



TANF Technical Assistance Virtual Meetings: Navigating New Pathways Towards Building Thriving Communities



In February and March of 2021, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families (ACF), Office of Family Assistance (OFA), held a series of three virtual meetings with state Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) agencies and stakeholders. The series, *Navigating New Pathways towards Building Thriving Communities*, invited state TANF administrators and other staff to participate in cohorts by ACF Region (Regions I-IV, V-VIII, and IX and X). Each meeting focused on a specific topic related to supporting families through COVID-19 and beyond, and each took place three times (once for each cohort).

The ***Interrupting the Impact of Traumatic Stress*** virtual meetings focused on how programs can best identify and address trauma among staff. This tip sheet provides a synthesis of key takeaways from the meetings. It is intended for TANF program directors, supervisors, managers, and case workers.

TIP SHEET

Interrupting the Impact of Traumatic Stress

Trauma is “an event, or series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by a person as physically or emotionally harmful or life-threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the person’s functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, and spiritual well-being.”ⁱ

Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS) is “the emotional duress or stress that results from hearing about or seeing firsthand the trauma of others.”ⁱⁱ The following provides tips for how to identify and address STS among staff at an individual, supervisory, and leadership level.

STS has also been called compassion fatigue or vicarious trauma. This is different from burnout, which is the diminished interest in and exhaustion from work over a period of time.

Any worker can experience burnout. Individuals experiencing STS may have trouble focusing, feel sadness, and go through changes in their sleep or eating patterns. Teams experiencing STS may see increased instances of absenteeism, work conflicts among colleagues, or low morale. Organizations may experience decreased outcomes-related success indicators, increased turnover, and negative or diminished inter-team or staff-program participant relationships.

A Note about Triggers and the Six-Second Rule

A trigger is when the body perceives an external stimulus (such as a smell or sound) that reminds it of a past trauma, and the body fights, flees, or freezes to keep itself safe. Strategies to cope with triggers include:

- Stopping and breathing.
- Using humor to neutralize the situation.
- Naming three things one can see, hear, smell, or feel.
- Practicing mindfulness or meditation strategies.

Using the six-second rule (i.e., it takes the chemicals that are released when an individual is triggered about six seconds to dissipate). Take six seconds to breathe deeply or focus on something else (anything that will help refocus) until the initial overreaction reduces.



STS and burnout can be addressed through individual, supervisory, and leadership resiliency strategies. Tips to build resiliency include:

For Individuals	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Eat well.• Get adequate sleep.• Take walks.• Set work-life boundaries.• Engage in mindfulness training.• Take vacations.• Meditate or connect with religious/spiritual beliefs.• Manage time.• Reach out to co-workers/supervisors.• Connect to a larger purpose than oneself.
For Supervisors	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Encourage staff to take breaks and vacations.• Hold weekly check-ins.• Engage in reflective supervision.• Allow for flexible scheduling.• Encourage use of Employee Assistance Programs or other professional assistance.• Support team approaches (e.g., pair workers in difficult situations).
For Leaders	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Offer social supports to staff.• Share weekly coping tips and self-care reminders with staff.• Acknowledge difficult situations.• Set up safe spaces for listening sessions with staff.• Be open to suggestions.• Be proactive about addressing and preventing stress.

To learn more about these tips, programs, or the ***Interrupting the Impact of Traumatic Stress*** virtual meetings, a full meeting summary report is available on the OFA PeerTA website at:

<https://peerta.acf.hhs.gov/content/interrupting-impact-traumatic-stress-virtual-meetings>.

Special acknowledgement to Dr. Barbara Pierce, Indiana University, and Dr. Nicole Bossard, ICF, the virtual meeting speakers whose remarks formed the basis of this tip sheet.

ⁱ SAMHSA's Trauma and Justice Strategic Initiative (2014). SAMHSA's concept of trauma and guidance for a trauma-informed approach. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Retrieved from https://ncsacw.samhsa.gov/userfiles/files/SAMHSA_Trauma.pdf

ⁱⁱ The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (n.d.). Secondary traumatic stress. Retrieved from <https://www.nctsn.org/trauma-informed-care/secondary-traumatic-stress#:~:text=Secondary%20traumatic%20stress%20is%20the,disasters%2C%20and%20other%20adverse%20events>