

# ASK AN EXPERT SERIES

## IMPLEMENTING A VICTIM-CENTERED, TRAUMA-INFORMED PROGRAM FOR SURVIVORS OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING

On September 24, 2020, three experts shared their insight and answered participant questions during this first in a series of Ask an Expert sessions hosted by the Office for Victims of Crime (OVC), Human Trafficking Capacity Building Center. The conversation focused on applying and enhancing policies and procedures centered on survivor safety, trust, choice, collaboration, and empowerment. Following are the questions and abbreviated answers provided by the panel of experts [during the discussion](#).

### *Questions and Answers*

#### **How does trauma impact survivors of human trafficking?**

Trauma varies for each person and can affect any aspect of their life: daily functioning, emotional well-being, relationships, self-image, goal setting and follow through, engagement in services, mental health and physical health. Trauma impacts the whole person in a variety of ways and can increase or decrease in a moment, triggered by something as simple as a smell or a noise.

#### **What does it mean for an organization to be victim-centered and trauma-informed?**

Trauma-informed care realizes the prevalence of trauma, recognizes how trauma affects all individuals involved, and responds appropriately. Being a victim-centered, trauma-informed organization begins with understanding the physical, social, and emotional trauma on the individuals it serves, but it doesn't end there. Trauma-informed organizations also recognize the impact of trauma in the lives of their staff members; how staff may bring greater empathy, passion, and commitment to their work as a result of their own experiences with trauma; and how staff who are survivors may also be more vulnerable to their own trauma triggers and vicarious trauma in their work. The [OVC Model Standards](#) offers guidelines and suggestions on improving the quality and consistency of response to victims. The pathway for thinking about what it means to be person-centered and trauma-informed in engagements with individuals can be conceptualized in these four ways—

1. **Being trauma-responsive** and having an understanding of how trauma impacts the brain, how it impacts every human and every individual, and the substantive trauma literacy we bring to trauma consciousness;
2. **Being ethical** and honoring ethical standards in our interactions with individuals and in the delivery of services;
3. **Being empowerment-based** and looking at what individuals want, what their goals are, and how they seek to get to their end goals; and
4. **Being culturally relevant** and recognizing the impact of culture and taking the time to understand the relevance for each individual person.

#### **How is staff best trained on this approach and its practices?**

Staff should be trained on these principles in a comprehensive way including crisis response, screening, intake, meetings and communications with clients, and collaboration with community partners. Training should be delivered through various means, such as access to resources (e.g., guides, reports, research, presentations, and white papers), in-person trainings on related topics, and staff discussion. [Project Trust's Trauma Response to Uplift Survivors of Trafficking](#) is an OVC-funded training and technical assistance provider that supports agencies and organizations with integrating a trauma-informed approach into each level of service delivery and organizational structure.

#### **What is the best way to start making changes in an organization and how can an organization train its staff in this approach?**

It starts with the organizational culture and making changes at all levels of the organization. Staff at the manager and director levels can incorporate a trauma-informed, human resource policy in their organization. Think of trauma not as something only clients deal with; think of trauma as something staff inevitably deals with at some point in their work in the organization, both personally and professionally. Best practices for training staff can include—

1. Requiring staff to participate in trauma-informed practice training. Not just once, multiple trainings over time.

2. Engaging in agency or program self-assessment and involving multiple staff at different levels in this process. Engage survivors and former program participants to inform practices.
3. Reviewing, assessing, and changing policies and procedures as needed to improve programming. This should be fluid and ongoing.
4. Starting small, focusing, and creating a plan to expand and continue efforts over time.
5. Implementing practices and continuing to assess and adjust programming practices and policies over time.

### **How can an organization put these guidelines into practice?**

The [Guiding Principle's Self-Assessment](#) document helped the Bakhita Empowerment Initiative prioritize focus areas and makes a plan for moving forward. The steps taken by the Bakhita Empowerment Initiative include—

1. Completing the Guiding Principles Self-Assessment;
2. Receiving technical assistance from [OVC TTAC](#) and [Project REACH](#);
3. Developing an advisory board to offer feedback from former program participants; and
4. Engaging other agency staff—administration, development, and other programs—to inform changes in programming and share training/resources.

### **What are some ways to create expectations for clients in advocating for their needs while also addressing the required information for program services?**

The policies and procedures in place to guide the intake and assessment process are critical. Thinking about informed consent is an opportunity to set and manage expectations and be transparent about what a program can and cannot offer. It is an opportunity to talk about the limits to confidentiality. Build in documentation and processes to ensure transparent conversations occur every single time staff meets with a client. All client conversations are grounded in informed consent. This is where the trauma consciousness comes in, the language we use, the tone we use, how we come into the room, how we're conscious of space. The Bakhita Empowerment Initiative uses a rights and responsibilities

form. Rights are empowerment based, and responsibilities explain the expectations of clients in the program. It is really important to be transparent and to talk honestly about what a program can and cannot do. This helps ensure, at the very beginning, you address the service provision, make sure clients are engaging, and the organization is responding to client needs and wants.

**What are some ways staff can experience vicarious and secondary trauma? How has it been handled successfully and not successfully?**

This is a shared responsibility, a responsibility of staff and also of supervisors and agency leadership. One tool the Bakhita Empowerment Initiative has used is talking about self-awareness. This started with a facilitated training to talk about self-awareness and has been a tremendous tool for a supervisor to better understand staff. There are traumatic things happening in our world. Being able to address them with cultural humility is important. Being able to say “I'm here to listen; I'm here to learn; I'm here to help and serve you” can go so far.

**How can upper management be held accountable for trauma-informed practices and for ensuring the environment is a safe, trauma-informed environment?**

It takes humility, accountability, and requires a shift in dialogue. Accountability comes from cultural structures within organizations that hold individuals accountable. When there are positions of power without systems of accountability, there is a way to get around those conversations. So, it's two parts both hard conversations and organizational policies.

**How can you use pet therapy teams to work with survivors? Are there any model programs?**

Equine therapy and trauma have been positively connected in research. Animals as a therapy aid can be incredible. Having a therapy animal with a survivor can change the game; people can feel safe. When people feel safe, they communicate better, which allows service providers to understand their wants and needs, connecting them to services.

**As victim service providers, what would you like to see integrated into the legal realm (e.g., attorneys, courts, policy advocates)?**

We need to move away from making cases so dependent on a victim's testimony and do a better job of gathering evidence in other ways. Right now, the system is dependent on survivors of crime to make

these cases possible, and that can do a lot of harm. It is important to understand the neural biological impact of memory. When asking individuals to recall events in sequential order—and the brain fundamentally does not encode traumatic memory that way—something is missing in crime investigations and the reliance on those pieces. Having a collective, baseline understanding as to why individuals may not be able to recall traumatic events in sequential order, asking questions in a different way, and using systems that validated sensory-based memories and other pieces could result in different outcomes.

**What are some suggestions for offering trauma-informed care through an interpreter?**

Think about where and how an organization sources interpretation. Is there training for interpreters and translators to understand different kinds of language? What kind of confidentiality agreements exist that can protect individuals? Provide supportive measures and make sure interpreters have a baseline lens of what it means to speak to someone in a person-centered, kind, and respectful way throughout the process.

*The following questions were submitted during the Ask an Expert Session and due to time constraints were unable to be addressed during the live discussion. The answers are provided here.*

**Are there any model Family courts that are recognized as a trauma informed?**

The National College of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (NCJFC) is a respected leader in trauma-informed juvenile and family courts in the country. NCJFCJ collaborated with the National Child Traumatic Stress Network Justice Consortium to provide judges with [useful questions and guidelines](#) to help them make decisions based on the emerging scientific findings in the traumatic stress field. More recently, NCJFCJ released a [publication with 10 key recommendations](#) to help juvenile and family courts become more trauma-informed. Lastly, the Alliance for Hope International shared an example of a model approach to [creating a trauma-informed environment in court](#) in a 2020 webinar.

**How do we support our clients on their plan of action while balancing their trauma and making sure they are able to do the things they need to reach their goals?**

This comes back to meeting clients where they are, taking time to listen, taking the time to explore the support they need, and how this support furthers the goals they are seeking. It is about gaining an understanding of a client's experiences of trauma and in turn helping the client understand how this trauma is impacting their life. It is about sitting down with a client to discuss their hopes, dreams, and fears, and assessing potential opportunities and any limitations. Finally, it is about creating a plan of action together with the client to best reflect the person's safety concerns, their goals, and their pathways to those goals. This will drive the delivery of services and provision of on-going support in a victim-centered and trauma-informed way.

*Additional Information*

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