



Trauma-Informed Practices Strategy Lab: Helena, MT

Implementation Report

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By Alysha Hall and Amber Moe

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Center for Justice Innovation

520 Eighth Avenue, 18th Floor

New York, NY 10018

p 646.386.3100

f 212.397.0985

innovatingjustice.org

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The opinions, findings, and recommendations expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the positions or policies of the Center for Justice Innovation or the State Justice Institute.

For correspondence, please contact lead author Alysha Hall, Center for Justice Innovation, ahall1@innovatingjustice.org.

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Background

Center for Justice Innovation

The Center for Justice Innovation (the Center) is a community justice organization that centers safety and racial justice. Since our founding in 1996, the Center has partnered with community members, courts, and the people most impacted to create stronger, healthier, more just communities. Our decades of experience in courts and communities, coupled with our field-leading research and practitioner expertise, help us drive justice nationwide in innovative, powerful, and durable ways.

The Office of National Initiatives spearheads the Center's national and global efforts to provide hands-on, planning and implementation assistance to a wide range of jurisdictions working to reform their legal systems and make their communities safer. By providing training, advice, and collaborating with practitioners, policymakers and other partners in both the system and community, the department aims to assist jurisdictions in finding solutions to their most complex and pressing criminal legal and public safety challenges. As one of the three departments within the Center's Office of National Initiatives & Research, the Office of National Initiatives also collaborates closely with the National Research and Data Analytics and Applied Research departments to ensure that data, research, and evidence-based practices inform best practices and drives innovations in communities that advance justice and safety for all.

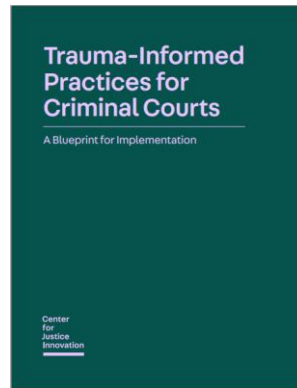
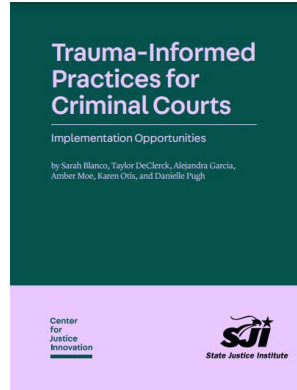
Trauma-Informed Practice Strategy (TIPS) Lab

The Center, with funding from the State Justice Institute (SJI), is leading the development of the Trauma-Informed Practice Strategy Lab for Criminal Courts (TIPS Lab). The goal of TIPS Lab is to bridge the gap between training and implementation of trauma-informed practices to specifically support criminal court practitioners, who receive less specialized support than their counterparts in specialty courts (i.e., community court, drug treatment court, juvenile court).

TIPS Lab launched in 2023 and has three distinct phases. Phase One of the project focused on conducting a national inventory of both the major challenges and opportunities that criminal courts face when implementing trauma-informed practices, and an in-person Symposium, culminating in the publication: [Trauma-Informed Practices for Criminal Courts: Implementation Opportunities](#). Center staff conducted a literature review of available research and professional writing related to trauma-informed practices in criminal courts, deployed a national survey of practices, and conducted in-depth interviews.

Phase Two included the development of [Trauma-Informed Practices for Criminal Courts: A Blueprint for Implementation](#) that includes a variety of tools and frameworks to assist criminal courts to go beyond training to develop and sustain trauma-informed practices. The Blueprint is organized into four key domains: Trauma Training, Trauma-Informed Guidance for Criminal Court, Trauma-Informed Spaces, and Burnout, Vicarious Trauma, and Moral Injury. The findings and recommendations contained in this report mirror these four domains.

Phase Three focuses on the practical application of the Blueprint through providing training and technical assistance to a cohort of diverse criminal court jurisdictions across the United States, including Helena, Montana.



Methodology

Incubator Site Selection

In early 2025, Center staff published an application to the national criminal court field to receive no-cost, individualized training and technical assistance (TTA) to support the implementation of trauma-informed practices. Court practitioners were asked to complete a brief application describing their jurisdiction and their interest and experience with trauma-informed practices. Specialty courts were ineligible for this opportunity. Center staff received 13 applications from courts across the country and held follow up calls with several finalists. Helena, Montana and other incubator lab sites were selected based on capacity to receive TTA, interest in trauma-informed practices, and assessed need.

Pre-Site Visit Needs Assessment

Before traveling on site, Center staff conducted a limited virtual needs assessment to identify key areas for TTA. Center staff developed a training needs survey that was completed by eight practitioners from Helena. The survey asked information about practitioners' experience receiving training in trauma, and their interest and preferences for additional training. Center staff also held a virtual interview with site lead, Judge Anne Peterson, to review the court's case flow and determine potential areas for intervention. This information helped inform the strategic planning work completed during the site visit.

Site Visit Summary

In October 2025, Center staff traveled to Helena, MT to conduct a site visit at the Helena Municipal Court. During the site visit, Center staff observed court using a structured observation tool that uses a trauma-informed and procedural justice lens to collect information about the exterior of the courthouse, the courthouse entry/security, the accessibility, signage, lights, and art throughout the courthouse, and courtroom proceedings. Findings and recommendations from this court observation are incorporated into the rest of this report.

In addition to conducting in-depth court observation, Center staff facilitated a trauma training and action planning workshop for court practitioners. The training provided a comprehensive overview of various types of traumas, trauma-informed principles, the value of considering trauma in criminal court settings, and related trauma-informed

practices. Fourteen court practitioners, including judges, attorneys, pretrial services staff, clerks, a court officer, and a victim advocate attended the training.

After the training, Center staff facilitated an action planning session where participants used a guided worksheet to identify priority areas for implementing trauma-informed practices. Center staff then led the group through an exercise to develop shared goals, and begin the creation of an action plan, which forms the basis of this report.

Action Plan

This action plan is the result of information collected during the needs assessment, and work completed with participants of the in-person action planning workshop. Judge Anne Peterson is the site's point of contact, and will lead the implementation of this action plan, with TTA support from the Center. The individuals who participated in the site visit will also be tasked with supporting the implementation of this plan. This action plan is organized into four domains that mirror the domains of [Trauma-Informed Practices for Criminal Courts: A Blueprint for Implementation](#), which serves as the basis for this work: Training, Criminal Court Procedures, Spaces, and Burnout and Vicarious Trauma. Each section opens with best practices and recommendations for the domain, followed by findings, goals, and actions. The full action plan table can be found at the end of this report.

I. Training

Informed court practitioners are crucial to integrating trauma-informed and responsive practices throughout the courthouse. However, it is not always clear how to approach and effectuate the educational opportunities afforded to members of the judiciary, including judges, court clerks, court security, and attorneys. Often only a few members of the court have access to educational opportunities, which makes it difficult to share learned practices across the courthouse.

Institutional support for training requires leadership and funding for sustainability. Philosophical alignment, clear plans, and coordinated efforts across multidisciplinary partners are also crucial components to sustainability efforts. Adult learners need the education to be relevant and be applicable to their job functions for it to "stick."

Recommendations:

- Conduct a training needs assessment across multiple court roles
- Develop and implement a cohesive training education plan
- Garner leadership support
- Measure the impact of training

Findings:

Prior to conducting the site visit, seven Helena court practitioners responded to a training needs survey. Most respondents (88%) had not received training in trauma-informed practices. For the one respondent who had received training, it focused on trauma-informed practices in the criminal justice system, with a focus on victims. The

individuals that received training noted that the training provided great information for her toolbox and insight for working with victims of crimes, in particular. Most respondents indicated a desire for more training. Site visit participants also expressed interest in continuing and broadening access to trauma training. They noted a lack of procedural justice training, which is a complementary and relevant framework to trauma-informed practices in criminal court settings.

Goal 1:

Integrate trauma training into the onboarding process for the Helena criminal court system.

Actions:

Participants of the site visit indicated the desire to include trauma-informed training as a part of the training requirements for staff entering various roles and positions within the system.

1. Identify point person to engage with the county's Criminal Justice Coordinating Council Onboarding Task Force.
2. Provide CJCC Onboarding Task Force with information about trauma-informed practices and training (garner buy-in).
3. Gather information on the Task Force's development of onboarding materials, including identified pamphlets, and determine feasibility of developing a pamphlet on trauma and trauma-informed practices.
4. Engage with CJCC Onboarding Taskforce about integrating trauma training session(s) for all new court hires.
5. Share existing trauma-informed practices bench card with all judges in Helena.
6. Identify potential trauma trainers (local and national).
7. Schedule and host trainings, for example, procedural justice and trauma-informed interviewing (in-person, virtual).
8. Conduct pre- and post-surveys for trainings to support implementation.

II. Criminal Court Case Flow

Several key trauma-informed principles can be applied within the Helena criminal court system. The criminal court is a multidisciplinary system involving various key roles at each juncture. Law enforcement, court security, defense attorneys, prosecutors, judges, court administrators, court clerks, victims' services, service providers, and community members all play vital roles in the successful functioning of the court. Consistent communication, coordination, and mutual respect among these roles can support the implementation of trauma-informed practices.

Recommendations:

- Provide clear information about how to access court
- Use diversion options at earliest stages
- Limit the number of times victims recount stories
- Adhere to principles of procedural justice
- Develop and strengthen partnerships with community-based providers
- Treat families, witnesses, and jurors with respect and sensitivity

Findings:

Before the site visit, Judge Peterson participated in an in-depth interview exploring various aspects of the criminal court process in Helena. The interview explored how people appeared in court, the information they have access to about appearing in court, available diversion, specialty court, and ATI (alternative to incarceration) options, in-court practices related to procedural justice, and trauma-informed practices utilized during pleas and trials. The Helena court system offers post-plea diversion and specialty court options, including drug treatment court and mental health court for felony cases. There are no pre-plea diversion options currently, and no misdemeanor specialty courts, though not for lack of interest. There are available post-plea support services for individuals who need additional assistance navigating the requirements associated with their dispositions.

While on-site, Center staff observed the criminal court process firsthand and engaged directly with stakeholders. Site visit participants identified an opportunity for the use of pre- and post-plea diversion for certain traffic-related offenses, like driving under the influence or driving without insurance, and for better systems of tracking and managing deferred prosecution agreements. Participants also expressed a desire to streamline information sharing related to community resources and service providers available to the court and court users. Generally, there is an opportunity to implement more aspects of procedural justice and trauma-informed practices throughout the court process for various criminal court participants and, more broadly, within the courthouse.

Goal 2:

Develop pre- and post-plea diversion options for select traffic-related offenses.

Actions:

Participants of the site visit expressed an interest in offering pre- and post-plea diversion options for certain traffic-related offenses.

1. Engage the Missoula Municipal Traffic Court about its process, procedure and partnerships (peer-to-peer learning).
2. Convene key system actors to develop criteria for traffic-related diversion options, i.e. eligible case types, participation requirements, completion requirements and necessary community/agency partnerships, and to identify opportunities and barriers related to diversion.
3. Engage with other key stakeholder, e.g., Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) and local legislature, about the development of diversion options (garner buy-in).
4. Identify and understand (be trained on) the DMV processes and procedures relevant to the project.
5. Engage with potential community partners about the project, the support needed from them, and secure participation through and official mechanism, like a memorandum of understanding (MOU).
6. Develop step-by-step procedure for identifying and enrolling eligible cases and for tracking and managing participation.
7. Determine relevant data points to track for possible future evaluation of diversion options.
8. Pilot pre- and post-plea diversion options for one year.
9. Develop & execute participant survey.
10. Reconvene key system actors and community partners to review diversion pilot and identify any changes that need to be made.
11. Implement identified changes and fully launch diversion options

Commented [AH1]: Judge Peterson, we would love your take on a viable pilot period.

Goal 3:

Explore opportunities to enhance the Deferred Prosecution Agreement (DPA) monitoring & tracking process.

Actions:

Site visit participants identified an opportunity for better systems of tracking and managing deferred prosecution agreements.

1. Explore staffing and funding options for a position that would monitor and track the compliance of Deferred Prosecution Agreements.
2. Review and update existing DPA document.

Goal 4:

Conduct comprehensive resource mapping of available services in and around Helena and foster ongoing relationships with providers.

Actions:

Site visit participants expressed a need for better information sharing with court users and system actors related to the programs and services available to individuals with cases in municipal court.

3. Designate a point person to gather and disseminate information related to community programs and services from Criminal Justice Coordinating Council meetings and Citizen Advisory Committee meetings to representatives from court stakeholder group.
4. Develop and maintain a key contact sheet for sharing available community resources and services between system actors.
5. Review, update, and share list of service and support providers maintained by Pretrial Services.
6. Decide on a regular cadence to review and update resource postings in the Helena Law & Justice Center.
7. Designate a point person to review and update resource postings in the Law & Justice Center.
8. Implement process to review and update resource postings.

Findings:

Center staff spent time during the site visit getting a better understanding of court procedures along the lines of procedural justice and trauma-informed practices. Both procedural justice and trauma-informed principles emphasize increasing a court user's understanding of procedures including rules and rights and treating all court users with respect and sensitivity. During the site visit, Center staff observed many trauma-informed principles already in practice by the Helena Municipal Court. For example, the judge maintained eye contact with defendants during their appearances, inquired about name pronunciation to ensure she called defendants by their correct and preferred names, and made it a point to explain various aspects of the proceedings, i.e., bail requirements, sentence requirements, and fines and surcharges, using plain language.

Additionally, the court officer explained the court expectations prior to opening the courtroom for use. Though court began promptly, the judge did not introduce herself or provide an overview of what would occur while individuals were in court. Incorporating these components can contribute to court user's understanding of court procedures. The court had several explanatory handouts available online and in person. The handouts provided information about court hearings, pro se representation, sentencing, and some traffic offense procedures, but appeared information-laden and were only provided in English.

Goal 5:

Integrate procedural justice and trauma-informed principles throughout court proceedings.

Actions:

1. Integrate information learned during site visit training and any future training.
2. Disseminate procedural justice and motivational interviewing bench cards to sitting Municipal Court Judge and any substitute judges.
3. Identify or design a tool to assess the use of procedural justice and trauma informed principles at varying intervals.
4. Improve support for jurors, including resource pamphlets and debrief options.
5. Develop workgroup to review and update informational handouts (e.g. omnibus form, forms for pro se defendants), for example, adjust reading level of information, decrease the amount of information for clarity and accessibility, translate handouts into Spanish, streamline form colors.

Goal 6:

Develop general expectations for utilizing trauma-informed practices with court users seeking assistance at the Clerk's Office.

Actions:

Participants of the site visit indicated desire to develop a stepped procedure for how to use trauma-informed practices with court users at the Municipal Court Clerk's Office and a mechanism for notating actions taken in challenging interactions.

1. Convene Municipal Court Clerk's Office staff and bench to review trauma-informed principles.
2. Identify the principles that will guide expectations and procedure for Municipal Court Clerk's Office Staff.
3. Develop step-by-step procedure for utilizing trauma-informed principles and practices when engaging with court users and a mechanism to document steps taken with challenging court users.
4. Pilot use of procedure for an amount of time agreed upon by the Municipal Court judge and Court Manager.
5. Reconvene Clerk's Office Staff to review procedure pilot and identify any changes that need to be made.
6. Implement identified changes and fully launch use of procedures.
7. Conduct court user and staff surveys to determine effectiveness and implementation of procedure.

Commented [AH2]: Judge Peterson, we would love your take on a viable pilot period.

III. Spaces

The physical design of many courthouses across the country are often imposing, or historic, but are not always welcoming or user-friendly for the public. Physical spaces can impact our mood and perspective on our experience, both negatively and positively. Confusion navigating a space, poor lighting, or small closed-off spaces can activate a person's stress or a trauma response. Security practices and divisive zones often overlook trauma-informed, court user-friendly design and spaces.

For courthouses, trauma-informed design incorporates clear and respectful security procedures, effective wayfinding through clear signage, warm and inviting spaces, clean restrooms, and accessible spaces for court users with disabilities. Updates and enhancements to the courthouse's built environment can also improve procedural justice through welcoming, accessible, and community-responsive physical design. Creating an environment that is considerate of people's experiences and minimizes stress can enhance perceptions of legitimacy and trust in the system.

Recommendations:

- Assess space from a court user's perspective
- Update signage and technology to improve wayfinding
- Incorporate naturalistic design elements
- Improve accessibility for individuals with disabilities
- Invite community leaders to provide input

Findings:

The City of Helena Law & Justice Center houses the Municipal Court, Pretrial Services, Police Department, and County Sheriff's Office. It is a modest building with ample greenery and plant life outside. There is fee-based street parking out front and garage parking within 10 minutes of the Law & Justice Center, though no information about parking is available on site. The entrance is ADA-accessible and has large windows with ample natural light. The entrance also includes signage related to weapons prohibition (there is no security checkpoint) and the location of the various agencies within the building, as well as an area for community resource flyers and pamphlets. The area of the Law & Justice Center that houses the Municipal Court Clerk's Office and courtroom has less natural light than the entrance. That area also includes signs related to court expectations, some of which were in small typeface, and all of which were in English. The Municipal Courtroom itself included plant life

and had a blue wall behind the judge's bench facing the well. There is an opportunity to include artwork in the building and courtroom.

Goal 7:

Update and improve signage, art, and greenery throughout the Helena Law & Justice Center.

Actions:

Participants of the site visit were enthusiastic about improving the court's signage and adding more community-generated art to the courthouse.

1. Identify and engage key leadership responsible for courthouse design and administration
2. Share findings and report from the TIPS project (garner buy-in)
3. Identify key areas for signage updates - i.e., directional signage at entrance to building, informational and expectation signage near Municipal Court Clerk's Office and courtroom, consider use of image-based signage, develop translated signage
4. Collect existing examples and design new signage
5. Identify funding for new signage, acquire materials, and install.
6. Identify local artists/community-based partners who may be able to provide artwork for Law & Justice Center
7. Select new areas within the courthouse for artwork
8. Commission, display, and promote new artwork
9. Identify, display, and maintain additional indoor plants that may offer more naturalistic, soothing environment for court users (if plants are not feasible, consider artwork of natural environments or colors, such as blue and green)

IV. Burnout, Vicarious Trauma, Moral Injury

Criminal court practitioners are regularly exposed to distressing and traumatic material and events as part of their jobs. If left unaddressed, this exposure can lead to demoralization, compassion fatigue, and hinder their ability to consistently deliver procedural justice. It may also result in burnout, vicarious trauma, and moral injury. A trauma-informed work culture prioritizes compassion, satisfaction, and vicarious resilience, and ensures that staff feel supported and appreciated. It also acknowledges the emotional well-being of staff and the impact of trauma on the staff's well-being by implementing systems to promote self-care and team care.

Recommendations:

- Reflect on work-related stressors and how you manage this stress

- Consider how work-related stress impacts court processes and client engagement
- Create a self-care plan
- Agency leadership can develop organizational care plans

Findings:

During the on-site trauma training, participants took a survey about burnout, vicarious trauma and moral injury. Almost 80% of the respondents indicated that they saw, read or heard traumatic or violent material as a part of their job. All the respondents indicated that they felt stress, compassion fatigue, burnout, or numbing after exposure to traumatic material to some extent. Just over half of the respondents (57%) indicated that they had a self-care plan that they use when they experienced vicarious trauma, burn out or felt overwhelmed. Additionally, most participants indicated that they used vacation and sick time to support their well-being (71%) and that they had access to an employee assistance program if they experienced vicarious trauma in their work (93%). Training participants also highlighted the value of being close to nature as a mechanism to support well-being, relieve stress, and manage the effects of vicarious trauma.

Goal 8:

Continue assessment of court practitioners' levels of burnout and vicarious trauma and incorporate sustainable self-care and organizational care policies and practices.

Actions:

1. Consider conducting a quarterly or semiannual survey to measure court practitioners' levels of burnout and work-related stress.
2. Provide resources to court practitioners to facilitate development of individual self-care plans.
3. Engage agency leadership (e.g., prosecutor's office, public defender's office) in implementing burnout prevention practices, including staff appreciation events with adequate coverage for participation, nature-based group activities, and restorative practices that support staff and foster emotional healing and resilience.

Conclusion

The Helena Municipal Court is a well-functioning court with a small but invested stakeholder group. Site lead, Judge Anne Peterson, has demonstrated her commitment to and investment in the implementation of trauma-informed practices within this system. She is a dedicated and passionate practitioner that is fully invested in shepherding the expansion of trauma-informed practices within the Law & Justice Center, her courtroom, and beyond. The Helena Municipal Court has many strengths that can be leveraged to carry out this action plan. With training and technical assistance support from the Center for Justice Innovation, it is well-positioned to become trauma informed.