

Trauma-Informed Care for Children and Families Act

Senators Dick Durbin (D-IL), Heidi Heitkamp (D-ND), and Al Franken (D-MN)

Background: When children experience serious traumatic events, such as witnessing violence or living in a household where there is substance abuse, they can suffer. Decades of research have established the link between a child's exposure to trauma, its effect on neurological and behavioral development, and long-term health and societal outcomes, such as mental health disorders, high school graduation, and poverty. A child's response to trauma or toxic stress may manifest as difficulty paying attention or regulating emotions, and can lead to poor academic performance. Childhood trauma is often overlooked or misunderstood – resulting in school suspensions or escalation of conflicts. As children who have experienced trauma get older, they can pass these disruptions to their children, impacting communities more broadly.

Nationally, nearly 35 million children have had at least one serious traumatic experience, and nearly two-thirds of children have been exposed to violence. Too few children who experience trauma are identified and supported with the right care. While a child with a cut or broken bones would normally receive immediate treatment, a child who witnesses violence or experiences abuse at home may not receive any help or support. And those who never receive help can carry the weight of these emotional scars for life.

The Solution: The good news is that there are approaches and interventions that can effectively prevent and mitigate the impact of trauma. Schools, health care, social services, child welfare, first responders, the justice system, and other settings must all have the tools and federal support to recognize trauma and coordinate services to address the effects of trauma on children.

Legislation: Senators Durbin, Heitkamp, and Franken have introduced legislation that would:

- *Identify Best Practices.* Creates a federal task force comprised of HHS, ED, DOJ, and relevant tribal agencies to coordinate efforts and establish best practices for identifying and supporting children that have experienced trauma;
- *Disseminate Best Practices.* Provides more teachers, doctors, social service providers, and first responders with the tools to help children who have experienced trauma by creating an eligible use of funding for several federal grant programs to be used for this training;
- *Train Key Stakeholders.* Creates law enforcement and Native American coordinating centers that will share information, improve awareness, and enhance training on trauma's impact;
- *Test New Models.* Increases funding for the National Child Traumatic Stress Initiative to evaluate new strategies for improving trauma-informed prevention and care;
- *Improve Understanding of Trauma.* Requires the CDC to improve data collection on trauma prevalence, and directs CDC and GAO to conduct studies to identify barriers to coordination;
- *Expand Treatment Capacity.* Pilots a Medicaid demonstration program to test expanded coverage of child trauma services, and expands mental health care in schools;
- *Support Workforce Development.* Expands loan repayment programs for clinicians who serve in high-need communities; develops training guidelines for non-clinical providers in trauma care; and improves graduate school and pre-service training for teachers and clinicians;
- *Foster Community Coordination.* Creates a grant program to bring together stakeholders to identify needs, collect data, and target efforts. Additionally, builds on the Performance Partnership Pilot to pool federal grants from multiple agencies and focus the funding on increasing trauma services for children and families.