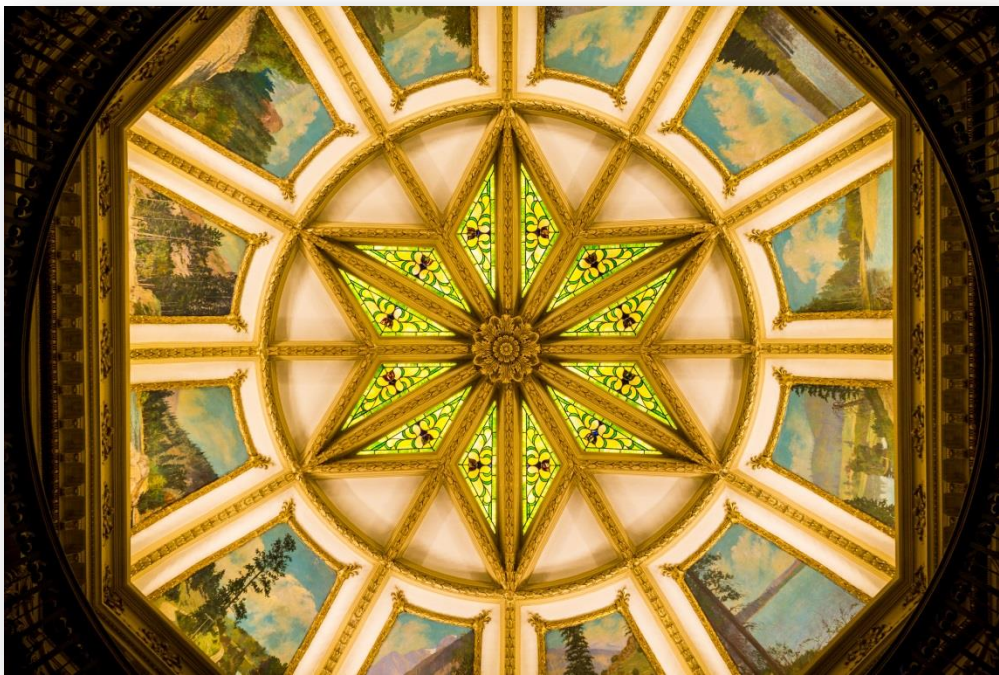


Secondary Trauma Group – Implementing Organizational Resiliency for Prosecutors

Abstract of Program

The Missoula County Attorney's Office, in collaboration with local trauma expert Andrew Laue, L.C.S.W., created and implemented an innovative and groundbreaking organizational resiliency program for prosecutors and staff called Secondary Trauma Group, to prevent and mitigate the negative effects associated with working with victims of violent crime. The program's facilitator is a clinical social worker who teaches the fundamentals of working with victims who have experienced trauma and also the devastating effects of long term exposure to secondary trauma stress to those professionals working closely with victims.



Missoula County Court House, E. Paxson paintings. T Uylaki photo

As a community, we are only beginning to understand and appropriately respond to trauma. Even more recently we started discussing the need to address secondary trauma in professionals who work with victims of abuse and violence. Little if any secondary trauma work has been done in the field of criminal prosecution, a profession literally immersed in violence and trauma. We've created a program to specifically address secondary trauma within a prosecutor's office.

Our Secondary Trauma Group has four major components—**Orientation; Development of Group Culture of Trauma Resiliency; Integration and Impact;** and **Case-Specific Trauma Response Teams**, involving prosecutors, jurors, advocates and law enforcement.

We have been able to successfully accomplish several of the program's goals. We have fostered an organizational culture that is safe, supportive and trauma-informed and are educating prosecutorial staff about neurobiological and behavioral effects of primary trauma in victims. Additionally, we've become organizationally fluent in secondary trauma. Our employees understand the risks associated with cumulative trauma exposure and are learning specific prevention strategies and remediation techniques.

We've created a **Resiliency Toolbox** full of resources employees can use to mitigate the impact of secondary trauma and maintain a positive work-life balance. We've also been able to offer case-specific post-trial trauma processing for jurors, our law enforcement partners and our litigation team.

Historical Challenge/Need

The field of studying and treating trauma is rapidly evolving as we begin to understand the profound effects of trauma on the human brain. When a person or child suffers on-going or intense abuse, the

experience actually changes the physiological structure of the brain and ushers psychological effects that change the person's view of and response to stress, to others and to the world. Trauma affects the brain's ability to process information, recall events and communicate to others.

Even more recently, we've started to recognize the existence and profound negative effects of *secondary trauma stress [STS]*—also described as vicarious trauma or compassion fatigue---on people who regularly work with victims of primary trauma, such as law enforcement and social workers. Indirect exposure to trauma such as listening to details of abuse, preparing cases for court and seeing photographic evidence of traumatic injuries accumulates over time and, unless the person utilizes strategies for preventing and addressing STS, that cumulative exposure can significantly impact the professional's work life, personal life and mental health.

Trauma psychologists tell us—and we've seen firsthand-- that those who work with victims of crime for prolonged periods of time often experience symptoms similar to those of PTSD, such as difficulty concentrating, headaches, stomachaches, depression, intrusive images, nightmares, strained personal relationships, fatigue, difficulty sleeping and compromised parenting. Andrew Levin, M.D., Assistant Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at Columbia, wrote, “[T]here is a consensus that STS and VT (vicarious traumatization) degrade



Missoula County Attorney's Office staff. T Uylaki photo

the professional's ability to perform his or her task and function in daily life beyond the job.”

Like criminal investigators, prosecutors and staff who work with victims of violent crime are at very high risk to suffer the effects of STS. In fact, according to Laue, “Professionals who are the most successful, because of their ability to openly and effectively engage with victims, suffer the greatest negative consequences of secondary trauma.”

Even though STS is considered a normal response to this kind of work, it often results in decreased productivity and interest in work, increased use and abuse of substances and higher turnover than in other legal settings. An organization’s most talented employees experience the greatest need for tools to process trauma in a healthy manner.

Despite the level of suffering and negative personal and financial effects of secondary trauma on prosecutors—particularly those working in domestic and sexual violence, child abuse and homicide—there remains a notable lack of programming designed to prevent and mitigate the negative effects on those dedicated employees.

Description of the Program

Addressing secondary trauma has become part of our curriculum at the Missoula County Attorney’s office. Our program does not replace more traditional forms of employee assistance, such as EAP and wholeness regimes, but incorporates those tools into the Resiliency Toolbox.

Born of necessity, our Secondary Trauma Group is the manifestation of an institutional acknowledgement that the status quo is inadequate and commitment to a healthier way of doing business,

as reflected in the program objectives, specified below. The program has been up and running for approximately 18 months.

Erika Tullberg, an expert on secondary trauma and assistant professor at New York University's Child Study Center explained the importance of making changes at the institutional level. Tullberg said, "The most important component of mitigating the impact from secondary trauma (and the best way to limit employees from developing it in the first place) is through organizational changes."

American Bar Association, Child Law Practice, Understanding Secondary Trauma, Vol. 34. No. 9, Sept. 2015 (pg. 136).

Similarly, the **American Bar Association** recommends organizational programs designed to counter STS in the legal system. ABA, Center for Children and the Law, Understanding the Impact of Secondary Trauma on Lawyers Working with Children and Families, presentation by Carly Baetz, psychologist at Mount Sinai Health System, Center for Child Trauma and Resilience in New York, 2016 (stressing that organizational strategies and changes are key in addressing STS).

Brief descriptions of our original objectives and core program components, which encompass change at the organizational level follow.

Objectives

1. To foster an organizational culture that is safe, supportive and trauma-informed. Our goal is to educate prosecutorial staff on the effects of neurobiological and behavioral effects of primary trauma on victims of crime - the population we serve.
2. To become organizationally fluent in secondary trauma. Every prosecutor and support employee needs to understand the risks and symptoms associated with secondary trauma in a

legal setting and learn specific prevention strategies and remediation techniques.

3. To create a Resiliency Toolbox full of resources employees can use to mitigate the impact of secondary trauma and maintain a positive work-life balance. We want to be a resilient, effective and compassionate county attorney's office where talented public servants are supported and able to remain for the entirety of their careers.



County Attorney Pabst
T Uylaki photo

4. To offer post-trial trauma processing opportunities for jurors, increasing trauma education in the greater community. Jurors who serve in violent cases similarly need the information on the effects of exposure to caustic information and the need to process that information.

5. To engage and collaborate with our law enforcement partners in dynamic post-trial, trauma-informed debriefing sessions.

6. To promote best practices and share what we've learned about trauma with other prosecutors' offices so that they might derive the dynamic benefit of our secondary trauma group, ultimately improving longevity and public safety.

Components

Our Secondary Trauma Group has four major components—
Orientation; Development of Group Culture of Trauma Resiliency;

Integration and Impact; and **Case-Specific Trauma Response Teams,** involving prosecutors, jurors, advocates and law enforcement.

Orientation. The initial four-hour training session is designed to teach concepts grounded in latest research in the field of trauma work. The initial group has the largest number of participants and includes prosecutors, child protection attorneys, paralegals and victim witness coordinators. Participants learn about how primary trauma affects a victim and causes a neurobiological response which makes organizing, recalling and communicating stored information extremely difficult, providing critical insight into counter-intuitive responses in interviews and in court. This first session is also aimed at educating the larger group about the long term negative effects of exposure to STS, the necessity of processing STS, and how to prevent, process and mitigate STS in healthy, holistic ways. Pabst invited her entire staff to attend one of the initial sessions and required attendance by criminal and child-protective staff.

Development of Group Culture of Trauma Resiliency. The second component consists of monthly two-hour sessions with a smaller core group. The facilitator utilizes the process of dynamic experiential learning, combining lecture, discussion, idea-sharing and resonating to show how long-term work with traumatized people physically, mentally and emotionally impacts our work lives and our professional performance. The work is intended to build concrete skills that can be applied in a variety of contexts to reduce the impact of STS, enhance the level of positive functioning in and outside of work, and increase longevity within the workplace.

Integration and Impact. The third component is a summary four-hour meeting for the core group, where the team engages in concrete planning and prepares to go back to the larger work force as trauma-resilient ambassadors who promote a culture of trauma-fluency at the institutional level.

Case-Specific Trauma Response Teams. The final component consists of intermittent two-hour, post-trial debriefings with prosecutors, jurors and the law enforcement team. After a recent particularly gruesome domestic homicide trial, the foreperson of the jury approached the county attorney and said that he had considered dropping out of service, midway through the three-week trial, because the content of the testimony from witnesses who knew and loved the victim, a young mother, was so disturbing that the juror had not been able to sleep.

County Attorney Pabst and facilitator Andrew Laue, L.C.S.W., discussed how STS dramatically affects jurors too, and set up a debriefing session for all of the prosecution team, law enforcement team and jurors who wanted to attend. More than a dozen people, all deeply affected by the young woman's death, got together in a trauma-informed setting and had a vibrant and therapeutic discussion bringing much-needed closure while educating participants about trauma.

Time Line

It took approximately four months from the program's inception to full implementation. The elected Missoula County Attorney, Kirsten Pabst, began the planning process in February of 2016, and the first group training session took place on June 14, 2016. The clinical social worker we chose to facilitate this collaborative project, Andrew Laue, L.C.S.W., has significant expertise working in the trauma field—both primary trauma with individuals and secondary trauma work with groups, but we recognized early in the developmental phase that implementing this kind of organizational resiliency within a prosecutor's office was unprecedented and presented unique challenges.

Ms. Pabst spent time talking to other professionals involved in trauma work, including a SANE nurse and social work supervisor, and had several preparatory discussions with the program facilitator. With Laue as the guide, they developed a Secondary Trauma Program tailored specifically for those working in the legal fold of the criminal justice system, to include prosecuting attorneys, child-protection attorneys, paralegals and victim witness coordinators.

Once we had the skeletal structure in place our next step was to secure funding, finalize a contract and commit to a schedule.

As of the date of submission, we have completed the first wave of our Secondary Trauma Group. The program was so well received and successful that we are well into our second wave and plan on continuing the program into the future.

Cost

We estimated that the program would require approximately 28 hours per year and, as a result, allocated \$2,800 for the first 12-month wave of our STG. All of the expense was to pay the facilitator for his time, at \$100 per hour. No operating costs were incurred.

Results/Success

Our Secondary Trauma Group has been hugely successful. Amongst the core group participating in the first wave, employees' effectiveness and productivity have markedly improved. Staff remind each other why they've chosen this meaningful work and that helping victims of abuse navigate the complex court system, however challenging, is our purpose. The group has instilled a renewed sense of justice, increasing overall job satisfaction and workplace harmony.

Inner-office comradery and communication have improved as have the depth and quality of professional relationships with our clients—

victims of trauma. We understand that we are not alone in facing challenges inherent in this field and that being affected by STS is not a sign of weakness or failure.

Career prosecutor Jordan Kilby described how the program helped normalize the STS. She said,

“Secondary Trauma Group has provided staff the opportunity to debrief and share experiences. I have found it to be specifically helpful in expressing some of the secondary trauma that comes along with hearing children speak about being victimized. Knowing that other attorneys have experienced similar struggles with the material we work with has been helpful because I've learned that having a reaction to the job is a normal experience.”

Lead Victim Witness Coordinator, Cathy Dorle, reflected on the multiple benefits of participating in the core group.

“Exposure to the emotional, mental and physical trauma of others is a daily occurrence for many of us working at the MCAO, and can lead to excessive job related stress.

Participating in the Secondary Trauma Group has been a useful outlet for me to express and process how this trauma affects me personally. The group has provided useful tools in how to process these feelings in a healthy manner, in addition to supporting my co-workers in that endeavor.”

For a relatively small price, the benefits of this program are truly beyond measure. Advantages to each participant include greater job satisfaction, improved personal relationships and better physical, emotional and mental health. Returns to our organization include increased longevity, greater employee production and enhanced inner-office communication. Moreover, our communication and relationships with our partner law enforcement agencies have been

similarly enriched. Most importantly, the program has benefitted the victims that we serve by making the criminal justice process more tolerable for them. Increased victim participation leads to better outcomes which in turn makes our community a safer place.

A Unique and Worthy Program

The Missoula County Attorney's Office Secondary Trauma Group, to our knowledge, is the first organizational program of its kind in the field of legal prosecution. Though we are just beginning the second wave of the program, we have seen tangible results in the productivity and satisfaction of our dedicated staff, who have committed their careers to helping victims of violent crime. Our inner-office communication is better and our relationships with our community partners have improved.

The Case-Specific Trauma Response Group after a recent trial highlights the whole program's success. When the prosecution team, advocates, law enforcement team and group of jurors involved in a brutal homicide all got together to honor the victim, learn about trauma, the importance of processing trauma, and skills to make that happen, something truly magical and worthy of repetition happened. For us, this is just the beginning.