

Partnering Against Poverty

Grant in Action: Supporting Trauma-Informed Care

Rochester Area Community Foundation has joined with the Marie C. and Joseph C. Wilson Foundation to invest \$244,000 to support eight human services organizations incorporate trauma-informed care into their day-to-day interactions with clients.

Trauma-informed care is an approach that explicitly acknowledges the impact of trauma – including psychological, physical and sexual abuse, neglect, structural racism, homelessness, and community violence – and integrates that understanding into all aspects of serving people’s needs. The goals are to improve the working relationship between clients and staff, alter rules and policies that derail clients’ progress, and intentionally avoid re-traumatizing individuals while trying to assist them.

Implementing a trauma-informed approach is a long-term commitment and requires change to an organization’s culture and way of thinking.

“A single traumatic experience can have long-lasting impact and affect the way people cope with everyday tasks or even respond to a simple question,” says Jennifer Leonard, president and CEO of the Community Foundation. “When individuals seek out help, if the social worker, therapist, or office worker doesn’t understand the impact of trauma, their interactions could derail healing and prevent the individuals from moving on with their lives.”

Seven nonprofit organizations and one Monroe County department have received grant support for this community-wide, collaborative effort. The participants are:

- Action for a Better Community
- Catholic Family Center
- Monroe No. 1 BOCES
- Monroe County Department of Human Services
- Society for the Protection and Care of Children
- Villa of Hope
- Willow Domestic Violence Center
- YWCA of Rochester and Monroe County

Some of these organizations are in a second or third year of incorporating a trauma-informed approach into their work and this funding will support their continued efforts. At the YWCA of Rochester & Monroe County, which has been rolling out trauma-informed training with staff and clients, can point to improvements through comments made by the women they help:

"This is the first time I actually felt better about myself."

"Helps me get in touch with my feelings, behaviors and keeps me calm."

"I truly did think in a different way about my problems."

The eight participating agencies have established a cross-disciplinary team to represent them at joint meetings and on conference calls. The goal is for these teams to learn from each other, share data to assess the group's overall impact,

and help to reinforce the fundamentals of trauma-informed care throughout their organizations.

Working together is key to the success of this effort because many of these organizations serve the same populations. When fully implemented, individuals seeking assistance will be treated with the same respect and understanding, no matter which agency is helping them. The goal is for the relationships between staff and clients to be person-centered instead of agency-focused.

Each of the grant recipients has hired a consultant to lead them through the transition to a new way of working. This will be accomplished through the use of customized curricula and coaching; training for staff on incorporating trauma-informed care; trauma-informed programming for clients; and additional time for staff to plan programs and gather and analyze data.

The participating organizations also will establish best practices for their own work that meet guiding principles related to trauma outlined by the Rochester-Monroe Anti-Poverty Initiative. Some of the principles include:

- Changing the approach from “What’s wrong with you?” to “What’s happened to you?”;
- Developing a partnership with clients and providing sufficient information and involve them in making decisions rather than have staff proscribe next steps;
- Building trust through consistency and transparency; and
- Making wellness for agency staff a priority to avoid burnout and traumatic work-related experiences.

An independent evaluator is working with the participating organizations to determine the long-term impact of the trauma-informed care practices on client and community outcomes. As more agencies introduce these practices, there is potential to help thousands of individuals improve their lives each year.

As these organizations pursue organizational change to better help their clients, Bell says there may be opportunities for additional funding, based on success with training and evaluation and a need for future support.

This joint-funding initiative comes after more than two years of partnership between the two foundations as co-founders and co-conveners of the local Trauma-Informed Care Network. This network, which includes trauma experts, providers, researchers, and advocates, is to explore ways to incorporate trauma-informed care practices and more effectively and compassionately serve clients who have been impacted by trauma.

“This innovative partnership is unique in our community, and hopefully will inspire other funders to collaborate on mutual interests,” says Leonard.