Vicarious Trauma Plan Guide

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Strategies to Address Work-related Trauma Exposure for Children’s Advocacy Centers and Multidisciplinary Teams

For more information or technical assistance in implementing strategies in this guide, please contact:

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Vicarious Trauma Plan Guide

There is broad recognition that Children’s Advocacy Centers’ (CAC) staff and multidisciplinary team (MDT) partners work in highly trauma-exposed work environments and that the exposure may affect the individual professionals and the organizations in which they work. CAC leaders often struggle to find ways to support staff and team members and to mitigate the negative impacts of doing this work. This guide will provide some tips on how to implement strategies to enhance professionals’ resilience.

Many of the strategies and all of the resources in this plan are applicable to MDTs, especially in regards to training and assessment. However, there are special considerations regarding supervision, policies and procedures, and organizational culture. As a CAC leader, you may not be able to influence supervision practices or the organizational culture in MDT partner agencies; however, you can increase awareness of vicarious trauma and its effects on organizations.

This guide will explore four domains:

- Organizational Culture
- Policies & Procedures
- Training & Assessment
- Supervision

ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

The path to creating a Vicarious (VT)/Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS)–informed organization requires an organizational shift. Here are some strategies to help begin the process.

For CAC Staff:

- Address the physical safety of staff. Ensure that your building is secure and that there is a plan in place for staff to follow in the event of volatile parents/clients in the workplace.
- Ensure the psychological safety of staff. Have MDT supervisors enforce ground rules for the MDT to prevent any horizontal violence or workplace bullying.
- Educate your board of directors on VT/STS to garner their support for policies and activities that will create a supportive environment.
- Express value and appreciation for the work of staff.
- Create a debriefing process for particularly difficult cases.
- Examine workloads and diversify when possible.
- Create celebrations and rituals that reinforce the values and the mission of the CAC.
- Continually remind staff and MDT members of the mission, especially in times of crisis.

For MDTs:

- While you may not be able to influence supervision policies of partner agencies, CACs can cultivate an atmosphere during the MDT meetings that allows team members to gain insight and awareness of the effects of this work.
- Have a “check in” time at the beginning or end of each meeting.
- Have a VT/STS “moment” in each meeting. Share a small piece of information or coping strategy.
• Schedule regular formal trainings.
• Allow time for team members to share what strategies work for them to maintain their well-being.
• Make everyone on the MDT is accountable for following the ground rules established for meetings. Be clear that it is the responsibility of each team member to hold each other accountable.
• Provide training for the team on conflict and healthy conflict resolution.
• Express value and appreciation for the work of the professionals on the MDT.
• Define success and develop celebration rituals.
• Remind MDT members that our individual and collective well-being is a priority because kids need our best selves.

POLICIES & PROCEDURES

Few organizations have formal policies and procedures related to VT/STS. Many organizations have informal ways of building resilience of staff, i.e., staff and MDT appreciation lunches, meeting for happy hour, team awards, etc. However, rarely are those practices part of a comprehensive organizational approach. By incorporating some of the suggestions below as a part of a holistic approach, organizations can begin to make the shift to being secondary trauma–informed.

For CAC staff:
• Create a value statement. It might read something like this:
  a. It is assumed this work will impact us in profound ways.
  b. We seek to provide an environment that acknowledges:
     i. Our employees are our most valuable resource.
     ii. The well-being of our employees is paramount.
     iii. Acknowledging the impact of this work without worry of stigma or shame is important to mitigate the negative aspects of working with victims of child abuse.
     iv. Discussing the negative impacts of this work will not influence performance appraisals.
• Include information about the impact of this work in the hiring/screening process. Include questions about self-care in the interview.
• Include strategies for mitigating the negative effects of this work in new employee and MDT orientations.
• Be sure mental health benefits are included as a part of the benefit package. If you use an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), make sure the EAP is educated on the issues related to VT/STS.
• Offer adequate time off so staff can re-charge.
• Offer flex time where possible.
• Develop formal policies and referral processes for symptomatic employees.
• Create a crisis plan for high profile or particularly difficult cases.

For MDTs:
• Create an MDT statement regarding VT/STS. It might read something like this:
  a. It is assumed this work will impact us in profound ways.
  b. There is a unique understanding among MDT members of how this work might affect professionals that others in our specific disciplines may not understand.
  c. Our MDT is a place where professionals can acknowledge how this work affects our MDT and us as individuals without worry of stigma or shame.
  d. We cannot do our best work if we are experiencing the extreme negative effects VT/STS.
• Incorporate information about VT/STS into the formal MDT orientation process.
• MDT ground rules are important for team functioning. Keep ground rules visible during meetings to remind members of agreed upon norms.
• Develop and display a purpose statement for the MDT. Keeping the “why” of the team’s purpose visible is protective for team members.

TRAINING & ASSESSMENT

Training
A comprehensive approach to addressing work-related trauma exposure should include regular training opportunities for professionals. This should be more than a one-time or even an annual training. Senior leaders and supervisors should explore ways to include conversations and information about the impact of this work in all trainings and meetings for staff and MDT members, in addition to formal trainings on the topic. Below are listed some training materials and videos that are available online, many of which are free of charge. In the resource section of the guide, there are several short videos from the Headington Institute that would be easy to add to any meeting. Consider a wide range of training topics that provide a holistic approach to wellness, including yoga, mindfulness, workplace ergonomics, nutrition, etc.

Assessment
Organizations should also provide opportunities and encourage staff to complete regular individual assessments as well as organizational assessments. Below are individual and organizational assessments that are free of charge.
Training Resources

- Building Resiliency in Child Abuse Organizations

- The Resilience Alliance: Promoting Resilience and Reducing Secondary Trauma Among Child Welfare Staff

- National Children’s Advocacy Center Virtual Training Center
  Jon R. Conte, Ph.D.
  The Foundations of Vicarious Trauma
  Managing Vicarious Trauma

  Janine D’Anniballe, PhD
  Secondary Trauma

  Alison Henricks, LCSW
  Cambria Rose Walsh, LCSW
  Psychological Hazmat Suites for Trauma-Exposed Professionals

- Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction
  [http://www.umassmed.edu/cfm/stress-reduction/](http://www.umassmed.edu/cfm/stress-reduction/)

- TEND
  [http://www.tendacademy.ca/resources/](http://www.tendacademy.ca/resources/)

Free Assessment Resources

**Individual**

- Professional Quality of Life Scale

- Secondary Traumatic Stress Scale
  [https://www.naadac.org/assets/2416/sharon_foley_ac15_militarycultureho2.pdf](https://www.naadac.org/assets/2416/sharon_foley_ac15_militarycultureho2.pdf)

**Organizational**

- Secondary Traumatic Stress Informed Organization Assessment
  [http://www.uky.edu/CTAC/node/234](http://www.uky.edu/CTAC/node/234)

- Vicarious Trauma Organizational Readiness Guide
  [https://vtt.ovc.ojp.gov/what-is-the-vt-org](https://vtt.ovc.ojp.gov/what-is-the-vt-org)
SUPERVISION

Often supervisors may feel as though they are stuck in the middle: they may be providing support to their staff, while receiving little or no support themselves. Things to consider relating to supervision:

For CAC staff:
- Vicarious trauma (VT)–informed supervision means creating time and space for staff to gain greater awareness and understanding of the effects of working in a trauma-exposed workplace. This means spending part of supervision talking about cases, administrative tasks, etc. but also discussing the impact of this work.
- Provide training for supervisors to equip them to use this type of supervision. (Refer to the sample questions in the box below that might be helpful.)
- Supervisors need to know how to recognize the signs of VT and STS stress among staff.
- There should be a clear written protocol on the process for accessing help and support for staff who are experiencing STS.
- Create a formal support network specifically for supervisors and senior leaders.
- Include discussions about the impact of this work in formal performance evaluations, while assuring staff that disclosing VT/STS will not negatively affect performance appraisals.
- Note that staff might need increased supervision in times of crisis, personal or professional.

For MDTs:
- Offer specialized training for supervisors of MDT partner agencies.
- Meet with MDT supervisors to discuss systemic issues that may be causing unnecessary stress for team members and to ensure that supervisors are holding MDT members accountable regarding team ground rules in order to avoid horizontal bullying.
Sample Questions to Promote Reflection in Supervision

- What client/case has been the most difficult for you recently?
- Why do you think that case was particularly difficult?
- Why did you get into this field?
- What excites you about your work?
- What client/case has been the most inspiring for you recently? Why?
- What motivates you to do this work?
- How have you changed since you began this work?
- How has your identity as a professional grown and developed?
- Are there things/activities/hobbies you used to enjoy that you no longer do?
- What are aspects of your job in which you feel most competent?
- What aspects of your job duties are most challenging for you?
- Is there professional training you would like to access?
- Who are the professionals who inspire you?
- Tell me about your support system outside of work.
- What is the most effective strategy you use to take care of yourself in doing this work?
- Is there something I can do to better support you?
- Is there something this agency can do to better support you?
Printed Resources

Vicarious Trauma: What Can Managers and Organizations Do?

Vicarious Trauma

Understanding and Addressing Vicarious Trauma: Reflection Questions Workbook

Secondary Traumatic Stress: A Fact Sheet for Child-Serving Professionals

Secondary Trauma and Child Welfare Staff: Guidance for Supervisors and Administrators
http://nctsn.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/sts_cw_final.pdf

Secondary Trauma and Vicarious Trauma among Professionals Who Work with Maltreated Children
Professional Bibliography

The Business Case for a Comprehensive Organizational Health & Workplace Wellness Program

Secondary Traumatic Stress in Child Welfare Practice: Trauma-Informed Guidelines for Organizations
https://ctisp.files.wordpress.com/2017/01/stsinchildwelfarepractice-trauma-informedguidelinesfororganizations.pdf

Websites

National Child Traumatic Stress Network: Secondary Traumatic Stress

The Vicarious Trauma Toolkit
https://vtt.ovc.ojp.gov/

Headington Institute
http://www.headington-institute.org/

TEND
http://www.tendacademy.ca/

University of Buffalo School of Social Work
Self-Care Starter Kit
https://socialwork.buffalo.edu/resources/self-care-starter-kit.html

The National Children’s Advocacy Center: CALiO
http://calio.org/resources/vicarious-trauma-resources
Books


Videos from Headington Institute
These short 3-5 minute videos are great to show for staff or MDT meetings.

What Is Vicarious Trauma?
Laurie Ann Pearlman
http://www.headington-institute.org/resource-index/374/what-is-vicarious-trauma

Transforming Vicarious Trauma
Laurie Ann Pearlman
http://www.headington-institute.org/resource-index/432/transforming-vicarious-trauma

Four Ways to Rebuild Responder Resilience
Jim Guy
http://www.headington-institute.org/resource-index/440/four-ways-to-rebuild-responder-resilience
SAMPLE PLAN

It is often hard to conceptualize what a VT plan might look like. To help CACs gain insight into how to begin developing a comprehensive plan, the National Children’s Advocacy Center (NCAC) Wellness Plan is included in the next section of this guide. This plan is a work in process, and it is not intended to be a static document. We are constantly exploring and adding new ideas and strategies.

How did we get started? We talked about implementing a comprehensive plan for over a year. In the meantime, we were already implementing strategies along the way, such as giving staff an additional four hours of personal leave every month.

Once we were ready to be more strategic and intentional about a comprehensive plan, we assembled a steering committee comprising supervisors and staff who had an interest in driving this process. Next, we conducted a survey of all staff, identified our gaps, and developed a plan to address those gaps.

The point is to be intentional. Acknowledge what you are already doing in what areas, then identify strategies that would help to create a supportive, healthy environment for your staff.

Remember, this is just a sample, a glimpse into one agency’s effort to implement strategies that will support staff so they can maintain their health and well-being and, in turn, provide quality services to children and families. After all, we are just trying to help some kids!
National Children’s Advocacy Center Wellness Plan

Working with children and families who have experienced trauma will impact our staff in profound ways. We seek to provide an environment that acknowledges:

1. Our employees are our most valuable resource.
2. The well-being of our employees and MDT is paramount.
3. Acknowledging the impact of this work without worry of stigma or shame is important to mitigate the negative aspects of working with victims of child abuse.
4. Discussing the positive and negative impacts of this work is encouraged and considered healthy.

Therefore, NCAC has developed the following plan to promote resilience and wellness within our organization.

**Goal: Create a secondary traumatic stress-informed organization.**

**Primary Focus Area I: Organizational/Policies and Procedures**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initiatives</th>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Person/Committee Responsible</th>
<th>Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Develop a STS steering committee</td>
<td>Michelle Krohn, Karen Hangartner</td>
<td>Completed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administer the STSI-OA</td>
<td>Michelle Krohn, Karen Hangartner</td>
<td>Completed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Add STS-Informed questions to interview questions</td>
<td>Michelle Krohn</td>
<td>Completed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide four hours per month of personal leave in addition to generous sick and annual leave benefits</td>
<td>Board of Directors and Executive Team</td>
<td>Completed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental health support for staff</td>
<td>Paula Wolfteich, Michelle Krohn</td>
<td>In process</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

**Primary Focus Area II: Training**

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Initiatives</th>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Person/Committee Responsible</th>
<th>Status</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>STS 101 training for all staff</td>
<td>Karen Hangartner</td>
<td>Completed</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Safety training for staff</td>
<td>Beth Jackson and Steering Committee</td>
<td>In process</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hold annual STS training</td>
<td>Steering Committee</td>
<td>In process</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make Symposium a STS-informed conference</td>
<td>Amy Boyd</td>
<td>Completed</td>
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### Primary Focus Area III: Supervision

<table>
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<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Person/Committee Responsible</th>
<th>Status</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Supervisor needs assessment discussions</td>
<td></td>
<td>Linda Steele, Paula Wolfteich, Michelle Krohn</td>
<td>Competed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training for supervisors</td>
<td></td>
<td>Linda Steele, Paula Wolfteich, Michelle Krohn</td>
<td>Not started</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create opportunities for supervisors to develop peer support relationships</td>
<td></td>
<td>Steering Committee</td>
<td>Not started</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Primary Focus Area IV: Resilience Building Activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initiatives</th>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Person/Committee Responsible</th>
<th>Status</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hold quarterly staff lunches (paid)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Michelle Krohn</td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share a client success story in monthly staff meetings</td>
<td></td>
<td>Paula Wolfteich and Pam Clasgens</td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conduct brief networking and/or supportive activities at start of monthly staff meetings</td>
<td></td>
<td>Michelle Krohn and Steering Committee</td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compassion Fatigue Book Study Group</td>
<td></td>
<td>Michelle Krohn and Cym Doggett</td>
<td>In process</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>