

# HEALING SYSTEMS

Reflections on the first four years of Trauma Transformed



## Executive Summary

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Prepared for:



Prepared by:





**The San Francisco Bay Area's Trauma Transformed—an ambitious, regional, multi-sector, complex systems change initiative—is far from simple. But the underlying concept is: it is about healing.**

Programs, systems and the people within them can themselves be traumatized. As in individuals, trauma in organizations can result in reactivity, dysregulation, numbing, and reflexive decisions and behaviors. When amplified at the organizational or system level, the symptoms and consequences of trauma result in a system that creates barriers to care, burden on consumers, and stress for caregivers and the workforce. The consequence is that the very system intended to care for trauma-impacted youth can actually be trauma inducing rather than healing.

In addition to addressing the structural ways the system can be traumatizing, Trauma Transformed also attends to the personal healing of all the adults in the system so that they can bring their whole, human selves to the important work they do to care for others. And when these people, from system leaders to providers and caregivers, are able to show up whole and human—it changes everything.

The story of Trauma Transformed is the story of courage: the courage to invest deeply in something that is difficult to describe, let alone measure, and occurs very gradually. It is also about the courage of system leaders across seven counties to take a leap of faith and try something not just new, but disruptive to the status quo. Trauma Transformed is not new in its attention to trauma-informed care. What is innovative is the focus on healing at the individual, organizational, and system levels in order to achieve a regional system that goes beyond a collection of trauma-informed practices to become truly healing.

Though systems change is inherently slow moving and difficult to measure, Trauma Transformed has embedded evaluation throughout the initiative with the goal of capturing lessons to inform ongoing efforts and to document and measure progress. Organizational assessments, workforce commitment to change measures, and training evaluations have produced findings that highlight promising ways in which the initiative is impacting the levers of change, garnering the attention and recognition of SAMHSA through a Spotlight and Promising Practice Award. These measures have fueled reflection among individuals and organizations about areas of strength and growth, as well as providing validation of the beliefs that underlie the Trauma Transformed model. Looking beyond the numbers, this reflection on the first four years of Trauma Transformed's journey to disrupt business as usual across seven counties' public systems that touch the lives of children and families tells the story of this innovative effort that is not just an initiative, and not just a new way of doing things, but a new way of *being*.

## WHAT MAKES THE TRAUMA TRANSFORMED MODEL UNIQUE

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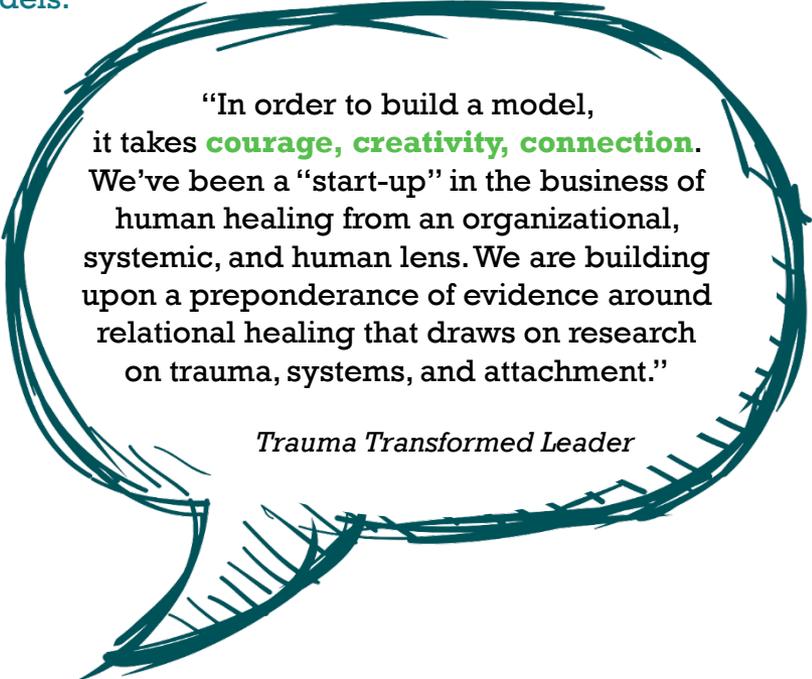
The following are core components of the Trauma Transformed model that are crucial to its success and set it apart from other systems change models.

**1 Being focused on healing for all:** A foundational belief underlying the Trauma Transformed model is that individual healing is bound up in the healing of others. As caregivers and care providers, individuals cannot support and promote healing for youth if they do not attend to their own healing, and the healing of the communities and organizations they are a part of. Trauma Transformed recognizes the healing of the adults who touch the lives of youth impacted by trauma as a critical pathway to healing youth.

**2 Being relationship-focused:** A key ingredient to what makes the Trauma Transformed model work is shared experience and human connection. The face-to-face interactions that take place as partners do the hard work of Trauma Transformed is a part of the “healing treatment” itself. This work can be painful, challenging, unifying, inspiring, and moving. Sitting together in communities of practice and reflective spaces fosters connection and relationship building. Those connections and relationships are the necessary preconditions and infrastructure for profound healing and transformation.

**3 Embracing a more expansive understanding of trauma:** A cornerstone of the Trauma Transformed model is a definition of trauma that extends beyond individual trauma. Trauma Transformed creates shared language about trauma that recognizes secondary trauma, community trauma, socio-cultural trauma, and historical trauma, including racism and oppression as traumas that impact members of our communities and workforce. Additionally, Trauma Transformed spreads awareness and language about organizational trauma, in addition to individual trauma. By adopting a broader definition of trauma and the role it plays in individuals, communities, and systems, Trauma Transformed laid the groundwork for multi-level healing that needs to take place in order to optimize the opportunity for individual healing.

**4 Centering those closest to the work:** The Trauma Transformed initiative itself was led by a community-based organization (CBO), not housed within academia or a single public agency. Trauma Transformed employed members of the workforce with close proximity to the systems, structures, practices, and clients, in guiding roles. The principle of centering those with close proximity to the work is maintained throughout Trauma Transformed activities as well, valuing and elevating the voices of people with lived experience and those who would be most directly affected by the work.



“In order to build a model, it takes **courage, creativity, connection.** We’ve been a “start-up” in the business of human healing from an organizational, systemic, and human lens. We are building upon a preponderance of evidence around relational healing that draws on research on trauma, systems, and attachment.”

*Trauma Transformed Leader*

## WHAT MAKES THE TRAUMA TRANSFORMED MODEL UNIQUE

**5 Doing things *with* and not *for* people:** Trauma Transformed is not a one-size fits all model that gets overlaid onto existing systems to create transformation. It is a process that requires people to metabolize and embody a new way of being. In order for it to be effective, people need to show up, participate fully, engage deeply, and hold a piece of the ownership for the change they hope to see. Trauma Transformed has partnered side by side with communities and organizations to enhance knowledge and capacity, involving key stakeholders at every level in their own transformation processes.

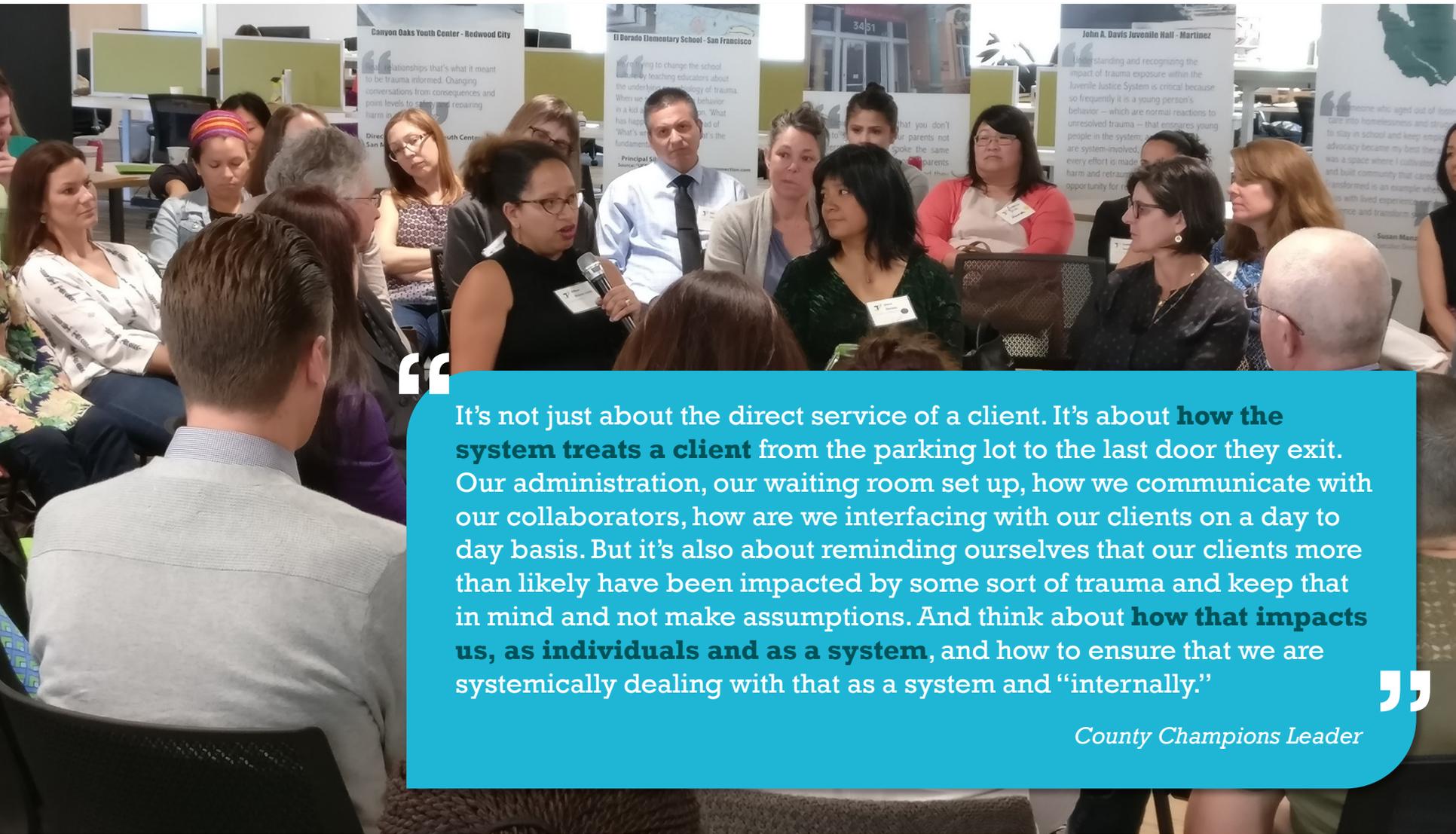
**6 Humanizing one another:** Trauma Transformed creates space for people to bring their humanity into the work that they do, and invites them to see and value the humanity in others. The act of showing up as human, and humanizing one another, creates profound changes. It makes relationships less adversarial. It allows space to experience genuine reactions to collective and secondary traumas. And by putting people before titles, it removes lines that divide us into “us/them” dichotomies. By showing up as our whole, human selves and humanizing one another, we interpret things with a more compassionate lens, we collaborate better, and we are better able to speak and hear truths and recognize one another’s expertise.



**7 Leveraging the regional model:** The successes of the Trauma Transformed initiative are not the result of building something completely new. The initiative was born out of the existing commitment and eagerness within the seven counties to develop and strengthen the trauma-informed system of care, and it built upon the foundations that lay within each of the counties. What Trauma Transformed did was provide a framework, dedicated capacity and resources, and infrastructure to support work at a county and regional level that could not have achieved the same degree of success by counties or agencies operating independently. While Trauma Transformed is not the sole driving force for all the trauma-informed work that has taken place regionally, it played a role as a catalyst, unifying and amplifying complementary efforts, and integrating them into a more cohesive transformation effort.

## SHARED UNDERSTANDING

Trauma Transformed created opportunities to create and embed knowledge, language, and values central to the practice of trauma-informed systems and trauma-informed care throughout the region.



It's not just about the direct service of a client. It's about **how the system treats a client** from the parking lot to the last door they exit. Our administration, our waiting room set up, how we communicate with our collaborators, how are we interfacing with our clients on a day to day basis. But it's also about reminding ourselves that our clients more than likely have been impacted by some sort of trauma and keep that in mind and not make assumptions. And think about **how that impacts us, as individuals and as a system**, and how to ensure that we are systemically dealing with that as a system and "internally."



*County Champions Leader*

## SHARED UNDERSTANDING

Through widespread training, development and dissemination of resources, and through creating models to support organizations to embed trauma-informed values into the fabric of their organizations, Trauma Transformed has promoted a common language and a culture shift that better understands, recognizes, and addresses trauma.



“TIS fosters a culture of critical thinking and cultural humility. Rather than assuming the expertise lives with upper leadership, **the model promotes inclusiveness**. This same principal is part of how this culture shift supports youth and families as well. It promotes voice and choice, not just assuming ‘I’m the expert and I know what’s best.’”

*Trauma Transformed Leader*

## RADICAL COLLABORATION

Trauma Transformed has fostered diverse multilevel, multisector, and multi-area collaboration and leadership in the service of healing the regional system of care.

Building upon the strong foundations and enthusiasm that already existed within the counties, Trauma Transformed provided a roadmap for implementing trauma-informed systems, and strengthened and aligned the counties' work as a regional effort.

The initiative introduced relationship-based approaches to collaboration and care coordination, creating opportunities for peers, colleagues, and communities from across organizations and sectors to come together and work towards shared goals. Through that process, participants humanize each other. It breaks down assumptions and stereotypes and enables improved collaboration and coordination for youth served by multiple agencies and systems.

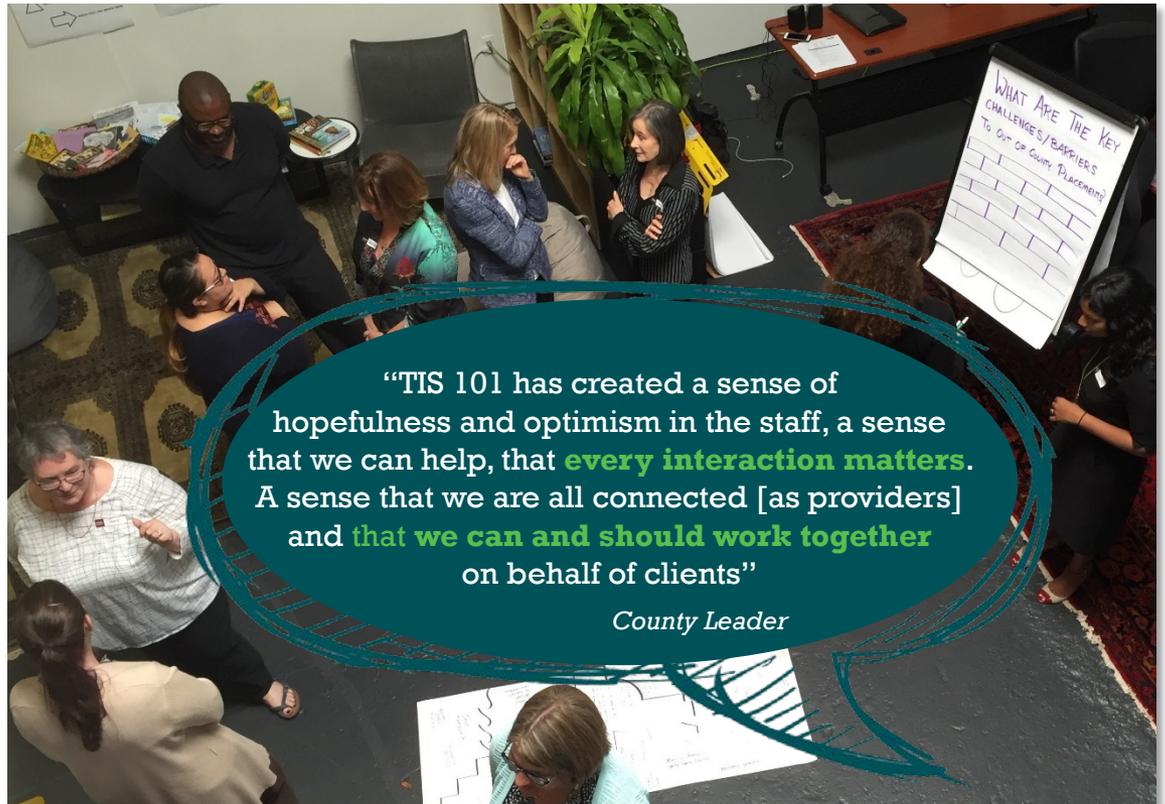
Trauma Transformed also enhanced diverse, multi-level collaboration within organizations. Providing structures to develop the leadership and voice of front-line staff, their direct supervisors, and emerging leaders of color has promoted more equitable and inclusive leadership.

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When we connect and relate and hear each other's stories we have less bias. It's also a pathway to healing. My healing is tied up in yours. The impact is **we humanize each other more in a dehumanizing system**. It's much easier to deny services to people who are flat, and to silo or talk bad about people who aren't sitting next to you in a circle and without you knowing their story.

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*Trauma Transformed Leader*



## TRANSFORMATIVE REFLECTION AND HEALING

Trauma Transformed is intentional and persistent in generating spaces for healing, reflection, and growth across the workforce and communities served.



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If the adults are taking care of ourselves, building community, and taking care of each other, we are better able to take care of and help our children... How does a better regulated adult do better for kids? By regulating ourselves first, we notice how we are feeling and reacting, and through breathing or movements or mindfulness, then we can interact in a more healing way. **If we want to see change, we have to be the change first. We cannot be off balance, we can't be showing up in a way that is working against what we want.** We have to create peace in our hearts first and then express that peace in the world. We have to see the light in each other.

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*Trauma Transformed Parent Organizer/Youth Leader*



The role of Trauma Transformed in bringing about reflection and healing—in individuals, organizations, and systems—may be the least tangible and hardest to measure through conventional metrics, but also the most profound in its impact on individuals and in its centrality to the success of Trauma Transformed as a catalyst for systems change. It is the aspect of Trauma Transformed’s work that elicits the most passionate and personal reflections and causes faces to light up and voices to crack when those touched by the work are asked to describe it.

Recognizing the importance of reflection in enabling the actors in a complex system to do things differently, Trauma Transformed provided opportunities for reflection in a wide variety of ways, from community circles after traumatic events to facilitated staff conversations to process trauma-informed agency assessment scores.

### Centering racial equity in the quest for healing

Trauma Transformed unequivocally acknowledges that it is not just impossible but antithetical to advance a truly trauma-informed system without an explicit racial equity lens. Influenced by the work of Dr. Kenneth Hardy and RYSE Youth Center, Trauma Transformed has taken care to embed a racial justice analysis in its systems change work, from dissemination of knowledge and clinical practices to leadership development to community healing circles. Trauma Transformed has also ensured that its work toward racial equity and justice has been explicit about transferring the burden off staff of color, who are typically more likely to do the work, formally and informally, of fighting racial inequity.

### Attending to staff wellness

A system cannot be transformed to better serve youth and families until it attends to the trauma carried by its workforce and other adults caring for youth. Trauma Transformed supports the ability of caregivers and members of the workforce to address their own stress, needs, and vicarious or secondary trauma in order to ensure they are not inadvertently passing that stress on to the people they care for. The widespread knowledge and skill sharing about trauma, including vicarious trauma, and what it takes to be a healing organization have begun to shift the organizational culture in agencies in a way that supports both staff wellness and trauma-informed care toward clients.

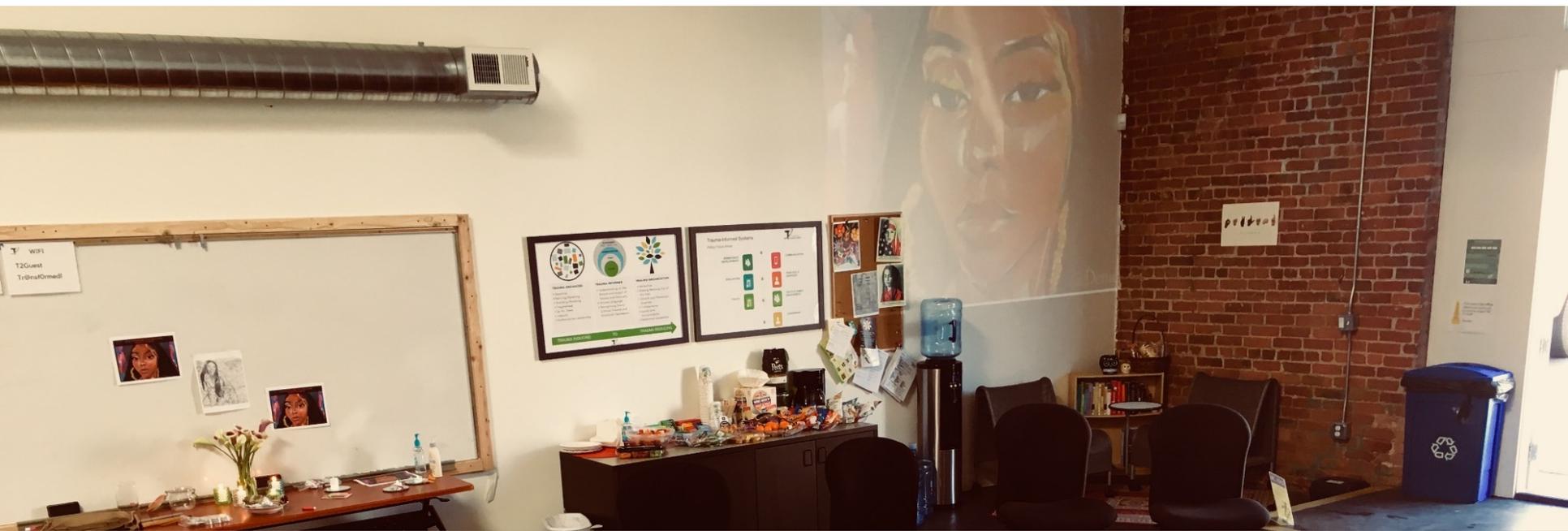
# TRANSFORMATIVE REFLECTION AND HEALING

## Facilitating growth among family and caregivers

Family members and caregivers of youth play a critical role in their healing journeys. Trauma Transformed has fostered peer-led outreach and engagement of families and caregivers and has built parents' capacity, specifically by increasing their knowledge about trauma, child development and behavior, how to navigate systems and advocate for their kids, and how supporting their own healing enables them to better support their children

## Youth and caregivers healing together

Two Youth and Family Healing Days were designed, planned, and led by youth and family members in the first few years of Trauma Transformed. These community events provide youth and family with empowering information about trauma and healing, skill-building opportunities, and intergenerational connections.



## CONCLUSION

Trauma Transformed is a bold and innovative effort that has disrupted norms, siloes, and barriers that perpetuate stress and trauma within the very systems charged with healing and addressing trauma. **In four years, Trauma Transformed has broadened awareness and understanding of trauma, it has fostered diverse, multi-sector, and multi-level collaboration, and it has created spaces for healing and reflection.** As a result, systems are working in new ways to promote the wellbeing of youth, families, and communities impacted by trauma.

Radical, system-level transformation is not possible without the willingness to take risks and invest deeply in something new and unproven. County leaders recognized the need for transformation to address long-standing, deeply entrenched fractures within the system. The will for change was there, as well as existing relationships among the county leaders, but the infrastructure was missing to create, test, and deploy new tools and centralized support. Trauma Transformed created that infrastructure. With intensive collaboration among those at the very front lines and those with the greatest level of influence, Trauma Transformed tried things that had not been done before, created space for innovation, failure and learning, and provided a container to help diverse partners hold a shared stake in the region's ability to respond to trauma within its communities.

**LESSONS FOR THE FIELD** - The first four years of Trauma Transformed have yielded insights about what it takes to do this work well:

**DEDICATED TIME.** Trauma Transformed owes much of its success to the fact that partners showed up from across the region to meet regularly in person, often with no reimbursement or direct financial incentive, and made this work a priority. This reflects buy-in and investment from the highest levels of leadership. Over time, trauma-informed values become more embedded into the fabric of organizations and systems. But early stages of change often require more intensive efforts, in the same way that the greatest pressure must be exerted at the outset to get a boulder to move; eventually momentum will carry it forward with greater ease. In the case of Trauma Transformed, this tremendous force came in the form of frequent trainings, presentations, in-person conversations, and time for reflection.

**DEEP TRUST.** There is a humility required to honestly and openly reflect inward, whether as an individual, an organization, or a system, and acknowledge a need for healing and repair. The way in which counties partnered deeply with Trauma Transformed, providing it with access to the inner workings of their organizations, and handing over leadership authority, is radically different from how CBOs and county health departments typically operate. CBO partners also embraced Trauma Transformed with openness, humility, and willingness to change, which would not likely have been possible were the initiative rooted in a county health department to which CBO partners were directly accountable.

**SUPPORT FOR RISK TAKING.** Change inherently means embracing new ways of doing things. Innovation does not happen without taking risks. It involves trial and error, allowing room for failure, and creating space for reflection and learning from what doesn't work on the pathway to finding what does. In order to create system-level solutions that are deep enough to create impact, and individually tailored enough to suit diverse stakeholders, experimentation is critical. Trauma Transformed created an environment in which risk taking, innovation, and experimentation were encouraged, where partners felt safe enough to acknowledge mistakes, and where challenges were not cause for giving up, but instead lessons to channel for improvement.

## CONCLUSION

As a CBO-led initiative, accountability to funders is a necessary part of sustaining the resources for the work. In an effort like Trauma Transformed this can sometimes mean documenting and reporting measures that may do little to advance learning. The work of innovative systems change takes time, deep trust, and risk-tolerance. Philanthropic partnerships that also embrace these same elements will be invaluable for enabling continued innovation, such as support for atypical “deliverables” like creating space for critical thinking and reflection, which has been one of the most important ways in which Trauma Transformed’s work has contributed to healing systems and enhancing their capacity to support the healing of individuals.

What makes the work profound is not the numbers of trainings that have taken place, the fact that partners are collaborating in new ways, or increasing access to evidence-based modalities for addressing trauma. **The radical transformation taking place is in the capacity of systems to support and sustain efforts and practices that address trauma, by supporting and healing the people within those organizations and systems.** Stakeholders who talk about the impact of Trauma Transformed talk about hope, compassion, understanding, human connection, changes in how people communicate, how decisions are made, how people address conflict—small shifts taking place at a very individual and personal level. But these small shifts, when sustained and widespread, amount to a massive change that will fundamentally shift the systems that affect youth and their families from being trauma-inducing to sources of healing.

