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Responding to Trauma Among Young Men of Color: Adapting the Crown Heights Approach For Your Community

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
What is the Center for Court Innovation?.....	1
What is the Make It Happen Program?	1
What is this Toolkit?	1
Trauma Among Young Men of Color	2
Addressing Trauma Among Young Men of Color: Planning a Response	3
Getting Started: Creating a Strong Foundation for Your Project	3
Step 1: Set Goals and Objectives.....	3
Step 2: Create a Planning Team or Advisory Board.....	4
Planning and Assessment: Building on Current Practice and Identifying Areas for Change	5
Step 3: Baseline Evaluation	5
Step 4: Map Resources and Engage Stakeholders.....	5
Step 5: Conduct a SWOT Analysis.....	7
Step 6: Document Your Plan.....	7
Operations: Methods for Implementing or Enhancing Your Project	8
Step 7: Program Evaluation.....	8
Step 8: Implement or Enhance Trauma-Informed Programming.....	9
Evaluation and Communication: Keeping Your Project on Track	10
Step 9: Evaluate and Measure Success.....	10
Step 10: Sustain Collaboration	11
Conclusion	11

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Introduction

WHAT IS THE CENTER FOR COURT INNOVATION?

Winner of the Peter F. Drucker Award for Non-Profit Innovation, the Center for Court Innovation seeks to help create a more effective and humane justice system by designing and implementing operating programs, performing original research, and providing reformers around the world with the tools they need to launch new strategies. The Center's goals are to prevent crime, improve public safety, strengthen neighborhoods, enhance the legitimacy of the justice system, and strengthen public trust in justice. The Center conceives, plans, and operates programs that seek to test new ideas, solve difficult problems, and achieve system change. In so doing, the Center wrestles with thorny planning and implementation challenges. The Center conducts rigorous and independent research, documenting what works and what does not. Researchers also provide regular feedback on the results of the Center's own operating programs. Finally, the Center provides training and assistance to justice reformers inside and outside of government, helping reformers around the world test new solutions to local problems.

The Crown Heights Community Mediation Center, an operating project of the Center for Court Innovation, is a unique neighborhood institution that works to improve community problem-solving, collaboration, and inter-group relations in Brooklyn, New York. The Mediation Center's staff and volunteers work to strengthen the neighborhoods of Crown Heights and Bedford-Stuyvesant, demonstrating how neighborhoods torn apart by violence can become safe, healthy, and vibrant places for all people through the collaborative efforts of neighbors,

government, and community organizations. The Mediation Center was the site of the first New York State Cure Violence replication, called Save Our Streets (S.O.S.) Crown Heights. S.O.S. Crown Heights is an anti-gun violence program that uses a public health approach to prevent and address gun violence in the community. The Mediation Center also houses the Make it Happen program, which is the focus of this toolkit.

WHAT IS THE MAKE IT HAPPEN PROGRAM?

Make It Happen is a trauma-informed program housed within the Crown Heights Mediation Center. Make It Happen arose from a gap identified in the S.O.S. Crown Heights program: although violence interrupters worked to prevent gun violence in the community, no service providers addressed the trauma experienced by many participants. Focused on young men of color who have been impacted by community and/or interpersonal violence, Make It Happen provides mentorship, clinical interventions, supportive workshops, advocacy, and intensive case management for participants, and works to strengthen relationships with traditional victim service providers in the community.

WHAT IS THIS TOOLKIT?

This Planning Toolkit is a blueprint for communities, violence interrupter programs, and traditional victim service providers that want to improve their responses to young men of color who have experienced trauma. The practices shared in this toolkit are based on the Center for Court Innovation's work with violence interrupter programs, victim service agencies, trauma, and gender-based violence.

Trauma Among Young Men of Color

Young men of color experience violence at staggering rates. Black and Latino males are disproportionately victims of violence, assault, and childhood or sexual abuse. This national trend is reflected locally: 84% of young men of color surveyed in a 2012 needs assessment in Crown Heights reported at least one personal experience of violence in the last year.ⁱ Many young men may also be hesitant or afraid to interact with system providers – not only victim services staff, but even staff at hospitals where they may be treated after a violent incident – because actors in the criminal justice, healthcare, and social service systems often assume young Black men are perpetrators, not victims. As our study of young men in Crown Heights indicated, “There is little mystery about why Black men who are the victims of violence do not seek help from professionals: it is because they are more often seen as perpetrators of violence than victims, and are treated as such by police, hospital personnel and other service providers.”ⁱⁱ

While the needs of these young men are great, the available services and connections to those services are limited. Traditional victim service agencies mostly focus on women and children. Further, young men of color may not recognize the

problems they experience as potential symptoms of trauma, and norms around masculinity and cultural stigma discourage some young men from seeking help. Many young Black men “did not view themselves as victims or were unwilling to identify with the term.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Violence interrupter programs, and similar programs with strong community ties, are in a unique position to de-stigmatize trauma-informed services and counseling for young men of color. These programs can partner with victim service agencies to better serve young men in their communities.

“[Make It Happen] is a good outlet to let different things in your mind that's really stressing you out or holding you down from trying to prosper or [get to] your next destination.” – Make It Happen participant

Addressing Trauma Among Young Men of Color: Planning a Response

Getting Started: Creating a Strong Foundation for Your Project

STEP 1: SET GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

Whether your community hopes to implement a new project or enhance an existing initiative to address trauma among young men of color, clear goals and objectives will help drive the planning process forward. Goals can help a planning group step back and examine what the project aims to achieve. Goals for a new or enhanced program addressing trauma might include identifying victimization, improving connection with resources in the community, equipping young men with tools for coping with trauma, and promoting relationships among stakeholders that serve victims of crime and those that focus on young men of color. [See Step 8: Implement and Enhance Trauma-Informed Programming, for more information on strategies to address these issues.](#)

Goals provide overall focus, vision, and direction for a project. A goal is a broad statement which may be short, intermediate, or long-term in nature. Goals should be believable, attainable, and based on identified needs.

FIELD NOTES: COLLECTING DATA

Make It Happen worked with an independent researcher to conduct a needs assessment prior to launching the program. The researcher had experience with incarceration, gangs, and other violence-related research. This foundational study illuminated the potentially traumatic experiences of young men of color in Crown Heights, whom they turned to for help (if anyone), whether they trusted system providers, and their narratives around violence and masculinity.

STEP 2: CREATE A PLANNING TEAM OR ADVISORY BOARD

The trauma-informed program should integrate the expertise of other community partners (restorative justice organizations, victim services, employment, and education resources). Stakeholders and advisory board members can be a mix of community-based agencies, agencies serving young men of color, hospital-based violence interrupter programs, justice system-based victim services, young men from the community, and mentors. The group can focus on either program creation or development of a specific event (a convening or discussion group) to bring stakeholders together. [See Step 10: Sustain collaboration for tips on maintaining your coalition.](#)

Objectives explain how goals will be achieved. When determining objectives, keep in mind that “SMART” objectives are:

- As Specific as possible;
- Measurable, in order to determine progress toward your stated goal(s);
- Achievable, given available time, staffing, and resources;
- Relevant to the goals, needs, and interests of the community; and
- Able to specify a Time-frame for when they will be accomplished.

After determining the project's goals, the next step is to identify objectives that define how the goals will be achieved. Objectives might include screening participants for trauma, meeting regularly with community partners, convening weekly group or individual counseling sessions for young men, and creating a referral protocol with agencies serving crime victims and/or those serving young men of color.

FIELD NOTES: CREATING A PLANNING TEAM

With plans to hold a future convening on trauma in the community, the Center for Court Innovation/Make It Happen assembled an interdisciplinary conference planning committee that included representatives from S.O.S., Common Justice (a Vera Institute for Justice project focused on restorative justice approaches), the Fortune Society (focused on LGBTQ victims of intimate partner violence), the Crime Victims Treatment Center at St. Luke's -Roosevelt Hospital (a trauma-informed counseling program), and Achievement First Brooklyn High School.

Planning and Assessment: Building on Current Practice and Identifying Areas for Change

STEP 3: BASELINE EVALUATION

Evaluation is a critical component of any community response to trauma experienced by young men of color. It can help identify needs among young men in the community, assess goal achievement, identify areas for improvement, and offer statistics to funders and policymakers illustrating the impact of the program and/or the need for the program. Data collected before a project's launch is typically referred to as baseline data, and helps illustrate the nature of the problem to be addressed. This data includes interviews or focus groups regarding the experiences of trauma locally; help-seeking behaviors of young men; and gaps in services to inform program creation or enhancement.

Once the types of data to be collected are identified, determine whether that data is already collected by the lead agency or another agency on the planning team. Identify additional data elements that are needed, along with a designated person or agency to oversee data collection and data analysis. When sharing data, focus on aggregate data to avoid breaching confidentiality among programs. The person or agency overseeing the evaluation can help the planning

COMMON CHALLENGE

Because of the stigma surrounding identifying as a "victim," assessing trauma experienced by young men of color through a community survey or interviews can be difficult. Consider whether the researcher(s) have trauma expertise or could work with a local practitioner to develop questions related to trauma and victimization.

STEP 4: MAP RESOURCES AND ENGAGE STAKEHOLDERS

A clear understanding of your community's resources, both traditional and informal, will enable you to better serve young men of color through effective referrals and collaboration. Resource mapping is the process of identifying and documenting community-based assets, including the types of services offered. For example, legal and social service providers, advocacy organizations, victim service agencies, reentry programs, restorative justice programs, and agencies addressing basic needs such as housing and employment may be potential resources for young men of color who have experienced trauma. Both victim service agencies and violence interrupter programs can benefit from resource mapping, and identifying one or more staff members or planning team members to meet with potential

partner agencies can help solidify relationships. In-person meetings are also an opportunity to assess alignment of goals, perspectives, and values between agencies. Once you have identified quality resources and strong partner agencies, consider institutionalizing the relationship with a formal agreement or referral protocol.

A planning team can begin by exploring existing coalitions that address crime victims or groups that address issues affecting young men of color. From these coalitions, or from existing community resources lists, begin to identify agencies that could complement the planning process and the new or enhanced program. Stakeholders could include:

- Reentry programs
- Employment/vocational programs
- Crime victim service programs
- Restorative justice programs
- Domestic violence and sexual assault agencies
- Benefits assistance programs
- Case management services
- Defense bar
- Drug/alcohol treatment programs
- Schools
- Educational/GED programs
- Faith community
- Government agencies
- Hospitals, including hospital social workers

COMMON CHALLENGE

Traditional and system-based victim service agencies may be inaccessible or unwelcoming to young men of color, so referrals for counseling and mental health services can be difficult. Mapping community resources can help identify agencies that have a particular staff person or overlapping expertise which may make them a helpful referral or partner.

FIELD NOTES: MAPPING RESOURCES & ENGAGING STAKEHOLDERS

Make it Happen partnered with local service providers to create a local conference, called "Paving the Way to Healing and Recovery: Conversations with Young Men of Color Who Survive Violence," to deepen engagement with traditional victim service providers and to address barriers to accessing such services. Partner agencies included Common Justice, a local nonprofit focused on restorative justice approaches, and Achievement First Brooklyn High School, a charter school in Crown Heights. In addition to the hosting agencies, the planning team was crafted from agencies that participate in crime victim coalitions, domestic violence coalitions, and coalitions addressing young men of color, including reentry and counseling programs. Two hundred-fifty professionals and community members attended the inaugural event, including young men themselves. "Paving the Way" acted as a catalyst for conversation and problem-solving across disciplines. **See Step 8: Implement or Enhance Trauma-Informed Programming** for details from the conference agenda.

STEP 5: CONDUCT A SWOT ANALYSIS

Once the planning team has collected data on various aspects of your program's and the community's response to young men of color and trauma (see Step 3: Collect Data), the planning team can review the data to identify and prioritize any gaps in practice. One way to identify existing strengths and gaps is through a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis.

Strengths: Identifying strengths in the community or program environment is important for two reasons: it affirms the good work you and the community are already doing, and it identifies assets upon which you can build. One example might be an existing coalition of agencies serving crime victims that are willing to interface with agencies focused on young men of color.

Weaknesses: Weaknesses should focus on gaps or areas for enhancement for the program. These issues should be reviewed by the planning team after the exercise to prioritize areas that need to be addressed; these can help shape the first set of goals your team will address. Examples might include lack of counseling services, difficulty identifying victimization among young men of color, or difficulty building trust for mental health services among young men.

One Make it Happen participant disclosed that his gang involvement stemmed from his past experiences with the child welfare system, his mother's death, and his disconnection from his father.

Opportunities: Planning and evaluation efforts may uncover opportunities the planning team had not yet considered. For example, through resource mapping, the planning team may have identified additional partner agencies or cross-training opportunities.

Regular meetings with your advisory board and other community agencies will help identify new opportunities to strengthen your programming on an ongoing basis.

Threats: You also may have identified threats to your work through the baseline evaluation. For example, there may be limitations on the use of a crime victims fund that will likely exclude program participants from benefiting from this system-based service. Threats focus on political climate, legislation, and other systemic issues that will affect the development of the program.

With your planning team, set aside time to discuss each of the four categories in the SWOT analysis. When the session is complete, use the SWOT analysis to help identify and prioritize goals and objectives.

STEP 6: DOCUMENT YOUR PLAN

A planning document memorializes the consensus and decisions formed by the planning team. A planning document can help clarify the mission of the project, and formalizes the roles and responsibilities of staff and stakeholders. The document is also a reference for future personnel in the event of staff turnover. As the planning process continues, additional challenges will arise. In addition to being a touchstone for action, a planning document can be iterative, reflecting needed changes and additions to the program.

FIELD NOTES: PROCESS EVALUATION

Make it Happen partnered with a local trauma expert and internal research staff to design and implement a process evaluation of the program. This evaluation focused on qualitative perceptions of participants through focus groups, as well as on staff and stakeholder perceptions of the program's strengths and areas for improvement.

Operations: Methods for Implementing or Enhancing Your Project

STEP 7: PROGRAM EVALUATION

Stakeholders should consider undertaking both a process and an outcome evaluation. A process evaluation measures how the program accomplishes its goals, while an outcome evaluation measures the program's impact on desired outcomes. The process evaluation is just as important as the outcome evaluation, because it documents which parts of the program led to the change and helps with program replication. Much of this toolkit is the result of a comprehensive process evaluation.

Programs must also engage in an outcome evaluation to measure how well their initiative accomplishes desired outcomes. Determine what kinds of quantitative and qualitative data the team will collect to assess the program's effectiveness. Examples of clinical outcome measures might include changes in help-seeking behaviors, improving participants' understanding of trauma, or reducing challenges in daily functioning related to a traumatic experience.

FIELD NOTES: IMPLEMENTING TRAUMA-INFORMED PROGRAMMING

In order to address the need for culturally sensitive services, Make It Happen consulted with a local nonprofit, CONNECT, with expertise in group work with men that addresses masculinity, domestic violence, and common stereotypes affecting men's view of themselves. CONNECT not only co-facilitated group counseling sessions at the outset of the Make it Happen program, but also offered cross-training for S.O.S. Crown Heights staff on domestic violence dynamics and trauma.

PLANNING DOCUMENT CHECKLIST

- Mission and goals of the program;
- List of planning team/advisory board members;
- Available services for young men of color, including a list of who will provide services;
- Referral protocols;
- Trainings on trauma and relevant topics for both community and justice system stakeholders;
- Program curriculum for group sessions;
- Evaluation plan for the project, including who will be responsible for the evaluation.

STEP 8: IMPLEMENT OR ENHANCE TRAUMA-INFORMED PROGRAMMING

Whether implementing a program within a violence interrupter project or victim service agency, consider the need to balance expertise from several fields. For example, many trauma-informed modalities may be informative and apply generally across populations, such as trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy. Collaborating stakeholders may be able to offer training to program staff. Further, as referenced in **Step 6: Document Your Plan**, program staff should develop and refine a formal curriculum for use in individual or group counseling sessions. The curriculum should take into account trauma-informed and evidence-based practices, but should also account for relevant data from the local needs assessment and other available data about the community and the population being served. The curriculum should also address systemic barriers identified through stakeholder collaboration and/or the SWOT analysis (see **Step 5: Conduct a SWOT Analysis**).

Programs should also consider how participants will come to the program, and how they will be assessed for services. For example, addressing immediate needs such as education or employment may provide an opportunity for program staff to develop relationships with potential participants. Community outreach, and strong relationships with referring agencies, is also critical. Program staff should also consider the purpose of an assessment, including an opportunity to build rapport with a participant and to find out about experiences of past violence and potential trauma reactions (see **Step 7: Analyze Program and Participant Data** for more information on how participant data can help improve programming).

COMMON CHALLENGE

Often, trauma-informed programs and victim service agencies have formal and informal practices that normalize counseling for white women and children. In order to assess ways to make your program welcoming to and appropriate for young men of color, consider creating a roundtable or event to discuss these topics.

FIELD NOTES: IMPLEMENTING TRAUMA-INFORMED PROGRAMMING

The Make it Happen group curriculum includes topics such as masculinity, naming violence and abuse, understanding trauma, understanding emotions, community and street violence, and resilience.

One Make it Happen participant disclosed that he was breaking into local homes in the community; after further exploration, however, the Make it Happen Director discovered that the participant was hungry and seeking food.

Evaluation and Communication: Keeping Your Project on Track

STEP 9: EVALUATE AND MEASURE SUCCESS

Your planning team will want to be able to monitor and assess the performance of the program once it has been implemented. An external or internal evaluator can be used. The benefit of an external evaluator is the increased independence and perceived objectivity of the evaluator, though cost can be prohibitive. If an internal evaluator is used, the objectivity and integrity of the evaluation process must be prioritized and protected. In either case, the evaluation should identify a list of performance measures that map onto the project's goals and objectives and develop an outcome evaluation that measures what the project hopes to accomplish. At the height of the implementation phase, it is easy for programs to become distracted by new opportunities or stray from the goals identified during the planning phase. Modifications are a necessary component of healthy program development, and are best done in dialogue with the project goals and objectives. Often, qualitative strategies, such as focus groups among participants or interviews with staff and stakeholders, can help to refine the group curriculum and/or training for staff and partner agencies. Having a robust evaluation process throughout the project helps to ensure that the initiative does not lose sight of the "big picture." See **Step 3: Collect Data**.

"I feel like it was a sense of confidence. [Kenton, the Make it Happen group facilitator] built a mutual respect with everybody. Like everybody had their own situation where they're coming from, so it's like everybody understood everybody, so you could connect in a certain way."

FIELD NOTES: CONDUCTING A PROCESS EVALUATION

In order to better understand whether and how the Make it Happen curriculum was working for participants, program staff conducted a focus group with young men who had completed all (or a substantial portion) of the group curriculum. The focus group touched on topics such as trauma, safety, and language around "victimization." The focus group not only gave program staff an immediate sense of what was working well and what wasn't, it also helped to inform the planning process for a more in-depth program evaluation.

STEP 10: SUSTAIN COLLABORATION

Sustaining the investment of the planning team and other stakeholders is critical as the program matures. Maintaining communication will encourage ongoing cooperation among the stakeholders gathered in. The activities in this toolkit encourage community partners to, collectively, map community responses to trauma, identify possible gaps in response and practice, and determine what is needed to address these gaps. Although the activities in this toolkit culminate in a planning document for program implementation or enhancement, interagency collaboration and periodic meetings should continue throughout implementation and beyond.

COMMON CHALLENGE

As a project progresses, it is common for stakeholder and funder interest to dwindle. Consider strategies to keep stakeholders engaged, such as a “self-assessment” that identifies progress on performance measures for the program, or planning an event that will ignite dialogue between service providers.

Conclusion

Collaborations between traditional victim service providers and violence interrupter programs are both necessary and complicated. Program staff may differ in both their lexicons and in their approach to working with those who have experienced trauma and violence. By building or enhancing relationships between these two types of entities, young men of color can benefit from both the deep and long-standing knowledge of the victim services field, while also benefiting from the public health approach taken by violence interrupter programs.

Creating a curriculum specific to young men of color and their experience of trauma – particularly if it is evidence-based or will be subject to evaluation – can further enhance a program’s ability to build rapport with young men and connect them with both crisis and longer-term services.

In an era of criminal justice reform, it is critical that we continue to develop and enhance programs that not only provide alternatives to incarceration, but also provide community-based options for healing and recovery.

i Thompkins, Douglas E., “Hidden Violence: Providing and Accessing Services for Young Black Men in Crown Heights, Brooklyn,” (February 2013). Report prepared for the Center for Court Innovation, and on file with CCI.

ii Ibid.

iii Ibid.