

# ReCAST MKE: Synopsis of Community Needs & Resource Assessment

## I. Background

The Resiliency in Communities after Stress and Trauma (ReCAST) Project is intended to facilitate individual and community healing and resiliency in the aftermath of structural violence and racism by increasing access to high quality, relevant behavioral health services and ensuring psychological and physical safety of children and adolescents in some of MKE's most economically and socially disadvantaged neighborhoods. The five goals of the ReCAST grant, as defined by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), the funding agency, are as follows:

1. Build a foundation to promote well being, resiliency and community healing through community-based participatory approaches.
2. Create community change through community-based, participatory approaches that promote community and youth engagement, leadership development, improved governance, and capacity building
3. Facilitate equitable access to trauma-informed community behavioral health resources
4. Ensure program services are developmentally appropriate and culturally specific to youth, families, and the communities served
5. Strengthen the integration of behavioral health services and community systems to address social determinants of health. In doing so, it is imperative to acknowledge transportation, law enforcement practices, employment and housing policies as contributing factors of health outcomes.

ReCAST MKE is staffed by the City of Milwaukee Health Department's Office of Violence Prevention (OVP) which is committed to involving youth and community stakeholders as both participants and decision-makers in all phases and aspects of project activities. Community engagement and grass roots participation will improve the quality of the results and help to ensure that data, strategies and outcomes are more relevant to the needs and goals of the focus populations.

ReCAST MKE will focus on youth between the ages of 12 and 24 who live in neighborhoods where they are exposed to more violence than those in less disadvantaged communities. Current research documents that consistent exposure to violence puts youth at higher risk for trauma which frequently results in lasting adverse effects on mental, physical, social, emotional and spiritual well-being. These youth have also been most affected by pervasive institutional and/or structural racism, which has been proven to interfere with their functioning in schools, their ability to find meaningful work, functioning as parents, and their fundamental safety in their own neighborhoods.

Neighborhoods identified for significant indicators of concentrated disadvantage include Franklin Heights, Hampton Heights, Amani, Harambee, Metcalfe Park, Muskego Way, Lincoln Village, Old Milwaukee North, Sherman Park and Silver Spring.

## II. Process

As a first step in the ReCAST project process, an initial *Community Needs & Resources Assessment* was completed to help identify priorities, stakeholders and to inform the development of key strategies to address the needs and bolster the resources. This process was

designed to provide a balanced and informed perspective on the needs and strengths of Milwaukee communities and included the following steps: (a) reviewing and integrating relevant reports on violence, trauma and mental illness in Milwaukee (completed within the last four years); (b) gathering data through “community listening sessions” hosted by OVP; (c) summarizing survey data collected from youth regarding their perspective on violence prevention; (d) conducting an environmental scan to identify MKE’s most economically distressed neighborhood and MKE’s community resources and assets; (e) conducting stakeholder interviews with community and agency representatives to gain multiple perspectives on how to address MKE’s primary problems.

Several of the community members/leaders interviewed emphasized the need for community involvement in the design and implementation of violence prevention efforts. Notably, respondents suggested: “nothing about us without us,” “take into account the youth voice” and “shared responsibility with the community having equal authority.” Community leaders also underscored that over the years they have heard lots of talk, but have seen too little action. It is imperative to fulfill expectations that constructive action will follow, as a next step in the project.

### **III. Identified Needs**

The following “needs” emerged as top priorities in community listening/discussion sessions and stakeholder interviews.

#### **Need to improve the social and economic conditions of youth at risk for violence.**

Neighborhoods with the highest rates of violence have the highest rates of (a) poverty; (b) segregation; (c) unemployment and (d) high school non-completion.

**Need to improve youth safety by reducing exposure to violence.** While the overall rates of violence have decreased in many of Milwaukee’s neighborhoods and communities, the rates of violence in communities with concentrated disadvantage has been persistently high. We defined violence broadly to include: gun violence, domestic violence, child abuse, bullying, dating violence, rape, molestation and exploitation. Finally, we also examined structural violence – such as mass incarceration and hyper-segregation - that causes harm by denying basic human rights and/or depriving access to fundamental resources.

**Need to increase access to appropriate psychological services.** It is estimated that 18% of young people have a mental health disorder and about 4.1% of youth/young adults have had a serious mental illness (SMI). The rate of serious mental illness for low-income young adults is significantly higher (about 7.7%). Recent evaluations of the public mental health system reveal a lopsided funding structure that emphasizes last-ditch inpatient services rather than community based services designed to identify problems early and intervene to promote healthy development. There is also a need to decrease distrust in the mental health systems by making services more relevant and meaningful to users of the services. Despite advances in the development of mental health programs for youth at the national level, there has been little improvement in the overall mental health of youth in Milwaukee.

**Need to build the capacity of informal places of hope and healing within the community as identified by youth and families.** There is a shortage of culturally competent mental health providers able to meet the needs of youth and young adults in distressed communities. Promoting this sort of “integrative behavioral health” approach is community centered and place-based which has been shown to diminish disparities.

**Need to promote Positive Youth Development by teaching young people how to invest in their own communities.** In addition to treating mental illness, there is a need to support positive youth development through programs situated in schools, health clinics, after school program and employment programs in their own communities. This could include activities that support social emotional learning, youth expression, creativity, advocacy, collaboration and leadership skills.

**Need to improve access to higher education for mental and behavioral health fields.** Milwaukee has several institutions of higher education that would benefit from increasing efforts to recruit and retain minority students, including those attending local high schools. This is a problem in two respects: underutilizing these institutions to promote diversity in the workforce and under-actualizing the talents of local youth.

#### **IV. Identified Resources**

Milwaukee already has many of the key ingredients needed to build an integrated system of support for youth in high risk environments including (a) high quality mental health service providers; (b) programs that provide alternative forms of healing and support to disenfranchised youth; (c) strong after-school programs that provide youth with valuable opportunities in safe settings; (d) employment programs that provide young people with job training, work experience and career exploration services; (e) evidence-based programs in schools designed to help students feel safe and to ensure that the classroom is a secure learning environment that supports growth and success.

Milwaukee has the fundamental resources needed to develop an assessment and referral system that could help connect at risk youth to appropriate resources and services. An opportunity exists to effectively develop systems and processes that connect local youth to appropriate programs and services based on specific interests and needs. This would allow institutions and organizations to collaborate more effectively to support the city's under-served and under-resourced populations.

Milwaukee has the expertise and resources to: (a) educate frontline public services providers about how to deliver trauma sensitive care; (b) provide parents with specialized support and coaching to diminish risk for child abuse; (c) provide relationship education and interpersonal skills training to prevent domestic violence and partner abuse; and (d) provide conflict resolution services to help defuse arguments that lead to violence. Currently, there is no central system for accessing and disseminating these services as needed.

Milwaukee has leaders in the business and workforce development community who are well positioned to address the current "skills gap" by training and mentoring local young men and women to fulfill specific tasks. It is possible to integrate mental health and workforce development/job placement services to help employees be more successful and help employers provide sufficient guidance and support through trauma informed employment practices.

Milwaukee is developing expertise in alternative, non-traditional forms of healing and youth empowerment. Milwaukee has under-utilized expertise in cultural competency training. Such training would help employers, youth development professionals, first responders and mental health professionals provide more relevant and effective support to the City's diverse population.

## V. Summary and Conclusions

Although Milwaukee has many valuable programs and services, the lack of an integrative entity to connect youth and families to those services means that many young people are under-served and many resources may be under-utilized or not providing culturally appropriate services. Furthermore, it is necessary to recognize that in addition to strengthening support systems for youth and families, it is also essential to address “upstream factors” that perpetuate chronic stress, violence and trauma. The “upstream factors” consist of segregation, poverty, unemployment and underperforming schools.

As a result of the *Community Needs & Resources Assessment*, the following set of recommendations have been recognized that reflect needs identified by the community stakeholders:

1. Promote long-term trauma reduction and healing support to residents, professionals who address violence, and others experiencing secondary/vicarious trauma
2. Increase coordination of mental health and trauma services across agencies to support children, youth and families who have been exposed to multiple forms of violence.
3. Build a pipeline of culturally-competent mental health care providers from neighborhoods most affected by violence
4. Promote and restore a connection to and sense of cultural identity to promote individual and community healing and resilience
5. Promote culturally rooted healing, resilience, and social development
6. Offer ongoing, collaborative opportunities for training and capacity-building for organizational partners and community stakeholders to better understand best and promising practices in preventing violence and reducing trauma
7. Offer training to providers, professionals and first responders to better identify, engage, assess and support youth and families who have experienced trauma
8. Promote inclusive and protective school environments
9. Decrease teen dating violence and sexual assault in youth
10. Strengthen treatment and services for sexual and domestic violence
11. Support, encourage and advocate for the delivery of services in settings where youth and families live, learn, play and work
12. Use assessment strategies to determine which social services are trauma informed, culturally responsive and useful for youth and families-- An efficient system will match individual needs to specialized services/programs.

This document is intended to stimulate conversations leading to the next step in the ReCAST process, which is implementing and assessing programs and services aligned with the *Community Needs & Resources Assessment* and *Blueprint for Peace*.