

Coventry rolls out initiative to identify and support children suffering from trauma

By [KENDRA GRAVELLE](#)

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During a celebration in the Knotty Oak Room on Wednesday, Coventry rolled out its initiative to become a trauma-informed community. Pictured, left to right: Superintendent Craig Levis; Bob Robillard, Coventry's director of human services; Matt Collins, executive vice president and chief medical officer of Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Rhode Island; Kayla David, of Family Service of Rhode Island; Neil Steinberg, president of the Rhode Island Foundation.

COVENTRY — Local officials and community leaders filled the Knotty Oak Room at Coventry High School Wednesday morning for a celebration to officially roll out Coventry's initiative to become Rhode Island's first trauma-informed community.

Made possible by a \$440,356 grant from the Rhode Island Foundation, the town-wide initiative to combat the various effects of childhood trauma seeks to "create a culture of resiliency" within Coventry, Superintendent Craig Levis said.

"There are tons of definitions for 'resiliency,'" added Bob Robillard, the town's director of human services. "With this grant, we're going to find out what that definition is for Coventry."

Before a crowd that included local Reps. Tom Noret and George Nardone, Sen. Gordon Rogers, town council president Kerry McGee and councilor Ann Dickson, and school committee chair Katherine

Source: https://www.ricentral.com/kent_county_daily_times/coventry-rolls-out-initiative-to-identify-and-support-children-suffering/article_dbc601a4-0729-11ea-8acc-d35ca86821fc.html

Patenaude and vice chair Dave Florio, Robillard was one of a number of speakers to take the podium Wednesday to discuss the town's efforts to become trauma-informed.

The intent of the initiative, which Robillard anticipates will span the next decade, is for the entire town to learn to identify and address trauma in both children and adults.

More than half of children today have experienced one or more traumatic events in their lives, Levis said, noting that that trauma can manifest in a number of ways.

"Often the adults in a child's life react to this manifestation, which can create another traumatic event," he said, adding that "instead of looking at a child that might be exhibiting some behaviors... as a problem, start [considering], 'I wonder what's going on in their life.'"

The hope, Levis said, is that through the initiative, incidences of bullying, aggression, substance abuse, school drop-outs and suicidal thoughts will decline.

Funded by Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Rhode Island — which has committed to donating \$5 million over five years to the Rhode Island Foundation's Behavioral Health Fund — the grant will cover three years of training to teach adults in Coventry to look through a trauma-informed lens.

Kayla David, a clinical director with Family Service of Rhode Island, said the training will help establish "a shared language and understanding" among all community leaders.

In the first year, the grant will cover training for school administrators, teachers and other school support staff.

"Starting at the school, where children spend most of their time, is a logical place," Robillard said, adding that the training will also cover vicarious trauma, to ensure educators "can take care of themselves."

The second year of the grant will cover training for all municipal employees, including town councilors, who interact in any capacity with children, and in the final year it'll cover training for youth leaders and coaches.

David has already begun working with some 800 teachers and administrators in Coventry Public Schools. There have also been champions identified in each of the schools, who Robillard said will "bring the message and mission forward."

The purpose of the training, David added, is to "break the cycle of intergenerational trauma" to foster a "collective resilience" in the community.

And considering the dramatic effects trauma can have on a person, she added, building a trauma-informed framework can go a long way in mitigating those negative outcomes.

According to the Adverse Childhood Experiences Study, conducted in the 1990s, the more traumatic experiences one had during childhood, the more likely that person is to have poor health and social outcomes as adults, David said.

"Adverse childhood experiences contribute to most of the major chronic health, mental health, economic health and social health issues in our communities," she said.

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Referencing the late psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner, who said “every child needs at least one adult who is irrationally crazy about him or her,” Levis asked those in the room to consider the difference that can make in one’s life.

“That’s what this program is about,” he said.

Matt Collins, executive vice president and chief medical officer of Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Rhode Island, shared a similar sentiment regarding the impact adults have on the wellbeing of the children around them.

“We’re all a product of the communities that we live in, and we’re all a product of the people that we had as role models,” Collins said. “So why isn’t it a great idea that the community becomes part of prevention?”

That, Collins added, is “what being a trauma-informed community is all about.”

“It’s about creating the fabric of a society, of a social system, where people recognize early signs,” he continued.

Levis added that he hopes Coventry becomes an exemplar for other Rhode Island towns.

Neil Steinberg, president and CEO of the Rhode Island Foundation, echoed that, calling the initiative crucial to the foundation’s mission to support education and health statewide.

“It would be wonderful to have Coventry held up as the model for this type of work,” he said, adding that children are the most significant factor to a bright future for Rhode Island.

“That’s our future, that’s our responsibility, that’s our obligation,” Steinberg said, “and, hopefully, inspiration for all of us every day.”

With Coventry taking the lead on becoming trauma-informed, Collins noted that it will be important to measure the impact of the initiative to determine what works and how it works.

“I think you’re going to be a great example for a lot of other Rhode Island communities of what their community can do to create an environment... that sustains and promotes wellness,” Collins said.

“We’re going to be watching and learning from you.”

And Robillard sounded confident Wednesday in Coventry’s capacity to lead the way.

“The goal, ultimately, is to have Coventry be the model, and our state to become trauma-informed,” Robillard said. “If you look at most states, we’re small enough to do it — it’s absolutely a possibility.”

kgravelle@ricentral.com