TRAUMA-INFORMED APPROACHES: THREE CASES

Featuring:
West Central Wisconsin Community Action Agency,
Northern Kentucky Community Action Commission, and Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services
Trauma-Informed Approaches: Three Cases

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This document is intended for use by Community Action Agencies and other CSBG Eligible Entities within the Community Services Block Grant (CSBG) Network.

Publication Contributors
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Community Action Partnership
The Community Action Partnership is the nonprofit, national membership organization representing the interests of the 1,000+ Community Action Agencies (CAAs) across the country that annually help 17 million low-income Americans achieve economic security. Whether it’s a Head Start program, weatherization, job training, housing, nutritional assistance, energy assistance, financial education, or any of the other 40 distinct programs, CAAs work to make America a better place to live.

Learning Communities Resources Center (LCRC)
The purpose of the CSBG Learning Community is to analyze Community Action outcomes and identify effective, promising, and innovative practice models that alleviate the causes and conditions of poverty.

The Learning Community, a project of the LCRC, is an opportunity for Community Action Agencies to build capacity to increase impact by:

• Capitalizing on Peer Knowledge and Expertise;
• Creating Effective Strategies; and
• Promoting Promising Practices

The Learning Community is comprised of topical Learning Community Groups (LCGs) which consist of a cadre of agencies that are currently working on a program or service delivery strategy related to each of the LCG focus areas. Learning Community members meet bi-monthly, either virtually or in-person and assist each other by discussing “what works”, sharing data findings, solving problems, and offering support for implementing new ideas.

The CSBG TTA Resource Center is also a project of the LCRC and serves as a wonderful compliment to The Learning Community as it is the “clearinghouse” for a broad array of resources to assist Community Action with its important anti-poverty work. The Resource Center allows for electronic submission of requests for T/TA, ensures the coordination of resources, and allows experts to meet the T/TA needs of the CSBG Network. It hosts a consultant bank; a resource bank which provides a broad array of evidence-based, evidence-informed and exemplary program practice models; a shared calendar; and a discussion forum. A valuable tool, the Resource Bank includes information, toolkits, webinars, articles and other information focused on a full range of services to alleviate the causes and conditions of poverty in communities served by the CSBG Network.

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The Learning Community

The Learning Community is comprised of topical Learning Community Groups (LCGs) which consist of a cadre of agencies that are currently working on a program or service delivery strategy related to each of the LCG focus areas. The Trauma Informed Approaches to Alleviate Poverty LCG seeks to design strategies to help Community Action agencies present their service offerings in a way that is sensitive to the trauma needs of their clients and staff.

The Learning Community followed a timeline including four phases, as illustrated above. This process takes place over the course of 20 months. Activities include a series of webinars, peer presentations, goal plans, implementation, and evaluation.

Each went through the process depicted in the graphic above. Learning Community Group Formation took place first as members focused on developing participant understanding of the Learning Community model, cultivating collaborative relationships, and building a shared vision of their goal plan.

Next, Knowledge Building emphasized opportunities for peer-to-peer learning, and research into the broader literature on the different subject areas. During this phase, the LCGs met during an intensive period which included resource review, best-practice presentations, emerging topic presentations, and goal plan finalization.

Third, Piloting focused on the implementation and evaluation of the programs and strategies, including the development of related resources for use by the broader CSBG Network. LCGs were convened regularly for updates/check-in on their progress, peer-to-peer support, and training and technical assistance by Subject Matter Experts (SMEs).

Lastly, during the Practice Transformation phase peers shared reports on the impact of their projects and developed resources for use by the larger CSBG network.

The cases that follow will take readers through the process, from formation to practice transformation, in three different agencies across the United States. These, as well as others within the learning community, exemplify the intention Community Action has to provide holistic services to improve the lives of low-income individuals and families and alleviate the causes and conditions of poverty.
The Importance of Trauma-Informed Care

Trauma is an unfortunate and all too persistent side effect for many individuals and families living in poverty today. It can take many forms and is present across all age groups of those in need of self-sufficiency services. Current literature defines trauma as any instance of severe distress, harm, or suffering that results from an overwhelming mental or emotional pain or physical injury.¹ A key characteristic of these events is the short and long-term losses experienced by individuals that have been exposed to trauma. The impacts of trauma can be profound regardless of age, but research suggests that it can be particularly damaging for children and teens.² With some of our country’s most vulnerable populations at stake, it is of critical importance for human service providers to be well-informed and equipped to help individuals overcome the impacts of their trauma on their journey towards self-sufficiency.

Being a trauma-informed organization is a commitment from human service organizations to create an intentional organizational mindset and treatment framework that understands, recognizes, and responds to the various effects and manifestations of trauma. It also obligates agencies to be aware of the fact that both clients and staff are in need of support to fully understand the impacts of trauma, and to then provide sufficient resources to avoid any future re-traumatization. As a direct result of our reach into some of America’s most at-risk communities, the entire Community Action network has a responsibility to ensure that the services they provide are grounded in an organizational culture that is trauma-informed.

This case study will highlight the efforts of two Community Action Agencies and one State CSBG office that have participated in a 20-month Learning Community Group: West Central Wisconsin Community Action Agency, Northern Kentucky Community Action Commission, and Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services. These three cases, as well as others within the Learning Community, exemplify the intention Community Action has to provide holistic and adaptable services to improve the lives of low-income individuals and families and alleviate the causes and conditions of poverty.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) defines trauma as “the result of an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual’s functions and physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being”. Trauma’s impacts are unpredictable and can affect individuals in a unique way dependent upon numerous factors, such as a person’s age, race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation. It can even upset groups of people at once, spanning families, communities, cultures, and entire generations. In addition to its complexity is its overwhelming prevalence, with 60% of US adults stating that they have experienced at least one instance of trauma in their lifetime. While reports of trauma are seen across the general population of the United States, it poses a particular threat to low-income individuals and families. Research that has been conducted within the last decade consistently shows that living in poverty creates an abnormally high stress environment that exponentially increases an individual’s risk for physical and mental health issues across the life span. It can be so damaging that last year the American Academy of Pediatrics named poverty as the single most chronic health issue facing children in the US. This issue stems from the fact that poverty is often accompanied by low safety-environments, with crime, violence, and abuse occurring at much higher rates than in more affluent areas. While survivors of trauma can learn to cope with its many side effects, this can only be done when they have access to the necessary support systems and resources needed to understand their experiences.

Due to the lasting and far-reaching impacts of trauma, it is essential for Community Action Agencies to offer trauma recovery and resiliency services that are considerate and adaptable to the varying needs of individuals in their communities. While there are numerous interventions and treatments for working with clients that have experienced trauma, lessons learned from the field indicate that a comprehensive trauma-informed approach is critical importance for organizations that seek to facilitate healing for survivors of trauma. SAMHSA summarizes a trauma-informed approach as one that

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“realizes the widespread impact of trauma and understands potential paths for recovery; recognizes the signs and symptoms of trauma in clients, families, staff, and others involved with the system; responds by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices; and seeks to actively resist re-traumatization.” Becoming a trauma-informed organization requires an assessment of organizational and clinical practices together in an effort to alter their entire organizational practice from one that’s reactive (“What’s wrong with you?”) to one that’s responsive (“What happened to you?”).

In addition to a large body of work outside of the CSBG Network, The Results Oriented Management and Accountability (ROMA) framework that Community Action Agencies operate under guides agencies away from service provision and toward a strategic thinking model. This model includes comprehensive services and the engagement of other community partners and community members to support positive change. In turn, this works to meet the primary mission of the CSBG network: elimination of poverty/reducing the effects of poverty. Since 2015, the Learning Communities Resource Center (LCRC) has sought to take a closer look at various ways that Community Action Agencies have conceptualized what it means to be trauma-informed through its Trauma-Informed Approaches to Alleviate Poverty Learning Community Group (LCG). Over the course of this 20-month research and piloting project, 8 Community Action agencies from across the country came together in an effort to increase their capacity to fight poverty more effectively through the creation of a trauma-informed organizational culture. Participants in this group were guided in their efforts by Subject Matter Expert, Elena Cohen, and Learning Community Resource Expert, Catherine Marshall.

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10 F. Richmond and B. Mooney (2012) “Introduction to ROMA” Version 5.0
Utilizing their combined expertise in trauma-informed care and organizational culture development, group members were led through an intensive process to evaluate their organizations’ capacity and knowledge of trauma in an effort to develop a comprehensive trauma-informed approach. As an essential part of the Learning Community process, all of these project elements were explored and discussed in a peer-learning format. By creating a space for agencies to learn from each other in real time, participants had the opportunity to use each other’s insights to strengthen their trauma-informed approaches.

Case 1: Northern Kentucky Community Action Commission

Northern Kentucky Community Action Commission (NKCAC) is a private Community Action agency that strives to build a thriving community across its 8-county service area where all members are self-reliant, capable of helping themselves, and offering support to their neighbors with any life challenges they may face. Its mission is to help individuals and families develop the knowledge, opportunities, and resources they need to achieve self-reliance through the provision of a wide array of support services. Some of these projects include early childhood education, workforce development, senior services, and housing and weatherization.

Vice President for Family Services Dawn Fogarty spearheaded NKCAC’s participation in the Trauma-Informed Approaches LGC. Her main objective for joining the group was to uncover strategies for increasing support and education across all staff levels on the various aspects of trauma-informed care. Provision of services that are trauma-informed had been an agency priority prior to NKCAC’s enrollment in the Learning Community, particularly in their early childhood education work in their Head Start program. Their task was to now create actionable steps to encourage this mindset and treatment framework across all departments within the agency.

Dawn and her support team engaged in this effort by conducting a comprehensive agency self-assessment to gauge their organization’s baseline knowledge of trauma-informed principles and practices. After three months of planning and focus group testing among the staff this comprehensive survey was administered to over 42 staff members and agency stakeholders, covering topic areas such as training and education of staff, creating safe and supportive environment, and reviewing organizational policies. A more comprehensive overview of this self-assessment survey and an analysis of the responses that were received is available in the presentation slides of our Learning with The Learning Community: Trauma-Informed Approaches LCG which is accessible here: https://lcrcweb.com/2017/06/01/learning-with-the-learning-community-trauma-informed-approaches-to-alleviating-poverty/
Using the responses collected through this assessment, the NKCAC moved quickly in early 2017 to address areas of staff knowledge and support, or organizational capacity were deemed to be lacking. This resulted in implementation efforts in the following capacity areas detailed in the graphic above.

The main barrier that was reported by NKCAC was finding ways to maintain staff momentum following the self-assessment. While the assessment provided them with critical insight on what needed to be done, the NKCAC team sought to coordinate exactly how to provide training and resources on these topic areas in a way that was motivating and engaging for various levels of staff. However utilizing feedback and suggestions from their peers in the LCG, they were able to accomplish a great deal in several organizational capacity areas once initial buy-in was gained across agency staff.

At the close of the cohort, the NKCAC team is well on their way to adapting a truly integrated and trauma-informed service delivery model across many of their departments and service offerings. Beyond the timelines of the LCG, NKCAC hopes to continue this important intra-agency work by establishing partnerships with organizations in their region, coordinating regular documentary viewing sessions and debrief discussions for staff, and working with their HR department to ensure that agency policies are reflective of trauma-informed strategies and values.
Case 2: West Central Wisconsin Community Action Agency

Providing self-sufficiency opportunities to 7 counties in rural Wisconsin, West Central Wisconsin Community Action Agency, Inc. (West CAP) has sought to develop the social and economic assets of low-income families and their communities for over 50 years. Through its numerous services offerings such as homelessness prevention and housing services, food access and resources, Weatherization, and adult education, it is the mission of West CAP to take action against poverty in an effort to create a more just and sustainable society.

In late 2015, Associate Director Robyn Thibado and Homeless Prevention Programs Manager Corin Tubridy enrolled to take part in the Trauma Informed Approaches LCG in the hopes of obtaining the resources and strategies necessary to inspire a trauma-informed culture shift across all aspects of their organizational framework. Trauma-informed care already played a central role in the administration and case management of their housing and homelessness prevention services. Seeing the substantial improvements to customer service and outcomes that came about as a result of these efforts in this department, the West CAP team decided that it was of critical importance to replicate this approach across their entire organization so that everyone in their agency – from board members to volunteers – contributed to a trauma-informed mindset that was reflected both within and outside of the agency.

Over the course of their participation in the Learning Community, they specifically wanted to accomplish three goals:

- Gain an in-depth knowledge of how to educate their agency about trauma and trauma-informed services
- Identify concrete action steps to begin fostering a trauma-informed culture change within West CAP
- Become a local research and training authority on the importance of trauma-informed care

Capitalizing on the resources and strategy discussions from their LCG meetings, West CAP determined 4 criteria by which they would measure their progress in this work. Called the 4 R’s of a Trauma-Informed Approach, they entailed a realization of the prevalence of trauma in their community, recognition of the effects of trauma on clients, response by putting knowledge into practice, and resistance of any re-traumatization. Using these measurements as their guide, the West CAP team was able to achieve some significant headway towards all three of their stated goals. First, the West CAP team took time to invest in the knowledge and training capacity of key staff members by attending numerous trainings on various
aspects of trauma-informed care. This was done in an effort to ensure that the work that they would be implementing among the rest of their staff was relevant, accessible, and educated by resources from the field. Building on this knowledge, the West CAP team next engaged in coordination efforts to facilitate a trauma-informed care in-service training for the entire agency. They were able to accomplish this in January of 2017, and continued on to organize a similar training that they presented to most of their board members. As a result of these internal capacity-building efforts (training and resource sharing), the West CAP team was able to establish baseline knowledge of trauma across all departments and all levels within the organization. Additionally, they developed a comprehensive self-assessment survey to better assess where additional training and resources were needed for staff.

Despite these impressive efforts, the loss of key staff members over the course of the project created a significant delay in West CAP’s initially proposed project timeline. This resulted in a delay in the accomplishment of a few originally proposed action items, including an assessment of existing agency and program policies to determine the extent to which they reflect trauma-informed principles, administering an agency-wide assessment survey to fully ascertain the understanding and implementation of trauma informed care within the organization, and the creation of a continued training calendar to support continued practice of trauma informed principles throughout the organization and community at large.

Regardless of these challenges, the West CAP team left the Trauma Informed Approaches LCG feeling as though a great deal was accomplished. By creating a strong level of interest and understanding among agency staff, the West CAP team was able to make a number of measurable steps towards the facilitation of trauma-informed organizational mindset and culture. Staff knowledge and skills relating to addressing trauma increased, the organization’s understanding of the prevalence of trauma was strengthened, and staff learned and began to utilize trauma-informed skills when engaging with customers. This further resulted in a greater sense of empowerment for customers and staff. Overall, West CAP is confident that the strength of their trauma-informed services approach will only increase going forward. Some next steps for the organization include developing a needs assessment tool for clients, the creation of a trauma champions team to continue to build staff enthusiasm in this effort, and the continued development of organizational capacity to provide impactful trauma trainings both within and outside of the agency.

### Successes
- Obtained buy-in from agency staff and leadership
- Received informative insights from all departments during training
- Inspired staff interest in the theory, research, and practice of trauma-informed care

### Barriers
- Loss of a team member
- Loss of key agency staff
- Timeline readjustments left the team unable to accomplish all desired action items in the timeline originally proposed
Case 3: Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services

The Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services (Nebraska DHHS) is grounded in its commitment to make a more effective, efficient, and customer-focused state government for the over 1.9 million residents of the state of Nebraska. Its clear mission – helping people live better lives – is encapsulated by their consistent effort to develop high-quality, efficient, and customer-friendly services for the most vulnerable populations in the 93 counties of their state.

CSBG Specialist, Jennifer Dreibelbis, led the department’s participation in the Trauma Informed Approaches LCG. Similar to the interests of other organizations that took part in the group, her participation goals were to increase organizational knowledge and capacity on trauma-informed care and to become a local training authority on the importance of trauma-informed care for other human services providers in the state. What set Jennifer’s work apart from that of her colleagues was the state-wide scale of the effort. The intention was to supply sufficient training and education opportunities for the 9 Community Action agencies located in Nebraska.

Given this was a statewide effort, this proved to be Nebraska DHHS team. Competing priorities and limited staff time proved to be significant barriers to intra-agency efforts, and these barriers were compounded due to the scale of the initiative. In addition to staff capacity, the Nebraska DHHS team was also impeded by differing levels of understanding and the corresponding training needs reported across these 9 agencies.

Regardless of the scaling challenge, the Nebraska DHHS team decided that they best use of their time in the learning community would be to establish a baseline rating for trauma-informed knowledge and capacity for their state. In March of 2017, the department administered a comprehensive 135-question survey to each of the 9 CAAs in Nebraska, targeting a 10% response rate from each agency. The survey was based on a template created by the National Center on Family Homelessness. By the end of the month, they had reached their target response rate, with 175 Community Action professionals having participated in the survey. Although the final results of the survey are still pending, Nebraska DHHS is excited to be partnering with two local organizations, the Nebraska Children and Families Foundation (NCFF) and their own Community Action Partnership

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of Western Nebraska (CAPWN), to analyze the response data and use that to inform their state training efforts.

Although there were many challenges encountered along the way, Nebraska DHHS left the Learning Community with a strong foundation of the importance of trauma-informed care in their state and concrete next steps for the training efforts. Participation in the Learning Community proved to be an essential and enlightening step for the Nebraska DHHS team, as the peer relationships and Subject Matter Expert guidance provided in the group helped provide momentum to department efforts. Their plans for 2017 and beyond are to establish their own state Learning Community on Trauma-Informed Approaches for the agencies in their state. Some of the details for this plan can be seen in the graphic to the left.
Conclusion

Due to its potential benefits for both clients and staff, it is of critical importance for Community Action Agencies to encourage a trauma-informed environment within their agency. The three cases described above detail just some of the steps that agencies can implement to build trauma informed organizational capacity. The work of our case study participants suggests that a foundational element of being trauma-informed is establishing a clear understanding of the impacts of trauma across all levels and departments of staff. This allows for the organization as a whole to contemplate the ways in which their procedures and interactions play a role in empowering or possibly harming clients’ sense of well-being. Ultimately, becoming trauma-informed requires patience; it is a long-term goal that requires a commitment to continuous evaluation of agency culture to ensure that all aspects of an agency are knowledgeable, supportive, culturally competent and intentional.

Communities across the nation have unique needs that Community Action Agencies are positioned to address. Community Action agencies engage in comprehensive approaches which are driven by the needs of their customers and their communities. The graphic below emphasizes how the trauma-informed approach, a promising practice, can be leveraged by agencies to achieve success and maximize impact.

For More Information

View the Learning with the Learning Community: Trauma Informed Approaches Webinar Presentation

Thank you to our case study participants:

West Central Wisconsin Community Action Agency
Robyn Thibado and Corin Tubridy
http://westcap.org/

Northern Kentucky Community Action Commission
Dawn Fogarty
http://www.nkcac.org/

Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services
Jennifer Dreibelbis
http://dhhs.ne.gov/Pages/default.aspx

Questions? Let us know!

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Resources Shared From the Trauma-Informed Approaches LCG

Adverse Childhood Experiences: National and State Level Prevalence
This brief, describes the prevalence of one or more ACEs among children ages birth through 17.
www.lcrcweb.com/2016/06/16/adversechildhood-experiences-national-and-statelevel-prevalence/

Being Black is Not a Risk Factor
This book looks at the specific obstacles facing African American children and their families. It focuses on the strengths of African American families and how these can be used to create solutions.

Defining Toxic Stress from A Community Perspective
This fact sheet defines what toxic stress is, why it is of concern and how communities can respond.
www.lcrcweb.com/2016/06/16/defining-toxicstress-from-a-community-perspective/

IATP Certification
This webpage has information regarding certification through the International Association for Trauma Professionals.
www.lcrcweb.com/2017/09/22/iatpcertification/

Poverty and Child Health in the United States
The policy statement states how the American Academy of Pediatrics is committed to reducing and ultimately eliminating child poverty in the United States.

Engaging Women in Trauma-Informed Peer Support: A Guidebook
This guide is designed as a resource for peer supporters in these or other settings who want to learn how to integrate trauma-informed principles into their relationships with the women they support or into the peer support groups they are members of.

Key Ingredients for Successful Trauma-Informed Care Implementation
This brief draws on interviews with national experts on trauma-informed care to create a framework for organizational and clinical changes that can be practically implemented across the healthcare sector to address trauma.
www.lcrcweb.com/2017/09/22/keyingredients-for-successful-trauma-informedcare-implementation/

Infographic: Stress in Childhood
The Administration for Children and Families (ACF) created this dynamic infographic to visually present the different levels of stress that children can be exposed to.
www.lcrcweb.com/2016/06/16/infographicstress-in-childhood/

SAMHSA’s Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach
This report explains how trauma is a widespread, harmful and costly public health problem and how it has become evident that addressing trauma requires a multi-pronged, multi-agency public health approach.
Opioid Use, Misuse, and Overdose in Women

This paper discusses the need for prevention, treatment, and recovery programs for women who have opioid use disorders.


Parenting a Child Who Has Experienced Trauma

This fact-sheet discusses the nature of trauma, especially abuse or neglect, the effects of trauma on children and youth, and ways to help a child who has experienced trauma.

www.lcrcweb.com/2016/12/29/parenting-a-child-who-has-experienced-trauma/

Trauma-Informed Care for Women Veterans Experiencing Homelessness

This guide applies the trauma-informed care model to services provided for female veterans experiencing homelessness.


Shelter from the Storm: Trauma-Informed Care in Homelessness Services Settings

This article examines the frequency of prior among those experiencing homelessness and the trauma associated with homelessness itself.


Shifting the Paradigm, Asking “What Happened to You?” Instead of “What’s Wrong With You?”: Emotional Trauma Information & Resiliency Building Strategies for Frontline Staff, Part I

This presentation examines the intersection of trauma and poverty and explores how trauma can rewire the brain in ways that aid survival but pose challenges in other situations such as interaction with agencies.


Trauma-Informed Care for Displaced Populations

This guide focuses on applying a trauma-informed model to services for displaced populations within the United States.


2017-2018 Certificate Program in Traumatic Stress Studies

A summary of the Trauma Center’s state-of-the-art advanced training program in traumatic stress studies.


Trauma-Informed Case Management

This presentation discusses common ways trauma rears its head. It identifies signs of compassion fatigue, discusses how to create self-care plans, and how program managers can promote their practice.

The Promise of Community Action

Community Action changes people’s lives, embodies the spirit of hope, improves communities, and makes America a better place to live. We care about the entire community, and we are dedicated to helping people help themselves and each other.