



Mothers' Voices



Pregnancy and childbirth are often among the most joyous times in life! Most often, pregnancies are uncomplicated and the outcomes include a healthy baby, an expanded family and a deepened sense of love and purpose.

Mothers are the cornerstone of a healthy and prosperous world. Therefore, when a pregnant woman dies, the ripple effect on her family and community is enormous. The United States is one of very few developed countries where deaths related to pregnancy or childbirth are increasing. And the growing problem of chronic conditions like diabetes, hypertension, and obesity is contributing to this rise in maternal mortality.

Merck for Mothers is supporting three community-based organizations – Maternity Care Coalition (Philadelphia), Camden Coalition of Healthcare Providers (Camden, NJ) and Northern Manhattan Perinatal Partnership (New York City) – to pilot innovative community health worker models. The goal is link pregnant women with and at risk for chronic conditions to the care and support services they need to have **safe pregnancies and healthy lives.**

PhotoVoice is a community-engaged action-oriented research method that gives voice to those traditionally unheard. Using photographs and captions, *PhotoVoice* participants identify, capture, and share their experiences and stories with others.

Mothers' Voices uses this approach to listen to and learn from clients and their community health workers who are participating in the *Merck for Mothers* initiative. The following contributions illustrate the many ways community health workers support women and their families during pregnancy and beyond. **Mothers' Voices** has helped us to raise up these voices and to demonstrate the importance of community-engaged interventions that provide quality, woman-centered maternity care and result in excellent outcomes for mothers, families and our communities.

I have a love hate relationship with this door right here. This is the entrance to the women's shelter where I spent almost nine months before finally moving into my apartment.

This building is filled with my tears, my anxiety, my anger, my laughter and my joy. At times I swore I was never going to be able to leave, I would get my hopes up about a place to move just to be pushed back time and time again and told no, my [community health] worker stayed positive even when I felt defeated. The work I put in, that she and her colleagues put in, that my boyfriend put in paid off, and we ended up exactly where we were supposed to be. I wouldn't change a moment of those nine months.

I walked through that door seven months pregnant, scared, broken and afraid of failing. I walked out of that door nine months later with my beautiful six month old baby boy, with my head held high, with new friends, with the support of the staff, with the keys to my family's new home in my pocket, but most importantly, with hope and gratitude.

-Client, Camden





These keys are so much more than just a way to open my front door. These keys represent hard work and determination. These keys are nine months at a shelter with my son, having to live separate from his father while we worked on housing.

These keys represent a second chance. These keys are months of struggle, tears, doubt, and most importantly, hope.

These keys would never have been in my hand if it were not for a [community health] worker who believed in me, who saw the work I've put in and how far I have come, a worker who wouldn't take no for an answer and got a hesitant landlord to believe in second chances.

These keys are so much more than just metal. When I carry them and hear them jingle in my bag, I smile. Because where you see keys, I see hope and the promise of an amazing future to come.

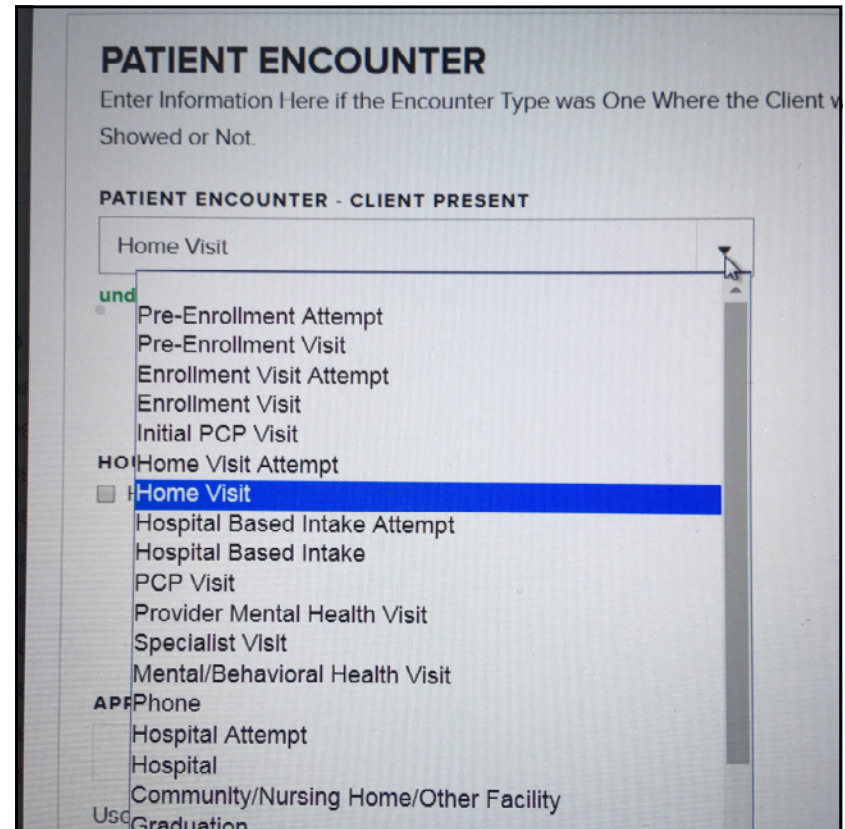
-Client, Camden

This is a photo of me documenting a visit with a woman who had just moved into an apartment after nine months of homelessness. She was living in a shelter for three months while pregnant and six more with her baby after he was born.

She has been through so much and has worked so hard to get back on her feet. She is a great example of how amazing things can happen when people get the resources and support they need. Her baby is happy, healthy, and right now teething in the comfort of a real home.

Now when I document our visits, I get to select "home visit," and that makes me smile.

-Community Health Worker, Camden



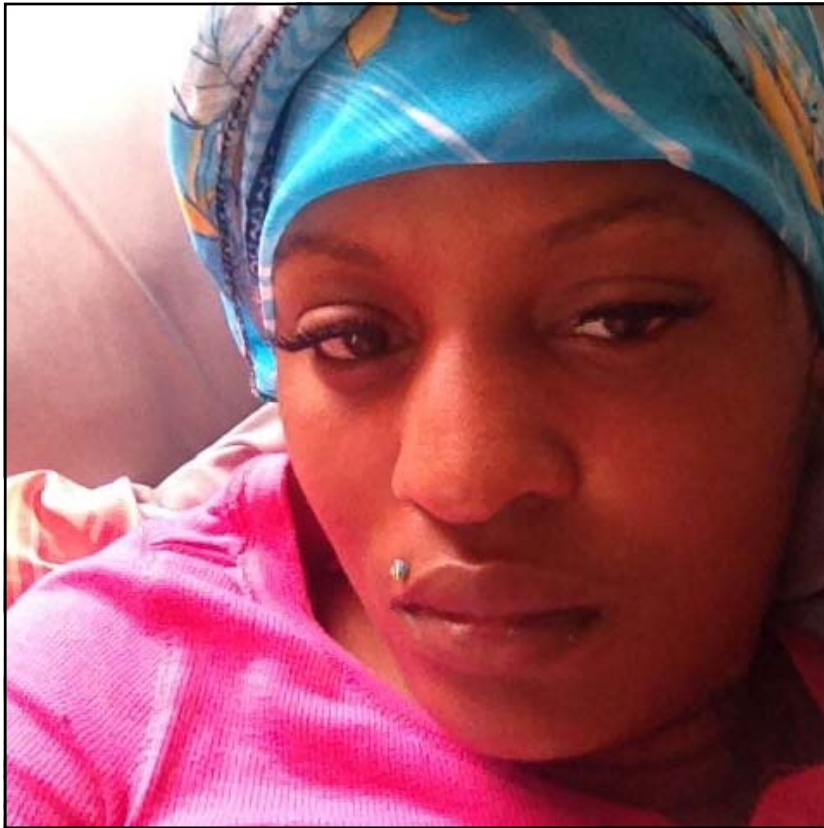


I'm having my third boy. I want to say I was shocked, but deep down inside I wasn't. It's funny, both my mom's and dad's sides of my family are basically all males except for me. I guess I was meant to have another young man. I'm excited either way because children are always a blessing. Even though this pregnancy was a trying one—it seemed as though everyone wanted to stress me out.

But I also got a lot of support from people who really care. I also had outside support from my community health worker. Having outside support from those that don't look down on you for mistakes or choices you've made is a big plus. She made me feel very supported and that this is more than just a job for her. She was there to help me have all the support I need throughout the pregnancy. If I ever wanted to talk about anything, she was there. I'm grateful I've made it through this pregnancy without any complications so far. That's truly a blessing, I must say.

So, three boys it shall be. I hope they form a close bond together. I can't wait to meet you. I love you boy!

-Client, Philadelphia



The reason why I picked this picture was because a couple of months ago, I was feeling down and out. It actually took me a month to get me right for me and my kids. And this is the reason why I'm now feeling good and free.

Thanks to Ms. Carla [my community health worker] for being in my corner, telling me that everything was going to be OK. I had doubts about what you were telling me. I thank you so much, I can't thank you enough.

-Client, Philadelphia

These two women [my community health workers] were my two corners of my new foundation.

Xiomara, with her ever-ready list of resources and not allowing me to settle for mediocrity, not for my children and definitely not for myself. She encouraged me to go for a job that matches my needs as well as salary expectations.

Digna, the emotional support the universe sent my way. Helping me organize my heart and mind. She accompanied me to my prenatal and sonogram appointments. It was difficult finding myself again. She would stay with the baby while she was at childcare as I did the yoga class at NMPP so that I didn't worry about her. This was amazing and definitely helpful for me to find my inner peace.

They helped me ease the worry and anxiety I felt in regards to the financial burden that comes with another child. I am now working full time, saving money, and preparing to have my own place.

I will love these women forever.

-Client, New York City





Overall, this whole thing scared me. I was not ready to have a second child. Despite the surrounding struggles, I found an inner peace by just accepting my life role as a mother of two. I was scared and nervous, but finding balance was my main goal. [My community health workers] helped me retain the necessities for my children and helped me find peace within my new status of being medically prohibited to work. Finding balance is an ever revolving process.

Now that my daughter is here, the smiles and stability of my children are what matter most to me. I am their pillar and example of balance, strength, and finding the laughs during difficult times. No matter what happens, we always make sure to do something fun, spend time together and just remember that life is not all about being serious.

Each day, I push myself to be good. I am my children's example to stay focused and work hard. There is a solution to everything.

-Client, New York



This is the entrance to my office cubicle, where I sit and type my notes and my home visits become a part of my families' story on paper. This space is where I "make things happen" for the families I work with, where hope is formed and a bond is made. It's the place where, with a call or an email or a text ,with health information and understanding, I impact my families' lives. I like to call it MY WORLD within the world.

The cloth that covers the divider is called a Rebozo which is used during and after labor to soothe the woman and carry the child. To me, the design on it represents womanhood in all its splendor and energy.

As a community health worker, I help change the lives of families with knowledge, understanding, or a simple hug. The work that I do impacts me as a person and them as a family. Community health workers are important in our communities!

-Community Health Worker, New York

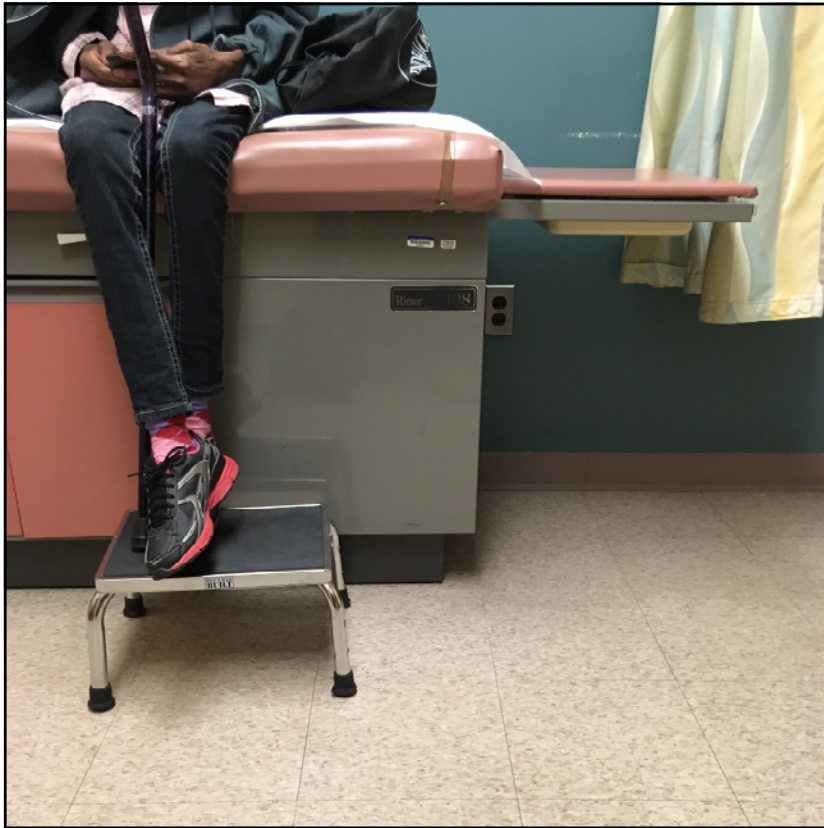


My baby bump means the world to me.

Although my son is not here yet, I've learned how to become a protector and how to cherish something that I will have for life.

My baby bump also shows me how everything could change in a matter of time.

-Client, Philadelphia



The doctor's visit. I often accompany women to their medical appointments. The women we work with often face a lot of stigmatization within the health care system and have usually experienced judgment and negative attitudes from one of their health care providers.

Going to the doctor can be just one more place where they are made to feel that they are a bad mom. For this reason women often come armed by donning the mask of toughness and defensiveness, with an air of impenetrability.

It's amazing how quickly that defensive armor can be shed when a provider shows compassion and respect and listens to the patient's story instead of creating their own.

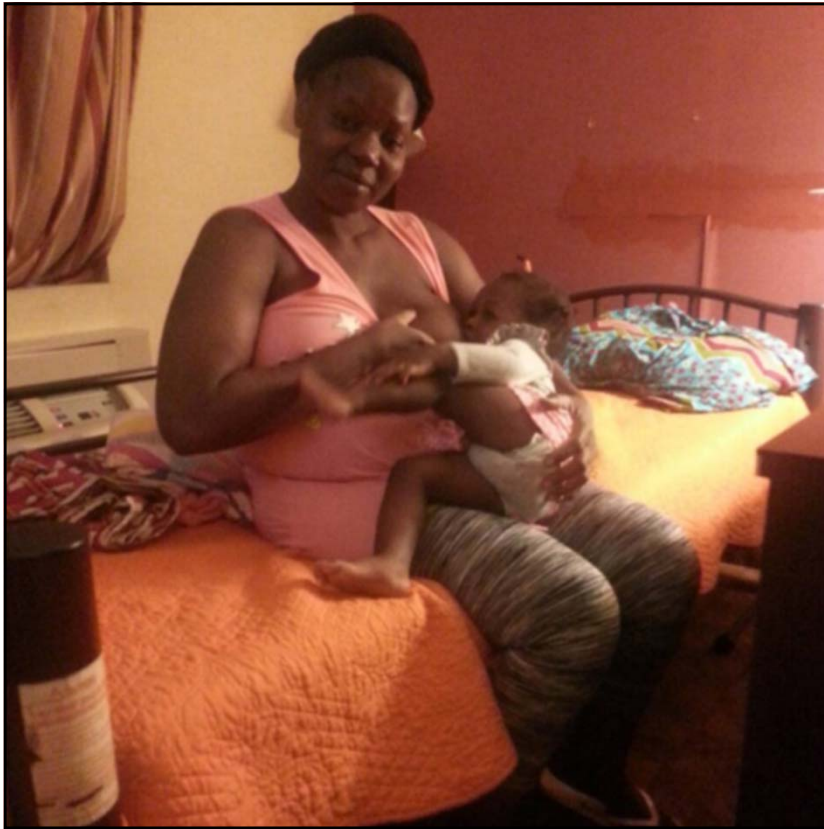
-Community Health Worker, Camden

In giving birth to our babies, we may find we give birth to new possibilities within ourselves. I believe the choice to become a mother is the choice to become one of the greatest spiritual teachers there is.

Giving birth is a mystery, just like life. It takes a woman's deepest fears about herself and shows her that she is strong.

-Client, Philadelphia





When we first met, my [community health worker] said, “I hope you are breastfeeding this baby exclusively. It will trim away the pregnancy weight, protect against infection and make you closer emotionally.” She explained to me how my mood can affect the milk production and advised me to be positive and think of happy moments. Most importantly, she has been a material and moral support for me, giving me advice and hope when I needed it.

I chose this picture because every time my community health worker visits me, she finds me breastfeeding and I can see the joy and happiness on her face. I remember her saying, “you don’t know how happy I feel inside when I see this baby enjoying her food in a safe and lovely place like your lap.”

I am very grateful because I feel stronger and valuable since I enrolled in this program.

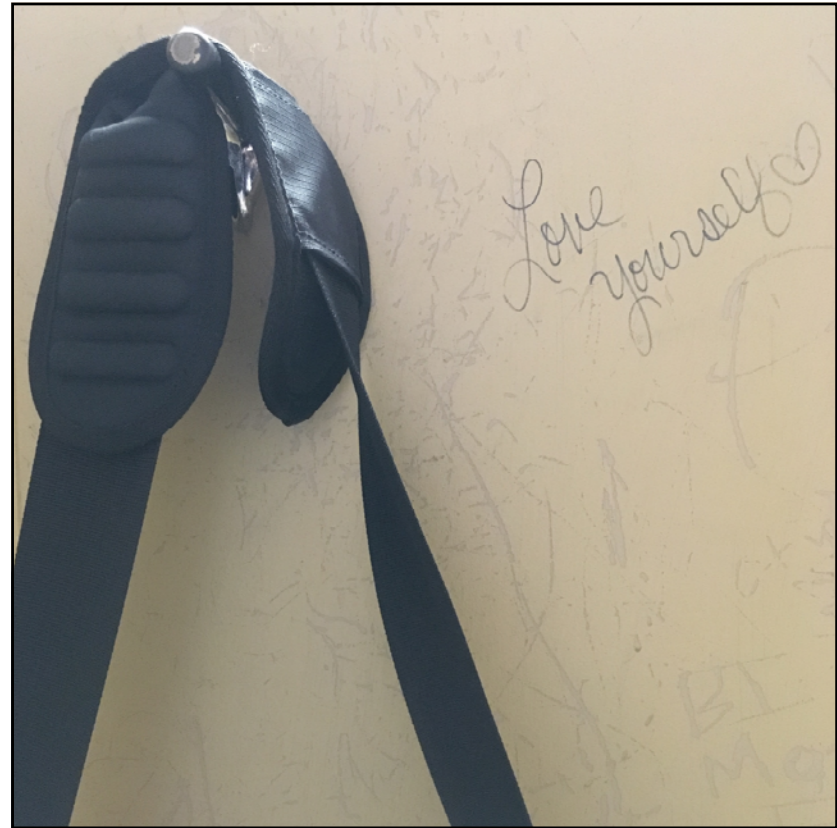
-Client, New York

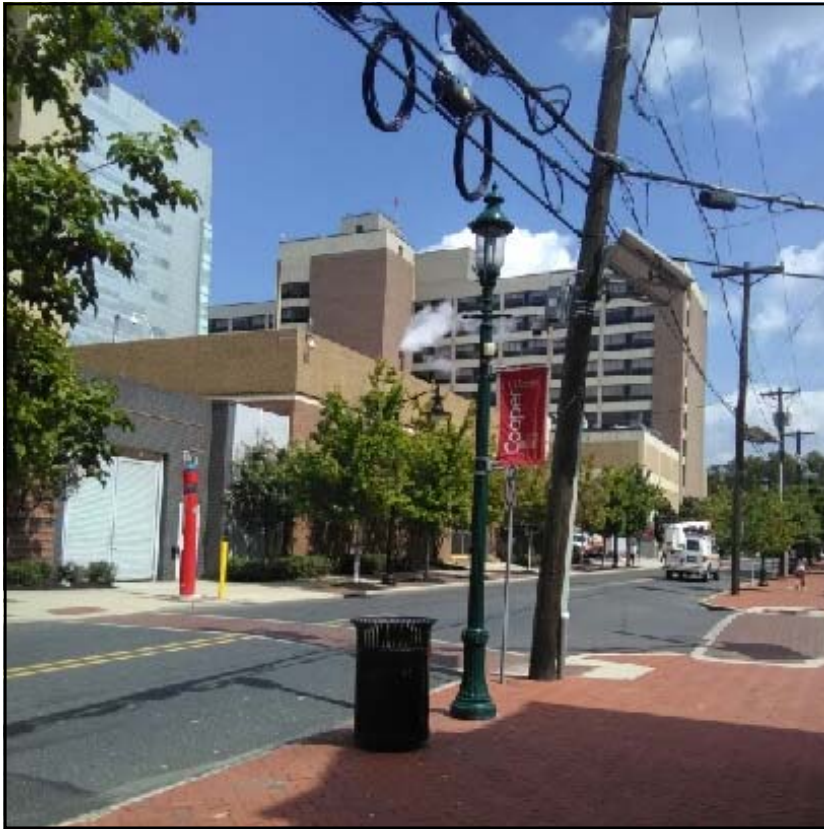
This is the inside of a bathroom stall at a public library in Camden. The mothers we work with are struggling with addiction and experiencing homelessness or housing instability, and this library serves as a safe place in the community where we can meet to work on their goals.

When I use the bathroom, I see "love yourself" has been scratched into the stall door. When I read it, I think, yeah, why is that so hard? Then I look around at the other messages, a dense mosaic of negative words, and I think, oh, that's why.

One of my favorite parts about this job [as a community health worker] is that it has given me the opportunity to see what people can do when provided with the right resources and a little support and positivity. Amazing things can sometimes happen :)

-Community Health Worker, Camden





I walked down this road to Cooper Hospital not knowing what to expect. I was hurting, physically and emotionally. I was scared and broken.

This two block walk felt like 200 miles, but I made it there and made it inside. I asked for help, and received it with welcoming arms. This is where I learned to open my mouth, this is where I started to get my voice back, this is where I became involved with the Camden Coalition, this is where I found out my beautiful baby boy would be here in a few short months.

This is where I found a support system who has changed my life for the better, people who said “we’re here for you” and meant it.

This is where I remembered how amazing it is to be a mother, and where I realized I’m a strong woman who can go through the worst and keep my head high and continue to move forward.

This is where I started to heal.

-Client, Camden



I pass by this mural on my way to many home visits each week and the words "see me like I see you" always stand out to me.

As a community health worker, I am in the position of being able to offer support to moms-to-be during what is often an incredibly challenging and transformative time in their lives. I recognize my special role of being a consistent and kind support to people during these moments, and the phrase "see me like I see you" guides me as I aim to bring to the surface all the positivity and strengths each and every one of the women I work with embody. To me, these words are an encouragement for all of us to strive to see the beauty/strength/humanity in one another.

I feel lucky to be in a role where I can be a non-judgmental support to people, and in doing so hopefully hold up a mirror to each woman's unique beauty as a mother, woman, and whole individual.

-Community Health Worker, Philadelphia

Merck for Mothers is Merck's 10-year, \$500 million global initiative to create a world where no woman dies giving life. We focus our efforts in three areas:

EMPOWER WOMEN

Empower women to make informed choices and get the quality care they need before, during and after pregnancy

EQUIP HEALTH PROVIDERS

Equip health providers with the skills, tools and technologies they need to provide high-quality care

STRENGTHEN HEALTH SYSTEMS

Strengthen health systems to sustain the delivery of high-quality services that benefit women and communities

We sincerely thank the many women and community health workers who shared their vision and stories – making them *come alive*. We also thank our clinical partners at the Maternity Care Coalition, Camden Coalition of Healthcare Providers and Northern Manhattan Perinatal Partnership as well as our research partners at the Yale School of Public Health.

For the latest updates on our programs and progress, visit **MerckforMothers.com**.

You can also join the **#EndMaternalMortality** conversation by following **@MerckforMothers** on Twitter.

Merck for Mothers is known as MSD for Mothers outside the United States and Canada.