



# Creating a Trauma-Informed Culture in Basic Needs Programs



*Beyond the Basics is an Urban Alliance initiative. [www.urbanalliance.com](http://www.urbanalliance.com)*

**Many people who receive services from basic needs programs have experienced trauma or chronic stress.** In fact, the experience of not having one's basic needs met can cause extreme stress or trauma. In response to traumatic experiences, people learn to adapt and cope to feel safe and in control. While necessary for survival in the face of trauma, these coping strategies often impact how

a person relates to others and engages with direct service programming. Meeting the needs of trauma survivors requires that programs become "trauma-informed". This means looking at all aspects of programming through a trauma lens, constantly keeping in mind how traumatic experiences impact people, and responding in ways that facilitate healing and avoid re-traumatizing.

### *Eight principles to consider when creating a trauma-informed culture in your basic needs program:*

- Understand Trauma and Its Impact
- Promote Safety
- Ensure Cultural Competence
- Support Control, Choice and Autonomy
- Share Power and Governance
- Integrate Care
- Healing Happens in Relationships
- Recovery is Possible

## **1 Understand Trauma and Its Impact**

**Staff and volunteers understand what traumatic stress is, how it impacts people, and recognize that many behaviors and responses, which may be ineffective and unhealthy in the present, represent adaptive responses to past traumatic experiences. Ongoing training about trauma, best practices for avoiding re-traumatization, and building relationships with trauma survivors is offered to staff and volunteers.**



### *Promoting Education and Awareness*

- ✓ **Offer ongoing education opportunities** to increase staff and volunteer knowledge about the prevalence and impact of trauma on people served as well as program and relational best practices that can be implemented to avoid re-traumatization.
- ✓ **Create a "trauma workgroup"**, or a core group of staff and volunteers from all levels of the program who are endorsed by leadership, that comes together to take what has been learned about trauma and strategize about how to apply this knowledge to daily program practices, as well as facilitate continued education about trauma.
- ✓ **Establish external networks of support** that sustain trauma awareness by establishing regular contact with outside agencies with expertise in trauma, including the use of outside consultants to provide ongoing education and case consultation. Making these types of connections offers providers a way to stay updated about new information, avoid isolation and focus on areas where the program is most in need of guidance.

## 2

## Promote Safety

Establish a safe physical and emotional environment where basic needs are met, safety measures are in place, and provider responses are consistent, predictable and respectful. This involves considering the degree to which the physical environment is experienced as safe and supportive by the people served through the program.



### *Creating a Safe and Supportive Physical Environment*

- ✓ **Ensure the building is well maintained and clean**
  - Things are fixed when they break
  - The building is swept/dusted/mopped, sprayed for bugs, etc.
  - Bathrooms are secure and stall doors can be locked
- ✓ **Ensure the program is physically safe**
  - There is a security system in place
  - There is adequate lighting inside and outside of the building
  - The building is accessible for people with hearing, visual and mobility impairments
- ✓ **Ensure the space is warm and welcoming**
  - Walls are decorated with colorful, culturally diverse, positive and child-friendly artwork
  - Comfortable, soft seating is available
  - Calming music is played in the background
  - Living items are incorporated into the decorating such as plants and fish tanks
  - Clients are involved in designing and decorating the space
  - Programs may choose to establish an “environment” committee where clients can determine ways in which they would like to improve or change the physical space

## 3

## Ensure Cultural Competence

It is important for program staff and volunteers to understand how cultural context influences one’s perception of and response to traumatic events and the recovery process. Programs can include practices that respect diversity within the program, provide opportunities for people to engage in cultural rituals and use interventions that are respectful of and specific to cultural backgrounds. A culturally competent approach helps to create a respectful environment in which trauma survivors can begin to rebuild a sense of self and a connection to their communities.

## Strategies for Ensuring Cultural Competence

- ✓ **Remain aware of everyone's cultural attitudes and beliefs.** Racism and microaggressions are not tolerated and staff and volunteers are offered training to raise their awareness of personal biases, diversity and culturally appropriate responses to various situations.
- ✓ **Offer food specific to the cultures and ethnic backgrounds of the people served.**
- ✓ **Staff and volunteers speak the primary language of people served.** Signs and printed materials are available in the languages of people served.
- ✓ **Embrace and celebrate diversity.** Opportunities to celebrate cultural celebrations are offered through the program.



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## 4 Support Control, Choice and Autonomy



New River Community Church

Staff and volunteers have the opportunity to help people regain a sense of control over their daily lives and build competencies that will strengthen their sense of autonomy.

One aspect involves keeping people well-informed about the program, outlining clear expectations, providing opportunities for individuals to regularly make decisions and participate in the creation of personal goals, and maintaining awareness of and respect for basic human rights and freedoms. Another aspect is giving people choice and the opportunity to express and receive services according to personal preferences.

## Sharing Information to Enhance Safety and Control

- ✓ **Share detailed information about program rules, expectations and schedules** to avoid recreating experiences that may make trauma survivors feel helpless and powerless. Providing people with information and regularly following program protocols enhances their sense of safety and control.
- ✓ **Use positive strength-based language that supports autonomy, rather than deficit-based or punitive language, to communicate program information.** Sharing a vision for what you want is more empowering than listing all of the things you do not want.
- ✓ **Information about program rules and people's rights is provided to those served** both verbally and in written form, and are posted throughout the building.
- ✓ **Be ready to review program information on a continual basis.** Traumatic experiences can have a significant impact on people's ability to integrate information, particularly under stressful circumstances. People are often extremely overwhelmed upon entering a program and are likely to have difficulties processing the information they receive.
- ✓ **Create a grievance process** and explain how to engage in the process when someone has a complaint.

## Offering Opportunities to Select Preferences

- ✓ **Offer many opportunities for people to express their preferences and receive services accordingly.** For example, pantries can be set up so people are able to select their own food, community meals can offer choice in food or beverage selection during meals, and case managements services offer an opportunity for a person to reflect on their life and select personal goals to focus on. These practices empower clients and create a sense of personal dignity.



Crossroads Community Cathedral

## 5

## Share Power and Governance

Recovery and success for trauma survivors is largely based on their ability to regain control of their lives. Programs can facilitate empowerment by giving people served a voice in what happens on a daily basis in the program. Programs can promote democracy and equalization of the power differentials across the program and share power and decision-making, whether related to daily decisions or in the review and creation of policies and procedures. Further, trauma-informed programs use feedback from people served as well as established trauma-informed best practices to shape program policies and procedures.

## Sharing Power

- ✓ **Create a meeting space or other platform for people to ask questions, express concerns and share ideas for program improvement.**
- ✓ **Provide opportunities for clients to be directly involved in developing program activities and evaluating program practices.** For example, invite a person who has received services from the program to be on an advisory board or part of another leadership structure.
- ✓ **Regularly collect feedback from people served by the program** (e.g. suggestion box, survey, focus groups, one-on-one check-ins) to better understand their experiences, satisfaction and areas for improvement.



## Using Best Practices to Inform Program Policies and Procedures

- ✓ **Consider trauma and its impact when creating policies and procedures** to avoid recreating feelings associated with traumatic experiences (e.g., powerlessness, shame, lack of control, etc.).
- ✓ **Formally acknowledge that people have experienced trauma and communicate a commitment to understanding trauma** and its impact, and engage in trauma-sensitive practices.
- ✓ **Regularly review policies to update practices and guidelines to make them as relevant as possible to the people being served.** The more program staff and volunteers learn about trauma, the more modifications they may need to make to their policies and services.

## 6

### Integrate Care

It is important for programs to maintain a holistic view of people served and their process of healing. Programs are strongest when they facilitate communication within and among service providers and systems, and help connect people to needed resources.

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Our Savior Lutheran Church

## Connecting to Community Resources

- ✓ **Offer a community resource center** where information about a variety of needed programs such as SNAP, mental health programs, Medicaid, GED programs, employment assistance, or 2-1-1-Info are available along with trained staff or volunteers who are present to answer questions.
- ✓ **Make a computer available** for people to search for needed services through the 211 website, apply for jobs online or enroll to receive benefits such as SNAP, Husky or cash assistance.
- ✓ **Identify a staff member or volunteer who is willing to offer coaching or case management services.** This person will receive training in Motivational Interviewing and meet regularly with clients to help them set goals, connect to needed services and offer support as they take steps towards their goals.
- ✓ **Offer a class or workshop on a topic of interest to those you serve.** Examples of topics include budgeting, stress management, setting goals, interviewing for a job or creating a résumé.

## 7 Healing Happens in Relationships

It is essential that program staff and volunteers believe that safe, authentic and positive relationships can be healing and restorative to survivors of trauma. Programs train volunteers and build in practices that support relationships between staff and volunteers and people served, and can manage challenging situations without re-traumatizing people in distress.



## Welcoming Clients

- ✓ **Staff and volunteers greet people by name** when they arrive.
- ✓ **New clients are given a tour of the facility and introduced to key staff and volunteers.**
- ✓ **Immediate needs are addressed** (e.g. food, clothing, shelter, etc.).
- ✓ **Program staff and volunteers are consistent, reliable, respectful and kind** in their interactions with people served.
- ✓ **At intake, private information is collected in a respectful and confidential manner.**



*Ebenezer Pentecostal Church*

## Maintaining a Respectful and Responsive Culture

- ✓ **Be aware of interaction patterns that are more likely to re-traumatize trauma survivors** such as an angry tone, frown, being told what to do, loud noises, crowded locations, fast movements or physical touch. Staff and volunteers interact with people in distress without yelling, using a harsh tone, telling them what to do or immediately giving consequences.
- ✓ **Listen and validate a wide range of emotions** (e.g. grief, fear, sadness, anger). Staff and volunteers are trained to ask questions, understand the client's perspective, and help clients to problem solve and de-escalate in a sensitive and respectful way when they are expressing strong emotions.



*Ebenezer Pentecostal Church*

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## Creating Opportunities for Relationship

- ✓ **Be intentional about creating a warm, relational, welcoming and hospitable program culture.**
- ✓ **Build deeper levels of relationship and trust** by organizing the program in a way that facilitates opportunities for staff and volunteers to interact with the people served.
- ✓ **Ask questions to better understand a person's life situation** so they can more holistically meet their needs.
- ✓ **Provide opportunities for ongoing support or mentoring**, either within the program or through other community programs.

## 8 Recovery is Possible

Staff and volunteers believe that recovery is possible for everyone regardless of how vulnerable they may appear. They work to instill hope by providing opportunities for people to be involved at all levels of the program, facilitating peer support, focusing on strength and resiliency, and establishing future-oriented goals.



St. Monica's Episcopal Church

*Maintain a strength-based view of people served and regularly affirm their strengths and potential.*

## Instill Hope

- ✓ **Maintain a strength-based view of people served** and regularly affirm their strengths and potential.
- ✓ **Communicate faith and hope in God's ability to heal and restore** in sensitive and appropriate ways.
- ✓ **Offer prayer and spiritual support** and, when appropriate, help clients connect to a faith community where they can begin building a natural network of support and grow in their faith.

### References:

*Creating a Trauma-Informed Culture in Basic Needs Programs* was adapted from the *Trauma-Informed Organizational Toolkit* that was developed by The National Center on Family Homelessness.

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