Bridging the Gap: Trust Building for Programs at the Intersection of Criminal Justice and Behavioral Health

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Many grantees of the Comprehensive Opioid, Stimulant, and Substance Use Program (COSSUP) and others working at the intersection of criminal justice and behavioral health regularly interact with groups that have been historically disadvantaged and marginalized, including people of color, tribal populations, low-income individuals, the formerly incarcerated, and people with mental and physical disabilities (Bureau of Justice Assistance, 2023). These groups continue to experience disproportionately poorer health outcomes and higher rates of illness and death from centuries of racism and inequitable structural systems (Braveman et al., 2022; Bundy et al., 2023). The persistence of these inequities over time has also caused historical and multigenerational trauma (Avalos, 2021; Sotero, 2006), which is associated with deep emotional and social distress among individuals from these groups (Brave Heart and DeBruyn, 1998; Danieli, 1998). Moreover, the institutionalized and structural forces that enact widespread disadvantage have created distrust between marginalized communities and public safety systems. For this reason, it is critical that criminal justice and behavioral health initiatives engage in strategic and institutionalized practices to build trust between their programs and the communities they serve. Building and maintaining community trust is the cornerstone of operating successful programs and increases the social impact of the programs for every group and population in the United States.

Trust-building Strategies

Building and maintaining trust takes continuous strategic effort and should be approached from both the individual and organizational/programmatic levels. Potential strategies for beginning this effort are highlighted below.

What is historical trauma?

Historical trauma is the result of persistent systematic and societal oppression directed toward a particular marginalized group. The trauma related to the experience of oppression, over generations, may have meaningful psychological, behavioral, and emotional consequences (Danieli, 1998). Marginalized communities that have undergone trauma and deliberate mistreatment by society may experience lasting changes to their views about society and themselves. These changes, in turn, can lead to high levels of mistrust (Ratcliffe, Ruddell, and Smith, 2014) that hinders program engagement, as clients have difficulty creating trusting relationships with key program stakeholders, such as program staff members, community leaders, or law enforcement.

- **Educate program stakeholders about the diverse communities they serve.** Building trust with individuals and communities involves a deep understanding of past traumas and their effects on present-day life experiences and behaviors (Lansing et al., 2023). Program leadership and staff members may wish to consider which communities they are most likely to engage with and then set a goal of educating themselves about the wider social experiences of these groups, including systemic disadvantage. On an organizational level, community leaders can recognize how their policies and programs can be changed to address the needs of their communities and provide opportunities to create meaningful relationships (Schiavo, 2021). Fostering these connections helps community members and clients engage deeply with program staff members and provides opportunities for feedback about program structures and operations. Identifying and remaining cognizant of the particular needs of communities in which a program operates can help administrators and staff members be strategic about addressing those needs. For example, program staff members may wish to consider how the needs of formerly incarcerated individuals may differ from those without a criminal history. Creating forums for individuals with lived experience to provide feedback on program practices can be achieved by adding individuals with lived experience to advisory boards, committees, and planning groups; encouraging dialogue in accessible community meetings; and highlighting the experiences of individuals with lived experience in staff trainings.

- **Hire program staff members who are representative of the communities served.** Hiring staff members who are representative of the communities served by the program is one way to improve their understanding of the experiences of diverse community groups. Staff members with lived experiences similar to those of program participants may be able to understand different perspectives and show needed empathy toward clients (Bourke

Special Considerations for Programs Involving Criminal Legal Professionals

Certain marginalized groups, including communities of color, have experienced trauma through persistent, negative interactions with criminal legal settings, particularly with law enforcement. For this reason, initiatives involving criminal legal professionals may experience unintended negative consequences in program interactions. To build a solid foundation from which to strengthen relationships with members of marginalized communities, the following approach may be helpful:

- Encourage program leadership and staff members to consider any history of harm and violence committed against the community as well as acknowledge how these experiences affect program participation (Jannetta et al., 2019).

- Prepare law enforcement officers to interact with clients in procedurally just (Jannetta et al., 2019) and trauma-informed ways (Jones, 2020).

- Adjust strategies for building trust between law enforcement and other criminal legal professionals and impacted communities to be more relationally driven, focused on promoting transparency and allowing open communication (International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2018).

and Titus, 2020; Walker, Perkins, and Repper, 2014). For example, the inclusion of people with lived experience can be an important way to establish trusting relationships between program stakeholders and program participants, particularly for formerly incarcerated individuals reentering into the community or individuals who require substance use services (Boles et al., 2022; Ray et al., 2023). Such mentoring relationships can help program

participants build strong relationships with program representatives and other members of the community.

- **Provide trauma-informed services.** Communities that have been racialized, marginalized, and/or disadvantaged have generally experienced high levels of trauma (Comas-Diaz, Hall, and Neville, 2019). Trust building with traumatized individuals and communities involves the implementation of trauma-informed strategies centered on principles such as creating safe spaces that instill a sense of physical and emotional safety and emphasizing shared decision making and autonomy (Lansing et al., 2023). To successfully implement these strategies, program leadership can provide educational resources for staff members who regularly interact with program clients; build and maintain relationships with knowledgeable community partners and mentor organizations; and make trauma-specific treatment accessible to the public (Lansing et al., 2023). Moreover, program administrators can design program policies and structures that consider high levels of trauma in their clientele and do not have unintended negative consequences for program participants (Yatchmenoff, Sundborg, and Davis, 2017).

- **Remove financial barriers to program participation whenever possible.** Many individuals served by criminal justice and behavioral health initiatives experience significant financial hardship related to lower educational attainment, fewer employment opportunities, less familial support, and significant mental and physical health concerns (Resler, 2019). For this reason, financial considerations can become a significant barrier to program access and continued engagement. Commonly experienced concerns may include lack of transportation, being underinsured or uninsured, not having reliable childcare (Resler, 2019), or having limited to no discretionary funds. Prohibitive costs may deter participants from engaging with programs, which prevents relationship building altogether. Whenever feasible, programs at the intersection of criminal justice and behavioral health

may wish to identify the ways in which financial hardship impedes the accessibility of their service offerings and aim to offset such burdens.

Conclusion

Building trusting relationships with communities that have been historically marginalized from society requires significant effort. It is imperative that these communities receive adequate support and resources for their well-being and safety in the community. While addressing system-level inequities can seem beyond the capacity of individual program administrators, building programs and organizations that strategically engage and invest in these populations is a critical first step to begin healing the negative emotional and psychological impacts of widespread disadvantage and trauma in these groups.

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