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Contact: Amy Hasenberg, (608) 266-2839

Trauma-Informed Care: There's a Role for Everyone

By First Lady Tonette Walker

Have you ever found yourself saying under your breath, "what's wrong with that person?" It might have happened while you were at work and someone was having a meltdown or at the grocery store when you heard a father yelling at his child.

Trauma-Informed Care (TIC) helps us understand why people act in ways that don't make sense, are interruptive, or are downright unhelpful. Once we have insight into the "why", our responses become more empathetic and compassionate – that's TIC in a nutshell. It helps us shift from thinking "what's wrong with you", to "what happened to you."

Over the last several years, I have been working to incorporate TIC across Wisconsin and the nation because it can truly make a difference in the everyday lives of thousands of kids and families. To spread awareness this month, Scott (Governor Walker), proclaimed the Month of May as Trauma-Informed Care Awareness Month and May 22nd as Trauma-Informed Care Day. As a result, the two of us have been traveling throughout Wisconsin to hear more from the organizations and communities using TIC.

Part of the reason we're talking about TIC is because we need everyone's help. I, along with many others, have been working for years to promote TIC awareness and the momentum is building. But there is so much more to do, and everyone has a role to play. TIC has the potential to not only prevent adversity and heal children and families, but also to transform our society.

How? TIC uses science about how our nervous systems develop as well as research from the Adverse Childhood Experiences Study, or ACEs Study. ACEs are adverse events that occur before the age of 18 that can include physical abuse; sexual abuse; emotional abuse; emotional neglect; physical neglect; mental illness of a household member; alcoholism of a household member; illegal drug use of a household member; divorce or separation of a parent; domestic violence towards a parent; incarceration of a household member. When a child experiences these things and does not have a stable and caring person to help buffer

the toxic stress created, the child's brain chemistry can change – this shapes educational outcomes and influences a person's future health and well-being.

Research shows when a person has one ACE, he or she is more likely to have another two or more. It also shows a strong link between the number of ACEs and adult health. As the number of reported ACEs increase, the greater a person's risk becomes for cancer, diabetes, depression, alcoholism, drug use, smoking, suicide, homelessness, and more.

Everyone can use this science to change the way we see and respond to others who are in distress. If we use TIC as our new guiding lens, we start to see that everything from a service environment to an organization's policies, to a community's local grocery store can prevent or promote toxic stress.

That's why Scott and I have visited schools like those in Two Rivers and family-oriented organizations like RISE and Treehouse. No matter where you are, TIC plays a role and you should be a leader in bringing TIC to that environment. That's also why six different state agencies are using TIC.

As far as we've come, our work is just beginning. While our state agencies, county services, schools and non-profit organizations become trauma-informed, we need to bring TIC to businesses, neighborhoods, faith communities, and local governments. This will be our work until everyone in Wisconsin has a TIC shift in perspective.

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