting in 28 years of incarceration.”

After his release from prison in 2008, life started to look up. Spurred on by a personal growth course he took before his release, Charlie began making gains — he found a mentor, earned his GED, began taking classes in human services management, met his 25-year old son for the first time, and even started a halfway house. But within months, drugs began to have a pull on him.

“A lot of things happened mentally and emotionally,” he said. “Just when I was making ties with my son, I lost him again. I became that loner that I was before.”

For the next decade, Charlie bounced in and out of treatment programs and hospitals throughout New Jersey and stayed at friends’ apartments and abandoned houses. Medical problems also started surfacing: he developed chronic vertigo, back pains,

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and headaches; suffered a stroke; and overdosed multiple times. Eventually, he sought primary care services and addiction treatment at Project H.O.P.E.. Last August, he was hospitalized with pneumonia and an esophagus infection when our enrollment staff offered him services to help him deal with his chronic health problems. Without hesitation, he enrolled in our intervention.

Since then, our care team members like community health worker Brian Thompson have helped Charlie connect to services that would meet his medical and social needs, including making appointments and getting referrals to specialists, securing placement at a local shelter, and helping him apply for permanent affordable housing through the our Housing First<sup>2</sup> pilot program. “They just stood by me,” said Charlie. “Brian has helped me more than anything. He has encouraged me to battle for my life, and every time I talk to him, I tell him, ‘Don’t give up on me.’”

### **“I took my chance”**

For all the progress he had made, Charlie knew one thing from his past was keeping him from realizing his goals for a healthier, more stable life: an arrest warrant for a probation violation.

“Brian told me that everything might stop because of my court issue — the housing and everything,” said Charlie. “I took my chance. I said either I address it or I lose it all and be back out on the street... Another concern of mine was, if I had to do time, would they be with me? I wanted them with me through the whole process. And they said yes.”

Charlie turned himself in. With his long rap sheet, he faced a possible five years in state prison for his probation violation. Through our medical-legal partnership<sup>3</sup> pilot program, our care team and consulting attorney Jeremy Spiegel worked closely with Charlie’s public defender on a legal strategy. To bolster his case, the care team faxed letters of support from the Coalition and Project H.O.P.E. to the judge’s chambers. Fifty days passed until a hearing was called.

In court, the judge began reading the letters. Then she asked Brian to speak.

“The judge asked me to stand up in court and asked, ‘What have you been working on?’,” recalled Brian. “I said, ‘This is a voluntary program. He has followed up on all his appointments, we placed him in a shelter, he’s getting Suboxone treatment at Project H.O.P.E.. He’s getting negative urine screenings for the past six weeks.’ He was doing all the right things.”

The advocacy made an impact. At the judge’s request, Brian secured placement for Charlie at a local shelter. Charlie was released.

### **“I got a support system”**

These days, Charlie continues to work on his goals with the support of our care team, but not without some challenges. In February, Charlie caught pneumonia and experienced a health setback that sent him back to the emergency department. He is currently at a nursing home, receiving occupational and physical

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therapy. Meanwhile, he eagerly waits for a Housing First voucher for permanent affordable housing to become available within the coming months.

“I never have been independent in my life,” he said. “Of course, my family always had everything through drugs and the rest of my life was in prison, so I never really had anything of my own. This would be a new experience for me. This would be learning

how to live. This would be learning how to budget my money with what I got. Learning to live life on life’s terms because it’s not gonna be happy-go-jolly where everything’s gonna be beautiful.

“I know I’m gonna go through changes, but I got a support system. I got Camden Coalition behind me. I got meetings I can go to. I got counselors I can go to at Project H.O.P.E.. That would be the beginning of everything.”

## ***About the Camden Coalition***

The Camden Coalition of Healthcare Providers is a citywide coalition of over 25 hospitals, primary care providers, and community organizations working together to deliver better health care to vulnerable citizens in Camden, NJ. Founded by Dr. Jeffrey Brenner in 2002, the Coalition knits together a fragmented health care system for patients with complex needs and repeated, ineffective and expensive hospitalizations, using smart data and holistic, multi-disciplinary team care. We believe if we can deliver better care at lower cost here in Camden, it can be done for everyone, everywhere in America.

### **Notes**

1. Learn more about our care management model at [camdenhealth.org/care-management-program](https://camdenhealth.org/care-management-program).
2. Learn more about our Housing First program at [camdenhealth.org/housing-first-pilot-program](https://camdenhealth.org/housing-first-pilot-program).
3. Learn more about our medical-legal partnership program at [camdenhealth.org/medical-legal-partnership](https://camdenhealth.org/medical-legal-partnership).

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