


HELPING CHILDREN HEAL

Promising Community Programs and
Policy Recommendations

DEAR LORD
BE GOOD TO ME
THE SEAT IS SO
WIDE AND
MY BOAT IS
SO SMALL



Children's Defense Fund
CALIFORNIA

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The Children's Defense Fund Leave No Child Behind® mission is to ensure every child a Healthy Start, a Head Start, a Fair Start, a Safe Start and a Moral Start in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities.

CDF provides a strong, effective and independent voice for all the children of America who cannot vote, lobby or speak for themselves. We pay particular attention to the needs of poor children, children of color and those with disabilities. CDF educates the nation about the needs of children and encourages preventive investments before they get sick, drop out of school, get into trouble or suffer family breakdown.

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INTRODUCTION

Advocates and policymakers in public health are paying more attention to the impact of exposure early in life to trauma or chronic adversity, since it is now known to impair brain development in children and have rippling effects on caregivers through secondary or vicarious trauma.¹ Children of color are more likely to experience trauma through chronic exposure to violence and inheriting the impacts of generational and community oppression. Trauma-informed care has emerged as a set of standards, theories, and best practices in public and private agencies.

While trauma-informed schools, which utilized these standards and practices, and school-based health centers, are strong preventive channels to decrease the long-term impacts of exposure to chronic adversity, healing strategies rooted outside of schools are integral components of a comprehensive system that develops resilience in children and youth and reduces exposure to adverse childhood experiences. Expanding trauma-informed care to all children requires coordinated state and federal policies and funds to foster social and emotional well-being through tools and approaches beyond what schools can provide.



All systems that serve children and youth, from the child welfare system to juvenile probation, should have a trauma-informed lens through which signs of trauma are recognized and strategies for healing are applied. However, government institutions are not always able to make rapid change or modify bureaucratic practices that have been in place for decades. Community-based organizations often have the advantage of being more nimble than government institutions that may rely on legislation to change their approaches. Therefore, it is critical to highlight the successful work of strategies developed by community-based agencies to heal children and youth who have experienced trauma.

This brief highlights four successful strategies in the San Francisco Bay Area that address the healing of young people, while also fostering community change and systemic transformation. The brief also explores the role public policies play in advancing and supporting this community-based healing work throughout the state.



RYSE YOUTH CENTER

In 2013, the RYSE Center in Richmond, California introduced the Listening Campaign, exploring how youth articulate trauma, healing, and coping. RYSE began as a youth-led response to four shooting deaths of young people in 2000. Richmond High School students involved in Youth Together, an advocacy and leadership development program that galvanizes students to organize around youth-related issues, responded to the violence by envisioning a safe space. Contra Costa County Supervisor John Gioia identified the physical location of the proposed center. The students, along with former staff from Youth Together, Kimberly Aceves and Kanwarpal Dhaliwal, opened the RYSE Center in 2008, serving youth ages 13-21.

As the Listening Campaign is meant to lead into robust and responsive action, one of the Center's own actions has been to develop the RYSE Leadership Pipeline, "ensuring young people are key stakeholders and decision-makers" in policy and relevant issues.²

RYSE maintains a youth leadership structure that drives the Center's operations. Notably, none of the young people interviewed asked, 'what is trauma?' Each had their own sophisticated and intimate understandings and "expressed feeling limited control over their circumstances alongside the desire and need to contribute in real and meaningful ways to decisions that impact their lives and their communities."³ The Center has provided first responder services, including helping with funeral services. Youth have developed videos to respond to the shooting deaths of Oscar Grant, Israel Hernandez, and Trayvon Martin; to demonstrate LGBTQ pride; and to imagine a loving and healthy community through rap, visual imagery, and spoken word. They are partnered with RAW Talent, a youth-led spoken word-theater-rap collective.

RYSE operates with harm reduction principles, restorative justice practices, and an ethic of meeting youth where they are. RYSE serves as the Richmond youth hub for The California Endowment's Boys and Men of Color (BMoC) camp. In February 2014, RYSE invited the National Compadres Network to lead a youth healing circle on-site, responding to requests from youth attending the BMoC summer camp who wanted to continue the healing work they learned there. A May 2014 survey of over 200 RYSE members shows that since coming to RYSE, 81 percent of youth feel more like a part of the community, 86 percent are thinking more about their future, and 88 percent feel like their ideas count at RYSE.⁴





BEATS, RHYMES, AND LIFE

In *A Lovely Day*, a documentary following the lives of several youth involved with Beats Rhymes and Life, a young man who affirms that “being young, seeing people around me being killed, it kind of traumatized me,” raps: “Hip-Hop changed my life/ became my life/ gave me a chance/ and saved my life.”⁵ Beats Rhymes and Life (BRL), a non-profit that promotes a culture of care for transitional aged youth (TAY) of color between 12-24 years, offers programming in Oakland (headquarters), San Francisco, and the South Bronx, New York. Developed in 2004 by social worker T. Tomás Alvarez III, MSW and artist-educator Rob Jackson, BRL features an innovative mental health care-delivery model that purposefully integrates “elements of Hip-Hop culture in a therapeutic setting to achieve catharsis and facilitate psychosocial development.”⁶

BRL’s vision is to make health and wellness services more accessible, useful, and meaningful for marginalized youth through community-defined strategies. Their work has been tested in residential and in-patient facilities and in school and community-based settings. Offering rap therapy in the form of community-based Therapeutic Activity Groups (TAGs)™, “participants learn to use rap as a springboard for discussion and a conduit for positive peer interaction. Youth also learn to use the program to talk about their struggles, seek advice from peers, problem solve and re-author their narratives from a strength-based perspective.”⁷ BRL Academy is a mental health care career pipeline and yearlong internship that trains youth of color to serve as peer counselors and ultimately pursue higher education. Academy participation includes ongoing counseling for the peer counselors as well as access to a Clinical Case Manager and Independent Living Skills Counselor.



In 2013, their multimedia and social justice literacy program, Idea 2 Form (i2F), developed REIMAGINE, a media project that invites the community to reimagine themselves. BRL partners with Daughters of D.I.G. (Developing Intelligent Girls), a gender- and culturally-responsive space providing strengths-based therapeutic programs that empower young women from marginalized communities. BRL has developed a partnership with the Oakland Public Library and Oakland Parks and Recreation to bring Hip Hop Therapy to youth in East and West Oakland, beginning the summer of 2014. This partnership includes the creation of “mental health hubs [using] Hip Hop Therapy within the Oakland Public Library system—an approach that has never been done before and has the potential to be replicated throughout the State.”⁸



DESTINY ARTS CENTER

At a September 2014 Open House at Destiny Arts Center in Oakland, the new circus and acrobatics instructor asked everyone to assume the horse stance: a training stance in martial arts traditions, where the spine is lengthened, core is firm, and the rest of the body is centered and ready. Immediately, every young person present dropped into their horse stance, some continuing with a few arm and hand movements. The acrobatics teacher was amazed to see how commonly known the position was to the children and youth there. It provided an excellent introduction to Destiny (De-Escalation Skills Training Inspiring Nonviolence in Youth) Arts Center, their newly-secured 7,500 square foot facility in North Oakland, and its foundation in martial arts instruction and building widespread and infectious youth power.

The Center, serving youth ages 3-18, is based on arts education and violence prevention. Destiny offers two program tracks and strongly advises participation in both: the Martial Arts track and Performing Arts track. Teaching Kajukenbo, an eclectic form of kung-fu, “as much emphasis in the program is placed on learning how to bow as learning to strike.”⁹ The Destiny Arts Youth Performance Company (DAYPC) pairs young performers with professional artists to create theater, dance, and music productions. They are launching a group for youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, and/or two-spirit (LGBTQQI2-S) to become ‘arts actionists’ and build leadership skills. This year, they’re also introducing a circus skills and acrobatics component. Founded by Kate Hobbs in 1988, each year the center serves more than 4000 children and youth. Sarah Crowell developed its well-known Performance Arts Company and has previously served as Destiny’s Executive Director.



The trailer for the documentary FREE that follows five teenage Destiny members features a young man who describes his life in 11 foster homes due to his dad’s incarceration “under drug, rape, and kidnap charges.”¹⁰ His vocalized exhale immediately follows, allowing viewers to collectively exhale both the gravity of what was just shared and the astounding nature of resilience the young man embodies. Crowell proclaims, “Telling the truth is better in the long run than holding it in” and “being saved is being a part of a community of people that tell the truth.”¹¹



NIROGA INSTITUTE

Twenty-two year old B., who was two when her mother was murdered near her home and nine when her father passed away, recently graduated from the Niroga Institute's teacher training program. Teaching at Youth Uprising, B. affirms that learning the practice helps her "really care for myself and love myself for who I am. I've gained a lot more confidence through yoga, connecting with who I am."¹² S., 18, who launched a yoga program at the Alameda County Family Justice Center after learning the practice from Niroga teachers, asserts that yoga helped him recover his life from despair. "I wanted yoga 'cause I was stressed, depressed, traumatized, and hurt," he states.¹³ Using a mind-body modality to address chronic stress and trauma experienced by young people, as well as their extraordinary capacity for resilience and self-mastery, Niroga Institute Executive Director Bidyut K. Bose remarks, "We're looking for a generational transformation

of vulnerable youth. Yoga is a time-tested tool for personal transformation".¹⁴

BK Bose worked as an electrical engineer for decades before developing Niroga Institute, which is headquartered in Oakland. It looks at yoga as a culturally-responsive, trauma-informed practice of dynamic mindfulness. Niroga's Transformative Life Skills (TLS) program—consisting of poses, breathing techniques, and meditation—is offered to youth between the ages of 12-24 in juvenile hall, homeless shelters, group homes, and schools, as well as through free community classes. Niroga hosts a mindful mentoring program and developed the BREATHE Campaign, a photo-voice project inviting young people to capture compelling images in their communities of 'peace amidst chaos'.¹⁵



Niroga teaches up to 27 classes a week at Juvenile Hall in Alameda County. Every six months, they conduct three day-long retreats for the confined youth. Instructor Danielle Ancin described her observations of two young men who recently found out devastating news the morning before a retreat. Ancin relates their decision to attend the retreat the same day of they received their sentences, "Carrying their heavy news in their hearts, they didn't know where else to go. They worked with their breathing and struggled to remain open despite the pressure to collapse inward. And at the end of the day, they recognized that although they could do nothing to change their external situation, they did something big to shift the way they felt about it."¹⁶

TLS underscores leading trauma research and somatic therapy, which emphasizes the full integration of body and mind to effectively heal trauma. "In a study of 165 youth at Alameda County Juvenile Hall in 2006, those who attended yoga more regularly were at significantly better general health, had better self-awareness, and had lower stress."¹⁷ In 2008, with support from The California Endowment, an 18 month assessment of the impact the TLS program had on confined youth, showed similar findings.¹⁸

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

The four community-based organizations profiled within this brief utilize distinctive strengths-based approaches, leveraging healing strategies that children and youth already engage in and elevating pathways of resilience. They face similar challenges, most notably in capacity-building and sustainability. Looking to further the discourse on trauma-informed and healing-oriented youth development, the organizations are considering commissioning reports and developing multimedia and public performance platforms for conferences and community engagement. Sustainability also requires consistent investment and a sound feedback loop, where effective practices that bubble up from the community are brought to appropriate scale.



THE ROLE OF PUBLIC POLICY

While mental health policy is not a new issue, overtly addressing trauma through state legislative efforts has emerged only recently. In 2013, Assembly member Rob Bonta (D-Oakland) sponsored AB 174, which was intended to “expand student access to trauma-informed mental health services through school-based health centers, where care is accessible, affordable, and youth-friendly.”¹⁹ Originally, AB 174 was envisioned as a statewide grant program but was eventually amended to create a privately-funded pilot program for Alameda County. It was ultimately vetoed by Governor Jerry Brown who believed that Alameda County could establish such a program without state intervention and that “waiting for the state to act may cause unnecessary delays in delivering valuable mental health services to students.”

Despite its legislative failure, AB 174 succeeded in catalyzing movement towards culturally-responsive mental health care and chronic trauma-sensitivity into health care services and health homes for children and youth. Additionally, thanks to the tireless work of foundations like The California Endowment, advocates, educators and medical providers- addressing trauma in children and youth remains a priority issue with legislators. From the Department of Public Health to the State Assembly Select Committee on Delinquency Prevention and Youth Development, state agencies and legislative bodies continue to produce reports and host hearings on various approaches to healing children and youth from trauma. On June 17, 2014, the California Assembly Health Committee unanimously approved (with some abstentions) California Assembly Concurrent Resolution 155 authored by Assemblymember Raul Bocanegra (D-Los Angeles). This resolution “encourage[s] statewide policies to reduce children’s exposure to adverse childhood experiences.”²⁰ With this measure, California is now the second state in the nation to pass a resolution addressing childhood exposure to toxic stress.

Local organizations are expanding the community-based frame of trauma-informed care to include all children who are vulnerable to toxic stress. Additionally, community work models youth development strategies that critically challenge public systems to re-engage youth and re-think their structure and approach. Advancing youth access to culturally-sound, trauma-informed, and healing-responsive community based systems of care requires focused attention, legislation, and funding on the local and statewide levels.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Establish regional and/or statewide advisory councils to develop standards and ongoing learning and recommendations around trauma-informed care, culturally responsive care, harm reduction principles, restorative justice practices, and self-care for providers in youth leadership program and service delivery models. Findings from the Listening Campaign can serve as a guide. Beats Rhymes and Life is exploring how to best frame rap therapy as a salient and scalable mental health strategy for boys and men of color. Councils can partner with the state Office of Health Equity and include state Departments of Education and Health Care Services.

Develop legislation to establish mental health hubs, community-based and healing-informed health homes, and Resourced and Resilient (R&R) zones. Identify and set standards for youth- and community-defined neighborhood hubs where culturally responsive and trauma-sensitive arts, activities, and services can be accessed. Beats Rhymes and Life's partnership with Oakland Public Library and Oakland Parks and Recreation can serve as a model. The presence of these zones would help establish a neighborhood as trauma-informed, utilizing similar standards, theories and practices present in trauma-informed schools. Adult and youth representatives from participating community-based organizations also could be included in the development of local and regional plans.

Earmark funding streams within already established funds to study and scale non-traditional, culturally-responsive, and community-defined evidence-based mental health programs. Examples of existing funds include the state Mental Health Services Act and the federal Affordable Care Act. It would also be useful to work with the California Reducing Disparities Project-informed strategic plan of the Office of Health Equity (now in development).

Expand funding for train-the-trainer series and service delivery provider (yoga teacher, peer counselor, youth organizers) training programs rooted in social justice, equity, and the arts. Offer generous scholarships to help people of color to become trauma-informed violence prevention and community health workers who reflect the demographics of communities of color and communities experiencing health inequities. One of the originating funders of Niroga's Integral Health Fellowship, a teacher training program for people of color, has said "it's important for our young people to see people who look like them delivering these services, to build the capacity of the community to provide training that's coming now from the outside".

■ **Pair healing strategies with workforce development for transitional-aged youth.** The reauthorization of and/or amendments to the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) can expand job training and career pathway programs to incorporate culturally based healing strategies. Youth Opportunity Area grants can be used similarly. BRL Academy is a model approach. Destiny Arts Center’s development of young leaders as professional arts-actionists can be recognized as community health education and violence prevention career preparation. Healing-based workforce development also responds to California Department of Public Health’s findings that link healing from childhood trauma and building youth resilience with pathways out of poverty.

■ **Pair healing strategies with community building and leadership development for transitional-aged youth. Combine personal healing with civic engagement, where youth lead conversations with policymakers and community members around a shared vision of healing from trauma.** Through Niroga’s BREATHE campaign, youth were able to share their images at neighborhood council meetings “to give voice to the narratives surrounding these images, enabling a dialogue between community members around stress management, self-care and healing from primary and secondary trauma.” RYSE Center advocates “engag[ing] youth in meaningful decision-making. Provide training and support so they are prepared to engage” with realistic and transparent expectations and responsibilities. Create space for youth to define and co-design what meaningful participation and decision-making looks like.

■ **Support and protect comprehensive health coverage for children.** As effective as healing practices rooted in community can be, it is important to remember that some trauma can only be healed through traditional clinical models, including psychiatry and psychotherapy. The Early and Periodic Screening, Diagnostic and Treatment (EPSDT) benefit for children covered by Medicaid (in California known as Medi-Cal), is the gold standard for such coverage. EPSDT guarantees children periodic screening and assessments as well as the services needed to maintain or improve their health. EPSDT is especially valuable to the treatment of trauma because it requires a comprehensive, age-appropriate health and mental health assessment in all Medi-Cal children that can identify early signs of trauma and cover the appropriate treatment. In fact, the federal agency administering Medicaid, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) recently released a letter to the state directors administering the program reiterating CMS’ commitment to EPSDT as an appropriate benefit to identify and treat the complex mental and behavioral health needs of children who have experienced violence and trauma. Despite its value to the health and well-being of children, particularly children of color, the Medicaid program is frequently under attack at both the state and federal levels.

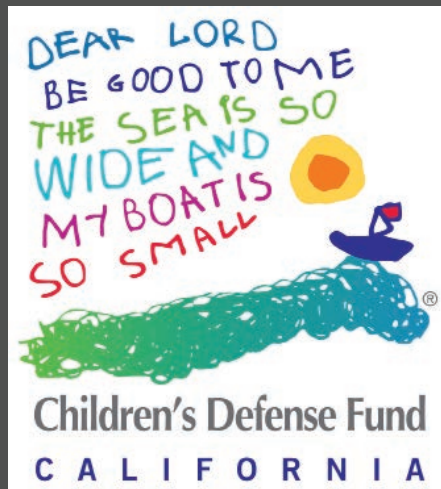


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