

## Appendix C – SAMPLE Trauma-Responsive Policy

### TRAUMA-RESPONSIVE POLICY: SUPPORTING STAFF IN THE WORKPLACE

#### I. PURPOSE

Many [Org] staff are themselves survivors of crime, abuse or other traumatic events. This includes both program and non-program staff. This policy is designed to support staff who may or may not identify as survivors, and may be experiencing both direct trauma and vicarious trauma. It provides guidelines for supervisors in supporting staff, including the following situations:

- When a candidate discloses trauma history during the hiring process
- When an employee's direct trauma is adding to their vicarious trauma responses to the work
- When an employee's direct trauma is affecting their performance

#### II. DEFINITIONS

**Individual Trauma:** Resulting from an event, series of events or set of circumstances experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life-threatening with lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional or spiritual well-being<sup>1</sup>.

[Org] acknowledges that staff members could be survivors of interpersonal violence or abuse and may experience symptoms of trauma while working at [Org]. We also recognize that staff may also be survivors of various forms of community and structural violence such as racism, homophobia, transphobia and xenophobia, which can cause trauma reactions.

**Vicarious Trauma:** Vicarious trauma, happens when people accumulate and carry stories of trauma, including images, sounds and details, that they hear and witness. More information is available [here](#). For those who work with survivors of violence — directly or indirectly — vicarious trauma is a common response to work-related trauma exposure. Our clients' stories affect our bodies, our minds and our worldview.

#### III. POLICY

[Org] recognizes that employees may also be survivors of violence or abuse. Some are drawn to this work because of struggles and/or parallels in their personal lives. We attribute the likelihood of having staff who are survivors to high rates of violence and abuse in our communities. Yet social stigma and uncertainty about professional boundaries can make it difficult to discuss these experiences at work. Research shows that people in helping professions who have personal trauma histories tend to be more vulnerable to vicarious trauma<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, [Org] acknowledges the importance of supporting staff in the workplace regarding trauma.

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<sup>1</sup>2014, SAMHSA [Publication](#)

<sup>2</sup> Lynn M. Michalopoulos & Elizabeth Aparicio (2012) Vicarious Trauma in Social Workers: The Role of Trauma History, Social Support, and Years of Experience, *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma*, 21:6, 646-664, DOI: 10.1080/10926771.2012.689422

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For survivors who work at [Org], their personal experience can be both an asset and a challenge. Survivors often bring to their work first-hand knowledge of abuse dynamics, resources, and coping strategies. They often have great empathy, passion and commitment. At the same time, survivors can be more vulnerable to vicarious trauma. Trauma history may negatively affect staff members' work at times. For example, survivors may be tempted to share too much with clients, or they may become judgmental or directive (as opposed to collaborative) when clients make choices different from staff member's own choices. At times, clients' stories may trigger staff's own trauma reactions.

Sharing one's trauma history with colleagues can be empowering and rewarding but it can also be painful and complicated. Staff who are survivors may have concerns about being judged or stigmatized. It may be hard to develop the right supports and coping strategies in a professional environment.

[Org] seeks to create an environment which recognizes that many staff are coping with both direct and vicarious trauma, and where staff feel they *can* choose to disclose that they are survivors.

Studies show that authentic, engaging and empowering supervision is key to managing and lessening the effects of vicarious trauma. Self-care, peer/group support, training and education are also helpful in managing vicarious trauma. At the organizational level, creating a culture of openness and trust will help staff to provide the best care possible for those we serve.

### IV. PROCEDURES AND GUIDELINES

1. [Org] culture and direct trauma:
  - a. Staff who work at [Org] may be survivors of violence or abuse. All staff members can help to create an environment where staff feel comfortable to disclose their survivor status or experience with trauma and seek needed support and resources.
2. The hiring process
  - a. Sometimes applicants disclose their trauma history during a job interview. (Please note that it is never appropriate to directly ask a candidate for their trauma history or if they are a survivor.) As described above, survivors bring many strengths to [Org]'s work. For those strengths to be realized, it is important that potential employees have an appropriate level of self-awareness and sound coping strategies. When a candidate discloses such information, the interviewer should explore and assess how the candidate would cope with their trauma history while working at [Org]. For client-facing positions, this includes asking how the candidate would deliver client-centered practices when clients face circumstances similar to their own.
  - b. Sample interview questions might include:
    - i. "You've shared that you're a survivor of \_\_\_\_\_. How do you think your experience would inform your work here? What might be challenging?"

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- ii. “How do you think you would react if you worked with a client whose situation was similar to yours? How would you approach the client? What might it be like for you?”
- iii. “Everyone at [Org] hears a lot of stories of violence and abuse. This can cause vicarious trauma (explain if necessary). What strategies would you use to deal with vicarious trauma? Can you give me an example of a time you had to deal with this in the past?”
- iv. (Additionally, for prospective supervisors): “If one of the staff you supervise shared that they were a survivor of violence or abuse, how would you take that into account in your supervision?”

### 3. Disclosing trauma and employee choice:

- a. Employees are empowered to choose how they share their stories, and with whom. Supervisors can open the door to these conversations by recognizing that many employees have experienced violence or abuse.
- b. In most circumstances, as with all personal information, client-facing staff *should not* disclose their survivor status to clients. Such disclosures can complicate the helping relationship. There may be times when such disclosures are appropriate; the employee should always discuss the possibility with a supervisor before disclosing to a client.
- c. There could be a variety of reasons to disclose to colleagues or supervisors. For example, a staff member may be dealing with a current safety concern, such as stalking by an intimate partner, and may need support around safety in the workplace (see relevant organization policy). A staff member may seek supervisory support after reacting to a client situation in a way that reflects their personal abuse history. Or a staff member may be interested in sharing their own journey in order to build awareness and support for [Org]’s work.
- d. Supervisors who are themselves survivors can choose whether or not to disclose their status to staff. When supervisors choose to be open about their own experiences, they can be role models for staff in how to navigate some of the challenges described in this policy.
- e- Staff who are survivors may seek services outside [Org], through an employee assistance program, i.e. EAP, or other avenues.

### 4. The role of the supervisor:

- a. Due to the nature of our work at [Org], conversations regarding direct and vicarious trauma will often arise during regular supervision. When supervising employees who are survivors, it is important for supervisors to be clear: the supervisor’s role is to support the staff member so they can be successful in their work, not to become their counselor or advocate. This includes affirming that the employee need not disclose details of their experience to seek support and guidance from a supervisor. (On occasion, when there is a workplace safety concern, a survivor may be asked to share relevant information.)

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- b. Supervisors can help staff explore how their trauma reactions might be affecting their work, and to identify ways to manage these effects. This may include:
  - i. Building the employee’s knowledge about trauma and vicarious trauma through supervisory discussions;
  - ii. Encouraging the employee to attend training on trauma and vicarious trauma;
  - iii. Encouraging the employee to increase self-care during the work day; and
  - iv. Encouraging the employee to seek out counseling and other services, through [Org]’s EAP, community-based programs, or other avenues.
- c. Supervisors may refer employees to their HR partner to explore options and benefits such as FMLA or reasonable accommodations, which may be helpful as they cope with trauma.
- d. Reasonable accommodations may be requested by an employee who is experiencing domestic violence, sex offenses or stalking in the workplace. (Cite relevant organization policy here.)
- e. Some employees who are survivors may qualify for reasonable accommodations under the American’s with Disabilities Act. (Cite relevant organization policy here.)
- f. If an employee requests accommodations, the supervisor should work with their manager and Human Resources to determine what accommodations are reasonable, and to ensure that those accommodations are clearly documented.

### 5. Performance Management

- a. If an employee’s trauma history is negatively affecting job performance, the supervisor should address the performance issues in a direct and supportive manner. This can happen during regular supervision and, as needed, in the annual performance review process.
- b. When documenting performance issues, supervisors should objectively describe the specific behaviors that are compromising performance (i.e. frequent lateness, or delays in documenting client work). Supervisors should avoid documenting the employee’s trauma history in the performance review, or in other performance-related communications. Supervisors should not attribute performance-problems to staff trauma histories in the performance review or other performance-related communications.
- c. If performance problems are not resolved through the regular supervisory process, the supervisor should consult with their own supervisor and their HR partner. [Org] will make reasonable efforts to consider all aspects of the employee’s situation and use all reasonable options to address the performance problem, as we would for any employee. If reasonable attempts to resolve the performance problems are unsuccessful, [Org] reserves the right to take any and all action consistent with [Org] policies. Supervisors should navigate these situations with care, seeking guidance from the Human Resources team and paying careful attention to relevant policies.

### 6. Privacy

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- a. When a staff member discloses their survivor status at work, it is important to respect their privacy. This information should not be discussed with peers, supervisors, or outside the work setting without the employee's permission.
- b. Staff members, including supervisors, may discuss a colleague's survivor status with their supervisor or their Human Resources partner when they need guidance in supporting the employee or managing safety concerns regarding the situation.
- c. If an employee is currently a victim of domestic violence, sexual assault, or stalking, this may raise workplace safety issues. Follow safety protocols and refer to relevant organization policy.

### IN BRIEF SECTIONS

This "In Brief" section provides a summary of key concepts and does not change the meaning of the policy. All decisions will be based on the policy language as a whole.

- [Org] recognizes that any staff could be a survivor of crime or abuse.
- Being a survivor at [Org] is often a strength. It can help staff relate to clients. It can increase staff commitment to the mission.
- Being a survivor at [Org] can be a challenge. Hearing client stories may be more distressing. Personal experiences and feelings may get in the way of client-centered practice. And just getting the job done may be harder at times.
- We want to build a supportive culture for staff dealing with trauma.
- We never ask job applicants if they are survivors. When a job applicant chooses to share a history of crime victimization or abuse, we should explore 1) whether they are ready to work in this field and 2) whether they have strong coping skills.
- Staff control and choose whether or not to disclose any crime victimization or abuse they have experienced.

### IN BRIEF

- When staff do tell co-workers, we should keep that information private as much as possible. However, staff can share that information with their supervisor or Human Resources (HR) partner when seeking guidance or to address workplace safety.
- The supervisor's role is to support staff so they can succeed at work. It is not to become a counselor.
- Supervisors should help staff dealing with trauma to identify useful resources, inside and outside of [Org].

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- If a staff member is struggling to get the job done because of their experience with violence or abuse, the supervisor should provide supportive, clear feedback and guidance.
- When needed, staff will be held accountable for performance according to existing policy.
- Supervisors should not write about staff's trauma history in their performance reviews, or in performance memos.

### IN BRIEF

- Some staff can request and receive “reasonable accommodations”, such as a change of schedule, location, or duties. Staff may request accommodations by speaking with a supervisor or HR partner. What can be done will be determined by the manager and HR partner.
- Several other policies may be useful for survivors on staff and their supervisors. Refer to list of [Org] policies on page ###.