

Building community power to heal and thrive

Addressing Adverse Community Experiences

The following narrative is excerpted from comments by Victor Rodriguez of the Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department (TPCHD), a partner in the Making Connections work in Tacoma.

I come from Tacoma, Washington, which is about a half hour south from Seattle. I grew up in Skagit County – a rural part of Washington. Most of the people there are farm workers, and my family and my ancestors have worked the lands on this continent for thousands of years. I always start with that because that's where this work comes from.

Our coalition's name is 253 Making Connections – 253 is Tacoma's area code. Our overarching strategy is to build community power to heal and thrive. I'm really excited to be presenting at this conference that's talking about Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). I heard about ACEs maybe three years ago, and I found, right away, that it didn't account for how communities of color experience trauma, and therefore failed to account for how they responded to it, and therefore failed to account for the resiliency that is part of those communities. When you don't account for race or institutional racism, you fail to see how communities respond to these inequities.

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Fostering authentic community engagement

Our goal with our Making Connections work is to have a community-driven process. This grant is a five-year grant, with the first year specifically focused on planning. We're really excited to have this intentional space to do planning because it allows us to actually engage with communities. We're usually not able to do that with traditional funding sources, which say: "Here's some money. By next week, make sure you get us a plan." It's really hard to engage communities when that happens. What ends up happening is that it undermines our ability when it comes to implementation.

Our three partners are Hilltop Urban Gardens, Tacoma Urban League, and Centro Latino. They're all local organizations. I want to highlight Hilltop Urban Gardens in particular, because they have been a very powerful partner. It's a grassroots organization led by African American community members that is focused on food sovereignty and expanding the conversation about health and nutrition and food production to consider racial and economic justice. They've been an important part of the project. Our partners are from three different neighborhoods, two of which are right within the city limits and one that is right outside the city limits.

Identifying community priorities

Our focus is men and boys of color and LGBTQ people of color. LGBTQ people of color were added as a result of our community engagement, especially with youth. We began by talking about how aspects of how we raise boys to be men are toxic. When we tell a young man, "Don't cry," or "You cry like a girl," that's the worst thing we can tell him. Our social constructs of masculinity are actually bad for our health. What we heard from the LGBTQ youth was that it's not just about masculinity. It's really about gender constructs, and we need to

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expand that conversation to examine gender and how it manifests in our communities. During one of these conversations, one of our young people talked about how we need to understand how these constructs were developed and where they come from; how they are rooted in Western European philosophies. Our constructs of masculinity and our racial constructs are driven from that same philosophy, and so they're very interconnected. Therefore, when we're trying to address gender constructs, we must also address race. Our young people are really pushing us to deepen these conversations to make room for the nuances.

So our high-level goal at this point is to understand and improve the social, environmental, and economic conditions and to develop and implement community-level strategies to improve mental health outcomes. We used Prevention Institute's THRIVE tool (see sidebar) to organize our thinking and make sure that our strategies are touching different community conditions.

Planning as healing

Our planning phase has included community organizing, public health planning, and qualitative data collection. One of the things we wanted to avoid was traditional data collection approaches, which tend to be very extractive in the sense that those collecting the data often approach a community only when they need to produce a report. What ends up happening, is that communities end up lose respect and trust for the people collecting the data. We were really trying to counter some of these norms in data collection that actually lead to structural violence (see sidebar).

The community organizing strategy that we use is called the People's Movement Assembly. It focuses on three questions: What does the community we want look like? What are the barriers that are keeping us from getting there? And what are the actions that we can take to achieve it? And that's actually also how we designed our qualitative data collection. We originally had a survey that was about five pages. The community said, "This is way too long." The survey we used actually ended up being three questions: What are the top three things in the community that are impacting your mental wellbeing in a negative way? What are the top three things that are the barriers that are keeping you from reaching positive mental wellbeing? What three actions do you think the community can take to address those issues? That's all we asked, and it was very open-ended. We connected with 16 community organizers to conduct the survey. These are people who are already trusted in the community, who already have that relationship with the community.

The THRIVE tool is a framework that helps communities examine and develop strategies to address the community conditions that can affect mental health and wellbeing – the sociocultural, physical/built, and economic and educational environments.

Structural violence refers to the harm that individuals, families and communities experience from the economic and social structure; social institutions; and relations of power, privilege, inequality and inequity that may harm people and communities by preventing them from meeting their basic needs.

So we conducted the surveys, led focus groups, and gathered life stories from some folks who have been in the community a long time and could share the history of their communities. Then we hosted a People's Movement Assembly, which wasn't just about collecting data, but was really about creating a process that provided some healing as we collected that data, through storytelling. The way we organized the People's Movement Assembly was culturally-grounded and really focused on not just gathering information, but on cultivating what some of the partners call the "Sacred Relationships." These are relationships that are based in humanity, first and foremost. Working from that place is the best way to have success in the long run.

The People's Movement Assembly is a community organizing tool that brings people together to make



decisions for collective action and power, and to move away from single-issue organizing to intersectional organizing, making sure that we get at the root causes. For instance, if you're organizing for food justice, and someone else is organizing for reproductive health, the People's Movement Assembly helps you understand that the root causes, the things you're collectively organizing against – the symptoms – are actually coming from the same place. We use this intentionally to strengthen community resilience, to create a healing space, to analyze and collect qualitative data, and to assure a community-driven process. Prior to the People's Movement Assembly, we synthesized some of the findings from the surveys, and we had people use that as the basis for the conversations at the assembly. Traditionally, that is not how data is used. Usually it's used within institutions, and then they come up with plans. We try to counter that norm and say, "Let's have community members engage with the data so they can make sense of it and make meaning out of it."

Some of the aspects of the People's Movement Assembly that speak to the potential for healing: we had a community altar in the middle of the gathering, and we started out by inviting the indigenous community from the area to welcome us onto their land and into their space. We also created a space for folks to call on their ancestors to help us as we think about these issues. Before we got into the logistical aspects of the meeting, we wanted to make these authentic connections.

Youth used theater, spoken word, and other approaches to teach and share their experiences. One of the things they talked about was police brutality, and they acted out different kinds of scenarios that showed how they experienced their relationship with the police. They also talked about job interviews and how they experienced them. I think that was very powerful because often we don't see adolescents and young people as people who have wisdom to share with us. I've worked with youth a lot, and often I see that they're the ones who are best able to articulate the contradictions of adults. They have a very important role because, often, as adults, we've accepted things, but youth haven't gotten to that place yet.

We also had young children as part of the People's Movement Assembly. Often in community gatherings, the progressive thing is to have child care, right? Well, I wanted to take it a step further and say, "Yes, we have child care, but we also want to hear what children have to say. We want to hear their voices." So we had them paint rocks to contribute to community Black Lives Matter memorial gardens. For this project, we asked the children, "What makes you feel good? What's something that you want to express here today?" They painted their rocks based on how they felt about our questions. They took their painted rocks and walked down the street to the community garden, hosted by the Hilltop Urban Gardens, and they had a little debrief. All this is part of our data collection process. They had conversations out there, and we used some of the information or some of the stories they shared to help us understand how people were experiencing things in the community. Once we finish our plan, we're going to have another community meeting to say, "Hey, this is what we came up with. What do you think? Did we keep to the integrity of what you were saying or do we need to change things to really reflect what you're talking about?"

Naming community trauma symptoms and strategies

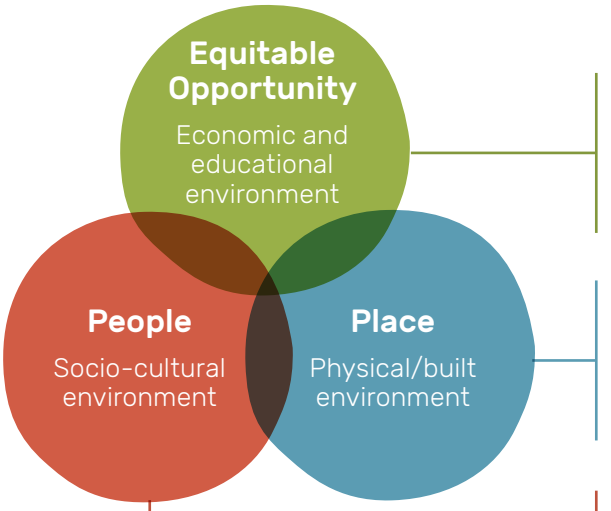
There are three findings that have emerged as part of this process so far. The first was that community trauma pervaded the community in the forms of police brutality, lack of access to basic needs, violence, and discrimination (racial and gender). There are a lot of people of color who identify as LGBTQ, who talk extensively about the unsafety they experience as a result of how they identify.

The second finding was around authentic social connections that support healthy interpersonal relationships and neighborhood cohesion, such as through strengthening intergenerational relationships. That is not necessarily the language the community used – one of the challenges is trying to translate what communities are talking about in ways that others can understand.

The third idea that came up was the need for stronger communal efficacy that supports community-level

Figure 1: Adverse Community Experiences and Symptoms of Community Trauma among Tacoma's Boys and Men of Color and LGBTQ People of Color 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 Tacoma's Making Connections initiative. For more information about the *ACE|R framework*, view the full report.

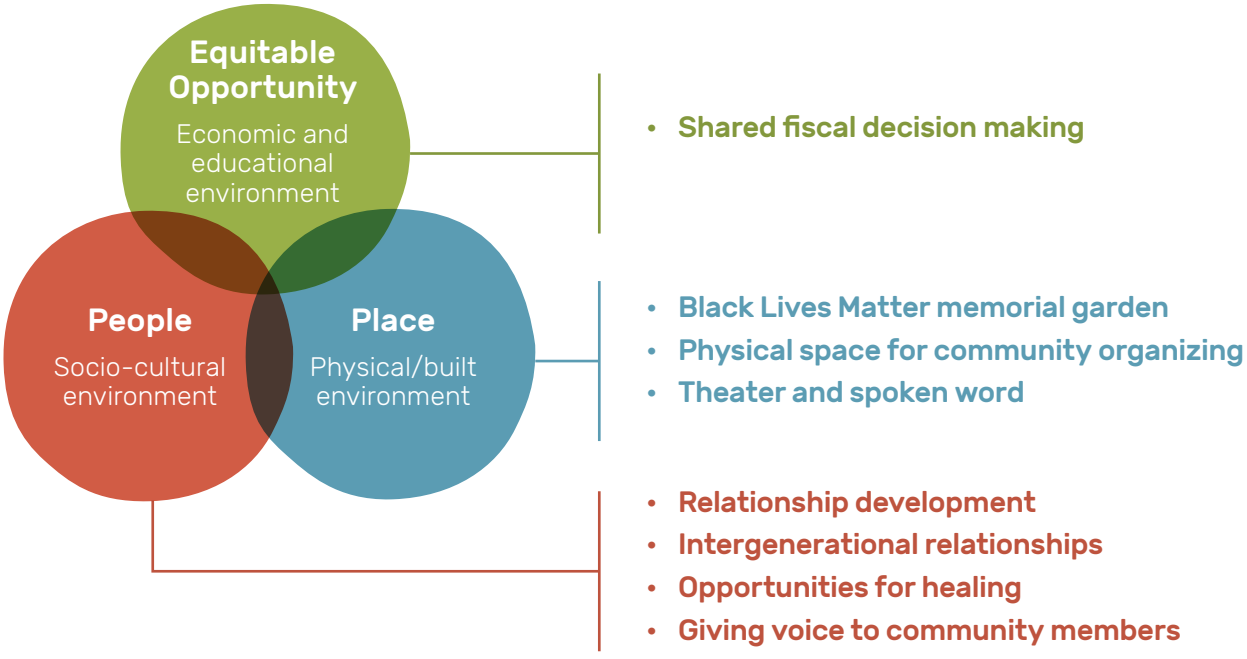


ADVERSE COMMUNITY EXPERIENCES	SYMPTOMS OF COMMUNITY TRAUMA
• Lack of job opportunities • Lack of access to basic services • Lack of cultural and linguistic services	
• Sense of feeling unsafe/ lack of safe places	• Urban blight
• Lack of access to professional law enforcement • Toxic masculinity • Harassment and abuse of LGBTQ populations	• Lack of authentic social connection • Feelings of exclusion

action and civic engagement in local fiscal and policy decision-making. The key question there was really, "How do we build community power?" One suggestion was to make visible the power that's already within the community, and the other was really more practical – yes, we can organize, and we should, and we need to keep doing it, but we also need to make sure we have a voice in the institutions that govern our communities. We need to make sure that we have direct decision-making power in terms of how policy is developed and how fiscal decisions are made, and that is a critical element of a resilient community. A resilient community can inform and shape political and fiscal decisions. That is what helps them address the issues that are happening in their community.



Figure 2: Tacoma Making Connections strategies to address community trauma aligned with the ACE|R framework



Authorship & Resources

Representatives from the Making Connections for Mental Health and Wellbeing Among Men and Boys initiative reflected on their experiences with community trauma at the second annual Conference on Adverse Childhood Experiences in San Francisco in October 2016. The conference, sponsored by the Center for Youth Wellness, brought together thought leaders and advocates to build awareness and move forward efforts to implement policies and practices to help children who face early adversity.

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.

ABOUT MAKING CONNECTIONS

Making Connections for Mental Health and Wellbeing Among Men and Boys is a national initiative to transform community conditions that influence mental wellbeing, especially for men and boys of color, veterans, and their families. Sixteen communities across the U.S. are developing and activating strategies to enhance their sociocultural, physical/built, and economic and educational environments. The Movember Foundation is funding the work; Prevention Institute is providing coordination, training, and technical assistance; and a team from the University of South Florida is evaluating progress and outcomes.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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.

This profile was supported by grants from Kaiser Permanente National Community Benefit and Kaiser Permanente Northern California Community Benefit programs..