



WEST VIRGINIA DEFENDING CHILDHOOD INITIATIVE

OVERVIEW:

A recent national survey of the incidence and prevalence of children's exposure to violence and trauma revealed that 60% of American children have been exposed to violence, crime or abuse. Forty percent were direct victims of two or more violent acts. Prolonged exposure to violence and trauma can seriously undermine children's ability to focus, behave appropriately, and learn in school. It often leads to school failure, truancy, suspension or expulsion, dropping out, or involvement in the juvenile justice system.

The West Virginia Defending Childhood Initiative, commonly referred to as "Handle With Care," is tailored to reflect the needs and issues affecting children in West Virginia. The Initiative, a result of a collaborative effort of key stakeholders and partners, builds upon the success of proven programs throughout the country. The goal of the Initiative is to prevent children's exposure to trauma and violence, mitigate negative affects experienced by children's exposure to trauma, and to increase knowledge and awareness of this issue.

Model Handle With Care ("HWC") programs promote safe and supportive homes, schools and communities that *protect* children, and help traumatized children *heal* and *thrive*. HWC promotes school-community partnerships aimed at ensuring that children who are exposed to trauma in their home, school or community receive appropriate interventions to help them achieve academically at their highest levels despite whatever traumatic circumstances they may have endured. The ultimate goal of HWC is to help students to succeed in school. Regardless of the source of trauma, the common thread for effective intervention is the school. Research now shows that trauma can undermine children's ability to learn, form relationships, and function appropriately in the classroom. HWC programs support children exposed to trauma and violence through improved communication and collaboration between law enforcement, schools and mental health providers, and connects families, schools and communities to mental health services.

PILOT:

"Handle with Care" is an initiative currently being piloted at Mary C. Snow West Side Elementary School in Charleston, WV. The school, located in an urban area of the city plagued by drug and violent crime, houses approximately 500 students. Ninety-Three percent of the students come from low-income families. The school has ranked 398 out of 404 elementary schools in West Virginia for poor performance. In conjunction with "Handle With Care," the United States Attorney's Office has launched a Drug Market Intervention in the area to address high level drug and street crime.

LAW ENFORCEMENT:

“Handle with Care” provides the school with a “heads up” when a child has been identified at the scene of a traumatic event. It could be a meth lab explosion, a domestic violence situation, a shooting in the neighborhood, witnessing a malicious wounding, a drug raid at the home, etc. Police are trained to identify children at the scene, find out where they go to school and send the school a confidential email or fax that simply says . . . “Handle Johnny with care”. That’s it. No other details.

In addition to providing notice, officers also build positive relationships with students by interacting on a regular basis. They visit classrooms, stop by for lunch, and simply chat with students to help promote positive relationships and perceptions of officers.

SCHOOLS:

Teachers have been trained on the impact of trauma on learning, and are incorporating many interventions to mitigate the negative impact of trauma for identified students, including: sending students to the clinic to rest (when a HWC has been received and the child is having trouble staying awake or focusing); re-teaching lessons; postponing testing; small group counseling by school counselors; and referrals to counseling, social service or advocacy programs. The school has also implemented many school-wide interventions to help create a trauma sensitive school (Greeters; pairing students with an adult mentor in the school; utilization of a therapy dog; and “thumbs up/thumbs down” to indicate if a student is having a good day or a bad day).

COUNSELING:

When identified students exhibit continued behavioral or emotional problems in the classroom, the counselor or principal refers the parent to a counseling agency which provides trauma-focused therapy. Currently, there are two partnering agencies providing trauma focused therapy on site at the school in a room provided by the Family Care Health Center housed within the school. Once the counseling agency has received a referral and parental consent, students can receive on-site counseling.

The counseling is provided to children and families at times which are least disruptive for the student. The counselors also participate in MDT, SAT and other meetings deemed necessary by school personnel, and as authorized by the child’s parent or guardian. Counselors provide assessments of the child’s need, psychological testing, treatment recommendations, accommodation recommendations, and status updates to key school personnel as authorized by the child’s parent or guardian.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

Components of this program were developed with guidance and technical assistance from the Massachusetts Advocates for Children: Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative, in collaboration with Harvard Law School and the Task Force on Children Affected by Domestic Violence. Special thanks to Joe Ristuccia, Ed.M., co-author of *Helping Traumatized Children Learn*, Edward Jacobs with the Plymouth County District Attorney’s Office in Brockton, MA, and Huntington, WV community activist and volunteer Leon White.