



# Fostering social connections and trust in public housing

BRIDGE Housing's approach to addressing community trauma

*Comments by Susan Neufeld of BRIDGE Housing, shared during a Prevention Institute web conference about the ACE|R framework in April 2016, serve as the basis for the following narrative. Photo credit: Clark James Mishler, courtesy of BRIDGE Housing.*

## BRIDGE Housing's approach to trauma-informed community building

At BRIDGE Housing, we recognize that trauma is the interpersonal things that happen in our lives but also the way systems fail communities, in many cases over generations. It's critical to recognize the impact that systems have on the communities they serve and there is a growing understanding that the trauma experienced by many low-income and public housing communities poses challenges for traditional community building efforts. When BRIDGE was recruited and hired to redevelop two large public housing sites, including Jordan Downs in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles and Potrero Terrace and Annex (PTA) in San Francisco, we noticed that both public housing developments suffered from a deteriorating built environment due to years of physical neglect. While trying to engage residents in the redevelopment process, we also saw that they had a chronic lack of trust as a result of the history of public housing in the United States and the chronic failure of the system in many neighborhoods. With affordable housing work, it is common to offer resident programs and services, such as mental health services and after-school youth development programs, and expect residents to show

In April 2016, **SUSAN NEUFELD** of BRIDGE Housing joined a Prevention Institute web conference about the ACE|R framework to discuss trauma informed community building as a strategy to promote resilience and healing. The remarks she shared during the web conference serve as the basis for this narrative and are supplemented by information from BRIDGE Housing's [\*Trauma Informed Community Building\*](#) report, [\*Partners in Progress\*](#) Case Study, and [\*evaluation\*](#).

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up and engage. However, for residents who have lived in and grown up in these communities, everything they see around them is a reminder of the trauma they have experienced. When residents look at their neighborhood,

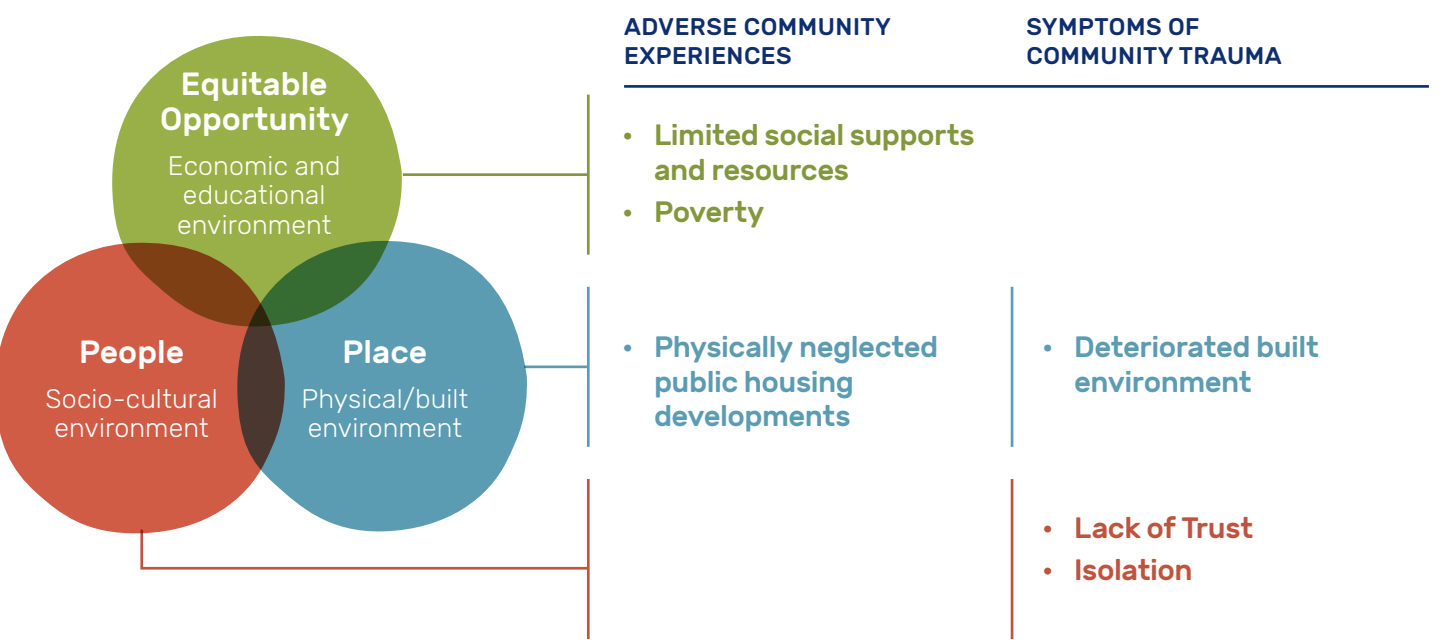
they see the corner where someone they know was shot or the side of a building where someone else was arrested. It is important to remember that the chronic experience of trauma is very real and requires a high level of sensitivity. How we redevelop, build housing, and engage residents must be sensitive to the trauma that residents have experienced (see Figure 1).

Out of the need to acknowledge and address the trauma experienced by public housing residents emerged BRIDGE Housing's Trauma Informed Community Building (TICB) model. This approach addresses the challenges to traditional community building by taking into account residents' emotional needs and recognizing the impact of pervasive trauma on a community.<sup>1</sup> TICB strategies focus on de-escalating chaos and stress, fostering

**Figure 1: Adverse Community Experiences and symptoms of community trauma in Potrero Terrace and Annex aligned with the ACE|R framework**

Prevention Institute's *Adverse Community Experiences and Resilience framework (ACE|R)* puts forth a set of symptoms of trauma at the community level. These symptoms, organized by Prevention Institute's *THRIVE clusters*, are present in the sociocultural environment (people), the physical/built environment (place) and the economic

environment (equitable opportunity). This figure presents the contributors to and the symptoms of community trauma that have emerged as part of San Diego's Making Connections initiative. For more information about the *ACE|R framework*, [view the full report](#).



resilience, and strengthening social connections. By acknowledging the real-life experiences of low-income and public housing residents, TICB promotes community healing as a part of housing redevelopment efforts.<sup>2</sup> The main outcomes of successful TICB include creating the conditions for long-term community and individual change, as well as the foundation and support for effective program and service delivery to meet community needs.

A core tenet of BRIDGE Housing’s work is that in redeveloping public housing, we preserve public housing. No residents are displaced, there is no gentrification, and we are not reducing the number of public housing units. Instead, the redevelopments are designed to address the neglected capital and physical needs of residents. As part of the redevelopment process, it is important to prepare residents for the dramatic changes happening in their community. The process of tearing down homes and rebuilding them, bringing retail into the community, and changing dynamics in the neighborhood can be disruptive and traumatizing, even in the case of changes that residents are excited about. Our goal is to make sure there are opportunities to communicate and support residents in a positive way.

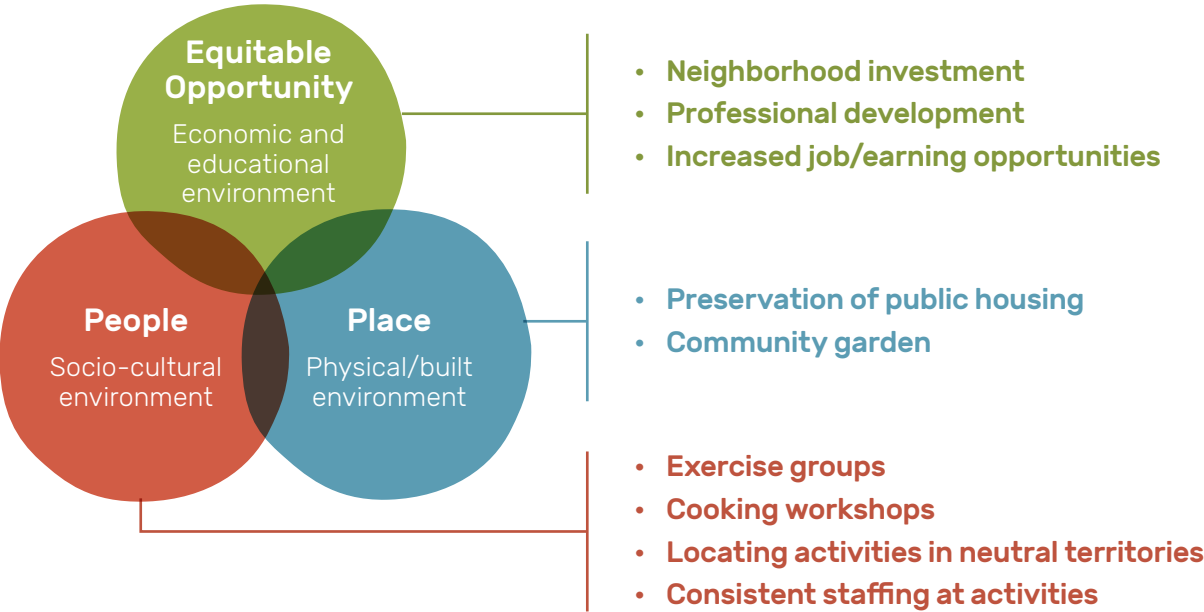
## Trauma-informed community building in action

In working with residents of the PTA public housing complex, we began to engage residents in a way that felt comfortable to them. We first hosted a series of listening sessions to understand what the community wanted, what they saw as their strengths, and how they envisioned their future. Then residents were offered highly accessible and predictable opportunities that most everyone could engage in, such as walking clubs, Zumba, monthly cooking workshops, and a community garden, to name a few (see Figure 2).



Photo credit: Clark James Mishler, courtesy of BRIDGE Housing.

**Figure 2: Potrero Terrace and Annex strategies aligned with the ACE/R Framework**



## Outcomes

As a result of providing TICB activities, BRIDGE has seen improved health and safety outcomes for residents, including reduced depression, improved self-esteem, greater feelings of happiness and relaxation, increased physical activity, a healthier diet, and maintenance of a healthy weight.<sup>3</sup> Residents also reported that they felt a sense of safety while participating in the activities, even if the immediate surroundings were unsafe.<sup>4</sup> The location of activities in neutral territories and the presence of consistent staff helped to create localized “Zones of Safety,” which can promote cohesion and connectedness among residents.

By engaging over 520 residents in TICB activities in 2015 alone, BRIDGE has helped to ensure that more residents become active community stakeholders and feel increasingly connected within their community.<sup>5</sup> Residents can take on leadership roles in implementing community building activities, which provides opportunities not only for financial compensation but also for skill-building and professional development.<sup>6</sup> Community building activities have also fostered new and meaningful connections between residents and have served as the foundation for the development of cross-cultural and multi-generational relationships.<sup>7</sup> A major outcome of BRIDGE’s work in the PTA public housing complex has included breaking down the barriers between residents of PTA public housing and



the neighboring North Potrero neighborhood.<sup>8</sup> As one resident put it, “You meet a lot of different people from different races that live up here in the community with me that I would never [have] known if I wouldn’t come to these activities. I probably would have seen them, but I wouldn’t have known them. But now I know them.”

## Building partnerships

Through BRIDGE’s work in the PTA community, we have built an innovative, successful and replicable approach to community building. BRIDGE has led a major shift in how affordable housing developers imagine their role, develop partnerships, and engage with residents. Our approach pushes affordable housing developers to not only strive to create safe and desirable affordable housing units that meet the needs of residents, but also engage residents and promote the development of a vibrant and resilient community.<sup>9</sup>

While BRIDGE’s work highlights the role that community development can play in addressing trauma and promoting community healing, there are also roles for other sectors in this work, and BRIDGE has engaged with a diverse array of partners to move the TICB approach forward, including the San Francisco City Planning Department, the YMCA, local businesses, contractors, and architects, as well as a host of other program and service providers. Even beyond our TICB work, BRIDGE’s collaborative approach serves as a model for multiple sectors coming together to promote community resilience and healing.



Photo credit: Clark James Mishler, courtesy of BRIDGE Housing.

## Authorship & Resources

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### MORE ABOUT BRIDGE HOUSING

Founded in 1983, BRIDGE Housing is an affordable housing developer based in San Francisco with properties throughout California, Oregon, and Washington. BRIDGE Housing's mission is to strengthen communities by developing, owning, and managing high quality, affordable homes for working families and seniors. Since its inception, BRIDGE has emphasized that an apartment with an affordable rent should be a stepping stone for advancement. BRIDGE's Trauma Informed Community Building (TICB) model is based primarily on the organization's experience in community building over the past five years in the Potrero Terrace and Annex (PTA) public housing site in San Francisco with populations facing poverty, ongoing violence, isolation, and limited access to services and supports. For more information about BRIDGE, visit their website at [www.bridgehousing.com](http://www.bridgehousing.com).

### ABOUT PREVENTION INSTITUTE

Prevention Institute is a nonprofit, national center dedicated to improving community health and wellbeing by building momentum for effective primary prevention. Primary prevention means taking action to build resilience and to prevent problems before they occur. The Institute's work is characterized by a strong commitment to community participation and promotion of equitable health outcomes among all social and economic groups. Since its founding in 1997, the organization has focused on community prevention, injury and violence prevention, health equity, healthy eating and active living, positive youth development, health system transformation, and mental health and wellbeing. For more information, visit [www.preventioninstitute.org](http://www.preventioninstitute.org).

### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

For additional information about BRIDGE Housing's Trauma Informed Community Building work, check out the organization's [full report](#).

Prevention Institute's report, *Adverse Community Experiences and Resilience: A Framework for Addressing and Preventing Community Trauma*, provides a groundbreaking framework for understanding the relationship between community trauma and violence. Funded by Kaiser Permanente Community Benefit in Northern California, and based on interviews with practitioners in communities with high rates of violence, the report outlines specific strategies to address and prevent community trauma – and foster resilience – using techniques from those living in affected areas. For additional information and resources on addressing community trauma, go to our [project page](#).

Since the initial development of the *Adverse Community Experiences and Resilience Framework* in 2016, multiple networks and communities have shared it, as well as adopted, adapted and/or implemented it to address and prevent community trauma. *Adverse Community Experiences and Resilience: Learning from Practice* reflects valuable lessons from their practice.

*What? Why? How? Answers to Frequently Asked Questions About the Adverse Community Experiences and Resilience Framework* builds off of core concepts in the *Adverse Community Experiences and Resilience Framework* and addresses questions that have emerged in early practice and implementation.

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## References

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