

Building a Community Response to Trauma

JUST
TRANSITION
FUND



AROUND THE WORLD, RURAL COMMUNITIES ARE EXPERIENCING A RAPID AND OFTEN INVOLUNTARY ECONOMIC UPHEAVAL AS GLOBAL ENERGY PRODUCTION SHIFTS AWAY FROM COAL.

Regions that have relied on coal are seeing mines close, plants shuttered, and hundreds of workers laid off. As local leaders respond to these macroeconomic dynamics, trauma and resiliency are critical factors in developing a just economic transition that lasts over time. This paper provides steps for including trauma and resiliency planning in local economic transition efforts.

Trauma is defined as an event or set of circumstances that has a lasting adverse impact on an individual's physical, mental, emotional and social well-being.¹ Trauma, and particularly childhood trauma, can impair a person's functioning over time and make change particularly challenging.

Trauma is often talked about as an individual experience, but it can also be felt at a community level. Community violence, natural disasters, chronic poverty and lack of social capital, discrimination, and economic adversity are all forms of systemic stressors. Traumatic events also offer the opportunity to develop and practice resiliency, the ability to integrate deeply stressful circumstances, and to move forward successfully.

Economic development leaders, community planners, public health advocates and elected officials are all tasked with managing a wide range of responses to community disruption. Economic transition efforts may have better long-term outcomes when they thoughtfully reflect on the role trauma has played in a local community – both prior to and during a major economic loss – and intentionally plan for support that helps individuals, families, and the community build resilience.

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¹ <https://www.integration.samhsa.gov/clinical-practice/trauma>

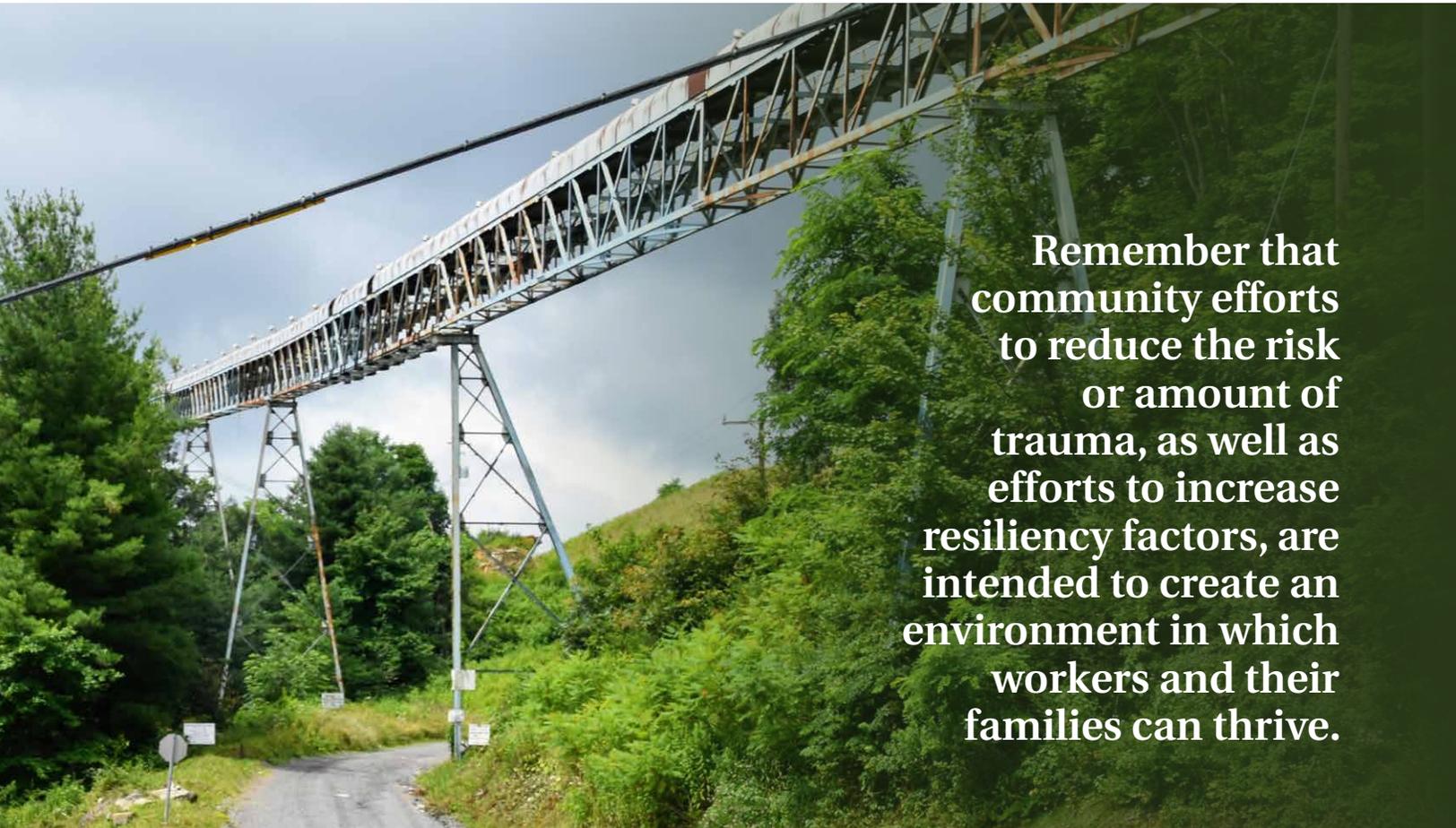
Why should trauma be addressed at a community or systems level?

IN THE CASE OF A COAL MINE OR POWER PLANT CLOSURE, A COMMUNITY IS LIKELY TO EXPERIENCE BOTH INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNITY-LEVEL TRAUMA. Because trauma can have its roots in, or be exacerbated by, structural frameworks in a community, solutions should likewise be at a systems-level. Complex trauma experienced by a large number of residents can have ripple effects throughout a community, creating the need for a community-level approach.

When confronting trauma in economic development and transition planning, the approach must be community-driven and responsive to local stakeholders, experiences, history and vision. There is no template for trauma mitigation and resiliency planning at a community level. Locally crafted solutions that represent the unique diversity of a community are essential to a sustainable approach. This paper will provide guidelines for economic development leaders to shape the

discussion on building a resilient community in the wake of significant economic upheaval, but the data, goals and outcomes will be unique to the area.

Remember that community efforts to reduce the risk or amount of trauma, as well as efforts to increase resiliency factors, are intended to create an environment in which workers and their families can thrive. These efforts are not a substitute for skilled therapeutic and mental health interventions. Individuals dealing with significant or complex trauma should work with a licensed professional on trauma integration and recovery. Community efforts around trauma and resiliency are more about increasing the odds of success – working to remove systemic foundations of trauma and investing in community infrastructure in a way that contributes to individual wellbeing.



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How can trauma be addressed at a community or systems level?

ESTABLISH A KEY STAKEHOLDER TEAM

DEVELOPING A LOCAL ECONOMIC TRANSITION PLAN THAT DEMONSTRATES AN AWARENESS OF INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNITY TRAUMA, AND ALSO DRIVES TOWARD INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNITY RESILIENCY, REQUIRES A MULTI-DISCIPLINARY STAKEHOLDER TEAM. Bringing diverse sectors into alignment on a clear set of shared goals helps to focus resources, improve communication, and formalize the goals into the fabric of the community. A good economic transition effort will endure at the systems-level, rather than be dependent on a few motivated individuals to maintain momentum.

A diverse local stakeholder group for trauma-aware economic planning may include representatives from the following sectors:

- Economic Development & Community
- Mental, Physical and Behavioral Health
- Elected Officials
- Schools and Child Care
- Business Leaders & Chambers of Commerce
- Justice, Legal, and Law enforcement
- Churches & Nonprofits
- Culture, History, & Arts
- Media

The intentional inclusion of representatives from the arts sector and media may be unusual in typical economic development efforts. However, both can make useful contributions to a successful, trauma-informed transition planning process. Grounding community transition projects in the culture and history of the area can help residents feel connected in times of turmoil. Responding to change by opening up space for public art, historical markers, or other artifacts of community connection can convey the idea that the core community identity remains intact.

Likewise, engagement with media outlets can help to build trust, an important component of transition planning as discussed below. At a basic level, regular collaboration with traditional and social media platforms can give residents information regarding changing circumstances, which allows individuals to anticipate and plan in a way that mitigates stress and anxiety.

Sustainable economic development flourishes in an environment of transparency and openness, where community members know what to expect. Journalists can also tell stories that connect communities, share successes, and translate complex concepts into a community

narrative.² Further, marginalized groups may find empowerment through having their stories told.

Each community stakeholder group will look a little different and should reflect the unique contours of the local challenges being confronted. The recommendations in this document are guidelines to challenge local leaders to think beyond the typical participants in economic development and invite a broader range of voices to the table.

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² Stevens, Jane. "How Social Journalism Accelerates the ACEs Movement." *Academic Pediatrics*. Volume 17, Issue 7, Supplement, September–October 2017, Pages S26-S27

IDENTIFY CORE VALUES FOR PLANNING EFFORT

IN ADDITION TO DEVELOPING A BROAD STAKEHOLDER CONVERSATION AROUND TRAUMA AND RESILIENCY IN ECONOMIC TRANSITION PLANNING, IDENTIFYING CORE VALUES IN PLANNING CAN SUPPORT A SUCCESSFUL OUTCOME. A planning process that focuses on equity and inclusion, openness and transparency, and locally relevant goals and strategies helps to create a broad, shared commitment to a vision that can endure over time. Local values may

influence the process as well and should be identified at the outset of any planning process. Taking time to establish core values creates a platform for consensus and helps to focus conversations.

Equity. A successful community planning process will ensure that diverse points of view are represented in the discussion. Particularly important is the inclusion of lived experience – ensuring that workers on the front lines of coal transitions, families confronting social or financial barriers, individuals recovering from opioid addictions, and other representative voices are integrated into the development of solutions and transition planning. Equitable planning processes often have to confront sensitive topics, but doing so in a respectful manner can help to strengthen the response to economic disruption. For example, the planning process may need to consider specific strategies for men and women if women are experiencing a loss of a job as well as an increased risk of domestic violence in the home.³ Younger workers may experience a higher rate of substance abuse in a particular community, while another community may see substance abuse issues among older residents.

Stories from other industries, regions, or moments in time are instructive, not determinative.

Openness. Creating an atmosphere of safety and trust is at the core of trauma informed practice. In each coal-dependent community, the nuances of building safety and trust may be unique.

For example, workers may feel distrust at promises of new investment or workforce transition, feeling like they have heard similar promises before. Some residents may feel like they are betraying friends and neighbors if they express desire for clean energy investment or non-coal commercial development. Parents may fear that acknowledging household dysfunction will result in children being taken away or judgment from other community members, while persons battling substance abuse issues may fear the criminal justice system. Community members who want to start planning for a post-coal future before a mine or plant closure is final may fear accusations of disloyalty or “giving up”.

As challenging as these examples can be, strong transition planning depends on dealing with the realities faced by a community. Creating an environment where complex issues can be discussed increases the odds of sustaining progress.



³ <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/484541544643269894/pdf/130659-REVISED-PUBLIC-Managing-Coal-Mine-Closure-Achieving-a-Just-Transition-for-All-November-2018-final.pdf>

STRATEGIES FOR BUILDING OPENNESS AND TRUST IN COMMUNITY PLANNING EFFORTS INCLUDE:



Using a neutral facilitator with no expressed viewpoint



Using strong communication techniques



Making clear that there are no right answers or wrong ideas



Offering different ways for community members to share input



Managing time well



Ensuring that physical space conveys equality



Process transparency

Strategies for building openness and trust in community planning efforts include:

- Using a neutral facilitator with no expressed viewpoint. The facilitator may be a person in the community that is well-known for this type of leadership. In a small community, someone from a different town may be more appropriate.
- Using strong communication techniques, such as repeating back comments to be sure a speaker is being heard, asking nonjudgmental questions to clarify, and actively inviting people to share thoughts so that all voices are heard.
- Making clear that there are no right answers or wrong ideas, and welcoming challenging questions.
- Offering different ways for community members to share input, including large groups, small groups, interviews, written responses, and surveys.
- Managing time well. Planning sessions, whether public or with smaller groups, should allow enough time for all perspectives to be heard without letting the conversation get stuck on any one topic.
- Ensuring that physical space communicates equality. Room set-ups for large meetings should avoid setting one group apart – elected officials on a dais, for example. Similarly, planning meetings can rotate locations throughout a community, so that all neighborhoods have equal opportunity to learn and participate in transition efforts.
- Process transparency. Ensure that all stakeholders are aware of next steps and how decisions are being made, receiving ongoing updates, and that progress against milestones is being tracked and shared.

Local. Although many communities are undergoing a seismic shift as the coal economy falters, there is no one set of recommendations

Whether focusing on the needs of the current workforce, or planning for a healthy workforce in the future, economic development goals should always identify those inherent community strengths that can form the basis of a just transition.

for just and equitable transition planning that will fit every community. Developing locally crafted solutions that are informed by broader best practices is more likely to respond to the true needs and traumas of a community.

The contours and shared experiences of working in a power plant or coal mine are unique to a particular area – simply grafting a community strategy from another place onto a community is unlikely to succeed. Stories from other industries, regions, or moments in time are instructive, not determinative. The local character should be reflected in resiliency-focused community transition plans – not just relative economic/competitive advantages or weaknesses, but the shared history and experience of the frontline workers.

Community planning efforts can use some concepts of design thinking to fully explore the context, challenges, and opportunities in a local area. Spend time thinking about the unmet needs of workers and families in the community, and brainstorm ways unique to the locality for addressing those gaps. Gather local data to supplement state or national trends, identify specific strengths of a community, and put precision to the challenges and goals for economic transition in the area. Test and pilot strategies if possible, gathering feedback and refining ideas over time. Engaging stakeholders in crafting local solutions creates empowerment and responsiveness, helping to build community and support transition.

CREATE BROAD FRAMEWORK OF VISION & GOALS

ANY SUCCESSFUL PLANNING EFFORT WILL INCLUDE A CLEAR ARTICULATION OF THE GOALS THAT THE COMMUNITY WANTS TO ACHIEVE. While specific goals will be shaped through the planning process, community leaders may choose to establish a preliminary framework to focus conversations in a productive direction. For economic transition planning, high-level goals may focus on specific workforce principles, as well as community development or infrastructure.

When thinking about workforce transition, goal setting should be aware of both the dispositions of workers in the community (e.g. physical jobs, hands-on labor) and also the sometimes difficult history of heavy labor.⁴ Goals that honor the dedication of workers over generations, while still moving to an economically sustainable future, may improve worker engagement in transition efforts.

When setting goals beyond immediate workforce needs, trauma-informed planning may choose to focus particularly on the unique challenges of childhood trauma. Adults in the workforce today who have a history of childhood trauma may face more difficulties in responding to change. Children who experience trauma during a time of widespread community disruption present a double challenge. First, children with trauma can strain education and health systems in a time when community resources are dwindling and second, those children may grow into adults with a higher propensity for physical, mental, and behavioral health issues that reduce earnings and productivity over time.

For those reasons, the Harvard Center on Developing Child recommends three primary goals for community planning around trauma and resiliency: supporting responsive relationships for children and adults, strengthening core life skills, and reducing sources of stress in the lives of children and families.⁵ Tailoring these broad goals to specific desired outcomes in a local community can help to lay the



foundation for stable economic growth. Communities may also consider the guidelines of the Collective Impact Model to form a shared agenda for success.⁶

Whether focusing on the needs of the current workforce, or planning for a healthy workforce in the future, economic development goals should always identify those inherent community strengths that can form the basis of a just transition. Every community has positive, protective factors that will, if properly supported, guide residents through hardship and downturn. Change and healing can take time, so goals may need to have both an immediate deliverable and a long-term perspective.

Building a community response to trauma and resiliency during a time of widespread economic disruption is a complex and challenging process, but the cost of responding to the negative social consequences of unaddressed trauma may be much higher than planning for positive outcomes at the outset. Using basic trauma-aware principles, such as ensuring many voices are represented, establishing shared values, and communicating clear goals, can lead to a more successful and sustainable transition planning effort.

⁴ Bridget Murray Law. "Coal Miners dilemma". *Monitor on Psychology*. April 2012, Vol 43, No. 4. Page 40. Available at <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2012/04/coal-miners>.

⁵ <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/three-early-childhood-development-principles-improve-child-family-outcomes/>

⁶ https://ssir.org/articles/entry/collective_impact