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# Building an Innovative Trauma-Informed Learning Community: Lessons Learned from the Center for Trauma Innovation

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This brief showcases the utility of learning communities (LCs) for supporting innovation, growth, and collaboration among organizations working toward shared outcomes. Community-based participatory research (CBPR) is presented as an approach to community-research partnerships that is well-suited to support the development of learning communities among organizations working to expand access to innovative, trauma-informed programming in justice-impacted communities.

*This memo is part of a series drawing on our evaluation of the CTI. For more information, visit [the CTI Evaluation page](#).*

An overview of learning communities and CBPR values is presented, followed by a discussion of how program evaluators can

support organizations in developing and expanding learning communities through consultation and collaboration informed by CBPR values and practices. A case study of the Center for Trauma Innovation at Exodus Transitional Communities in partnership with evaluators from the Center for Complex Trauma at Icahn School of Medicine is presented to illuminate the process of leveraging community-research partnerships toward the development of learning communities, including challenges, solutions, and lessons learned along the way. This brief concludes with recommendations for program evaluators, community organizations, and other stakeholders interested in establishing innovative, trauma-informed learning communities using a CBPR framework for research-community partnerships.

# Learning Communities: Capacity-Building through Shared Knowledge and Collaborative Practice

Learning communities, also known as ‘communities of practice’ or ‘knowledge communities’, are collaborative networks dedicated to the exchange of knowledge, experience, and advice between members of similar organizations, entities, identities, and/or locations (American Productivity & Quality Center, 2023; Bussiere et al., 2022). These networks promote organizational capacity-building through collaboration and knowledge-sharing between individuals with similar experiences and common purposes. They exist in a variety of modalities (e.g., social media, long-term cohort programs, workshops, conference-style gatherings) and organization types (e.g., educational, non-profit).

The structure and purpose of learning communities reflect the goals and values

of the organizations and individuals comprising these networks. Some key benefits of LCs include:

1. Opportunities for innovation in a field of practice, informed by the synthesis of knowledge, reflective learning based on successes and failures, and shared experiences of growth and exploration among the partners comprising the network;
2. Consensus-building regarding best practices related to working in a shared field of practice, approaching a common phenomenon, or working with a distinct community;
3. Convergence of resources and coordination of response toward challenges facing communities over time and in moments of crisis.

## Community-Based Participatory Research: Guiding Principles

Community-based participatory research is an approach to research that equitably involves partners/stakeholders in all aspects of the research process (Detroit URC, 2011). A CBPR partnership is generally a researcher-community partnership, in which researchers partner with (rather than simply engage) community members affected by the

phenomenon of study as well as leaders and/or organizations representing or working with community members.

CBPR approaches vary based on the specific structure, goals, and needs of a given research-community partnership, though most CBPR endeavors are guided by the following principles:

1. Recognizing community as a unit of identity.
2. Promoting an empowerment framework and employing an explicit power-sharing process.
3. Building on assessment of needs, problems, strengths, assets, and resources within the community.
4. Facilitating co-learning and capacity-building among all partners.
5. Engaging in a cyclical, iterative process of learning, growing, and improving the quality and sustainability of the partnership.

6. Focusing on problems of relevance to the community using an ecological approach (Collins et al., 2018).
7. Balancing research and action for the mutual benefit of all partners.
8. Integrating results and action for community change; working toward the shared goal of producing positive, measurable impact in the community.
9. Disseminating findings and knowledge gained to the broader community and involving all partners in the dissemination process.

## **How Program Evaluators Can Support Organizations in Conceptualizing and Establishing Learning Communities**

Program evaluators using a CBPR approach can play an important role in exploring the utility and supporting the establishment of LCs in their partner organizations. Using an ecological approach to identify and respond to community needs generally leads to the recognition that problems affecting community health and wellness are usually caused by multiple intersecting factors and therefore warrant a similarly structured solution. As such, LCs may emerge as an important step toward identifying distinct but related resources in a broader network that can more effectively and sustainably support communities through collaboration and increased capacity. Several of the guiding principles of CBPR are key to evaluators' involvement in supporting

LC development:

1. Engaging in ongoing, iterative needs assessment;
2. Facilitating conscious processes of co-learning and capacity-building;
3. Balancing research and action toward shared goals within the partnership.

Evaluators using a CBPR approach generally become embedded within the partner organization as a function of foundational and ongoing relationship-building, collaborative evaluation design, and immersive data collection methodologies. As such, evaluators become well-positioned to learn about and offer insights regarding a program's capacity to assess community needs, determine diverse and specific approaches to meet those needs, and

navigate obstacles and related adaptations along the way. An assumption of any partnership is that partners bring to the table distinct but related sets of skills and perspectives; in the CBPR tradition, a key function of the evaluator-program partnership is sharing and leveraging those resources toward shared goals and outcomes. In the case of developing an LC, evaluators may extend data collection, analysis, integration, and communication skills to help an organization identify the need for establishing a larger network of knowledge, resource-sharing, and actionable support. This data may be gathered from community members/service recipients, program staff and leadership via observation, focus groups, interviews, and surveys. In addition, data may be gathered from a broader network of like-minded organizations/stakeholders working toward a shared goal or offering complementary services within a community. In short, program evaluation methodologies can be leveraged to identify gaps in knowledge and capacity, to determine whether an organization may benefit from working more explicitly within a network of other stakeholders, to assess whether a program has the capacity to engage in the development and facilitation of such a network, and to establish the steps required to start an LC.

Evaluators may also support the development of LCs with their partner organizations by working to create

program-specific and community-tailored methodologies. The characteristics and purposes of these methodologies may include:

1. Honoring the value and wisdom of community members' lived experiences by fore-fronting their contributions and actively engaging their input in directing the goals and structure of an LC;
2. Maintaining equitable membership in the LC, regardless of formal credentialing and with flexibility toward method and magnitude of contribution;
3. Producing tangible, accessible, and diverse knowledge that extends beyond the forms of knowledge generally dictated by traditional knowledge experts (i.e., accessible and useful products not limited to research publications);
4. Mechanisms for establishing accessible spaces/platforms for learning and teaching (i.e., accessible and community/program-centered spaces for knowledge creation and exchange);
5. Sustaining structure and function of an LC that is informed and shaped by community needs, preferences, abilities, and access.

Ideally, methodologies tailored toward and informed by the qualities above would culminate in the presentation of findings by evaluators to support the ongoing development, improvement, and evolution of an effective learning community.

## **Case Study:**

# **Developing a Learning Community with the Center for Trauma Innovation at Exodus Transitional Community**

In 2020, the Criminal Justice Investment Initiative (CJII) – a partnership between the CUNY Institute for State and Local Governance and the Manhattan District Attorney’s Office (DANY) – funded the development and evaluation of an innovative trauma treatment center in East Harlem to create opportunities for holistic individualized and community-based trauma treatment, increase access to trauma-informed reentry and diversion services, and reduce recidivism through holistic support. Exodus Transitional Community, a multi-location service and advocacy organization offering a broad spectrum of services for youth and adults impacted by the justice system, was chosen as the funding recipient to develop the Center for Trauma Innovation (CTI).

The primary goal of the CTI is to deliver innovative trauma treatment, training, and education to a local and international community of individuals impacted by the justice system and organizations seeking to support the health and wellness of their communities. The CTI’s vision is realized through three branches of programming:

1. Direct Services (DS) – culturally-competent and trauma-informed healing services for justice-impacted youth and adults;
2. Training and Technical Assistance (TTA) – resources for local organizations seeking to provide trauma-informed services;

3. Learning Community (LC) – a transformative, previously undefined collaborative space for the dissemination and growth of innovative and holistic trauma services.

The Center for Complex Trauma at Icahn School of Medicine in Mount Sinai Hospital (CCT) advances the science and treatment of traumatic stress and development of psychological resilience through clinical services, training and consultation, and trauma-informed program evaluation. The CCT was also selected and funded by DANY to partner with Exodus Transitional Community to conduct a process and outcome evaluation of the CTI. The evaluation design employs a CBPR approach focused on consistently incorporating community (participant and staff) feedback into all aspects and steps of the evaluation, using immersive and varied methods for collecting data, translating data into knowledge to be shared with the community in real time throughout the evaluation process, and leveraging evaluators’ skills toward the accomplishment of goals defined by the community.

At the start of the partnership, 2 out of 3 elements of CTI programming were well-defined and actively in planning or implementation – a wide range of DS were being offered to the community served by

the CTI and TTA was being offered to CTI staff as well as a range of organizations in the local community and nationwide. However, the third element – establishment of an innovative, trauma-informed LC – was not yet in development. After taking one year to build a strong relational foundation for collaborative endeavors and in the process learning about barriers to conceptualizing and implementing the LC, the evaluation team saw an opportunity to provide consultation and leverage data collection, analysis, and program development skills to work with CTI toward the establishment of an LC.

Members of the CTI staff and CCT evaluation team attended a global network gathering of justice organizations working toward a shared goal of providing culturally-competent and trauma-informed services to improve quality of life and increase social capital for justice-impacted communities nationwide. The goal of their participation was to connect with likeminded organizations and to learn about a potential model for the development of a localized learning community to be established and led by the CTI. The global network gathering employed a diverse range of methods for sharing knowledge with participating organizations, including storytelling, workshops, panels, and technical assistance aimed at providing spaces for the exploration of intellectual, practical, and creative ingenuity. The purpose of this gathering was to support organizational leaders in effectively translating and adapting such learning spaces into the context of their own mission and values.

Through their participation, CTI and CCT were able to actively participate in an exemplary learning community and bear witness to its impact through participant testimony.

CTI and CCT members returned with a series of takeaways that helped to refocus ongoing conversations at the CTI about the development of an LC. The partners engaged in a series of reflective conversations about the benefits and shortcomings of the gathering as related to CTI's goals around establishing an LC. The purpose of these reflective conversations was to determine the purpose and function of an LC as well as to explore, predict, and attempt to preemptively address some of the challenges that may arise in the implementation of an LC. Framed by the goals of knowledge sharing, skill-sharing, and generating solutions, the conversations gave way to the development of a framework for establishing an LC. The results of these discussions are outlined as follows:

### **Determining the Function and Purpose of CTI's Trauma-Informed Learning Community**

The primary purpose of the CTI's trauma-informed Learning Community is to provide a space for the generation, organization, and dissemination of theoretical and practical information related to:

1. Understanding the effects of multiple

and chronic traumas, including the unique context of incarceration trauma and its impact on individual and community health and wellness;

2. The specific experiences (including barriers, vulnerabilities, strengths, and assets) of the community served by the CTI in East Harlem;

3. Innovative, holistic, and accessible approaches to treating chronic and intersecting traumatic stressors in justice-impacted communities.

## **Defining Learning Community**

### **Membership**

One of the key goals of CTI's learning community is that the knowledge created and shared within the LC remain accessible to the individuals and communities most impacted by this specific context of trauma. Therefore, membership in the LC will need to include organizations with access to a range of information and resources, stemming from the lived experiences of justice-impacted people and those embedded in their communities through leadership and support roles. It should also include topic experts with access to the most up-to-date empirical findings and theoretical frameworks for understanding incarceration trauma, its impact, and steps toward resolution at all levels of social ecology.

With this in mind, CTI's learning community membership was defined to include community leaders, credible messengers<sup>1</sup> with lived experience, youth members of the community, advocates,

researchers, policy makers, program leaders and staff, and a diverse range of healers (Credible Messenger Justice Center, 2023).

### **Determining an Appropriate Structure for the Learning Community**

Learning communities can be established in a variety of different formats, reflective of the accessibility and needs of its members. For the CTI, a few broad goals shaped the determination of most appropriate LC format:

1. Prioritizing involvement from justice-impacted individuals and communities, with an emphasis on accessibility that transcends a range of structural barriers;

2. Diversifying the concept of "expertise" to create a space that is welcoming of members who are willing to both teach and learn about the impact of incarceration trauma and the many pathways toward healing;

3. Increasing capacity and prioritizing relationship building between likeminded organizations and stakeholders working toward a shared goal.

While the determination of the ultimate structure for the CTI's LC is still in development, the approaches that would most likely address the goals above include a grand rounds structure<sup>2</sup>, a social media-based form of engagement to include youth members, and a series of monthly workshops hosted by a rotating set of local organizations (Zazulia, 2023). Importantly, remote accessibility and a

hybrid model of engagement were underscored as key components of engagement for a diverse LC membership, to include webinar-style

presentations with recordings or summary content posted on CTI's website for LC members to revisit or engage with at their own pace.

## **Summary, Key Highlights, and Recommendations**

In practice, establishing a learning community is an involved, long-term process that can give rise to a variety of challenges. Organizations serving communities facing multiple stressors, such as trauma-centered programs embedded within justice-impacted communities, have many competing goals that can significantly tax the capacity of its staff and stakeholders. Further, organizations staffed by individuals who have directly been impacted by the justice system must balance goals of programmatic expansion with ongoing efforts to support staff well-being.

It may be the case that an organization that is well-positioned to establish or participate in an LC based on its area of expertise and quality of services may not have the bandwidth to do so. Staff burnout, turnover, and changes in leadership may further hinder the ability of an organization to sustain an LC. Other notable challenges include the sustainability of funding and other resources, recruitment and retention of LC members, and maintenance of an

available and consistent LC leadership team. These challenges give rise to the value of collaboration with an institutional partner, such as program evaluators working in a CBPR approach, to support organizations in conceptualizing, developing, and implementing learning communities.

The case study of the Center for Trauma Innovation at Exodus Transitional Communities in partnership with evaluators from the Center for Complex Trauma at Icahn School of Medicine is presented to illuminate the process of leveraging community-research partnerships toward the development of learning communities and is meant to be considered as a reference point for program evaluators or organizations seeking to explore the establishment of a learning community for creating, organizing, and disseminating knowledge and resources among like-minded organizations and partnerships working toward shared goals of community stewardship, wellness, and engagement.



## References

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## **Footnotes**

[1] A credible messenger is someone with lived experience of justice system impact/ involvement who has transformed their lives.

[2] Grand rounds are a knowledge communication approach used to disseminate research findings and share expertise.