

Many Small Choices Create a Powerful Movement

What does paint color have to do with trauma? The staff of the YWCA of Rochester & Monroe County discovered the answer when updating its vestibule. They spruced up white walls with a mossy green color to make the room look less institutional and more welcoming.

Once it was painted, Carrie Michel-Wynne, vice president of strategic partnerships, met with some of the women who live there to get their feedback. “When I asked, they had their heads down and didn’t want to look at me. Then one woman said, ‘Carrie, those are Monroe County Jail colors.’ ”

That response was a profound reminder that colors can be strongly associated with traumatic experiences, such as visiting relatives in jail. “It’s also when we realized that part of the trauma-informed movement is including the vision of people who live here,” said Michel-Wynne, who has shared this painting misstep as a learning experience for others.

The vestibule was repainted a different color selected with input from residents. As other parts of the building were repainted and redecorated, residents were asked for their ideas.



Understanding the many ways trauma affects people and how best to respond to their unique needs is the focus of a three-year funding collaboration between Rochester Area Community Foundation and the Marie C. and Joseph C. Wilson Foundation. Together they are investing \$244,000 a year to support training of more than 4,400 staff from nine human service organizations to incorporate trauma-informed care into their day-to-day interactions with clients.

Trauma-informed care is an approach that explicitly acknowledges the impact of psychological, physical and sexual abuse, neglect, structural racism, homelessness, and community violence and integrates that understanding into all aspects of serving people's needs.

This training has the potential to impact the more than 100,000 individuals served by these eight nonprofit organizations and the Monroe County Department of Human Services. The goal is to improve relationships between clients and staff, change rules and policies that derail clients'

progress, and intentionally avoid re-traumatizing individuals while trying to assist them.

“This past year provided a unique opportunity to purposefully pause and reflect on how we might grow as an organization in how we not only care for the families in our programs, but how we care for our staff in a trauma-informed way,” said Lisa Butt, president and CEO of the Society for the Protection & Care of Children. “The mental health of our staff is critical.”

That’s why SPCC switched the focus of its training to better support its staff, many of whom work closely with children and families who witness or experience violent tragedies. If a therapist gets called to work over the weekend and forgets to turn in a time sheet or mileage form, for example, it’s important for the human resources department to be flexible about the deadline. Here are some other things the organization has done:

- Made the offices more welcoming with a fresh coat of paint and created a separate waiting room at the main office;
- Began stocking water, coffee, and hot chocolate that staff can offer clients during meetings;
- Got permission from Monroe County to post signs at building entrances so clients know which door to use when meeting with staff; and
- Ramped up internal communications among the 110 staff members in six offices to help everyone feel more connected.

“If our staff feel truly taken care of, they will be better able to care for the children and families they serve,” said Butt.

For staff at BOCES 1 in Fairport, better understanding trauma provides new insight into behaviors of their students with

disabilities (up to age 21) and what staff response should be.

“We have to consider the challenges they have faced along the way, the challenges their families have faced, along with a high degree of disruptions, traumas, and stress. We want to arm our staff with information on how that impacts learning and relationships,” explained Bill Hurley, coordinator of mental health.

Training included top administrators, all the professional staff and direct-care workers as well as those from the business office, technology, human resources, operations, and maintenance. This means the entire organization and every employee embraces the same mission: “I’m here to support you, no matter what,” said Hurley.

He believes this training allows teachers to jointly address, “What is the best way to respond to this kid and to this behavior?” Colleagues also feel more free to evaluate their experiences: “I didn’t like the way that went. What should we do differently next time?”

The agencies participating in the trauma training are also part of a learning collaborative where they share successes and failed experiments, help each other, reinforce the fundamentals of trauma-informed care throughout their organizations, and introduce other agencies to this approach.

“We don’t want them to exist in a bubble. We want them to share resources and ideas, and they are doing that,” said Megan Bell, executive director of the Wilson Foundation.

They have helped evaluate each other’s new or renovated spaces to determine whether or not they meet trauma-informed practices. They have shared revised HR policies. Villa of Hope bought Resilience, a recent documentary about trauma and children, and will open viewing sessions to partners. BOCES brought in a national expert on building resilience in youth and invited the other agencies to participate.

“Our hope is that as staff move around, they take what they learned with them,” Bell said. “After the three years, we hope to have enhanced the community’s capacity for trauma response and sensitivity and also to have the nine agencies be leaders in the community to help drive change, too.”

Photo above: Residents at the YWCA of Rochester & Monroe County were included in decisions to choose paint colors and decorations for rooms at the downtown site (photo by Julie Johnson).