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Cory Johnson Program for Post-Traumatic Healing Roxbury Presbyterian Church Social Impact Center 2017 – 2020 Program Impact Report

Mission and History

Roxbury Presbyterian Church Social Impact Center (SIC), a non-profit organization, was founded in 2000 with a mission to create and implement educational and economic development programs to strengthen the Roxbury community.

In the Spring of 2013 two daytime shootings steps from Roxbury Presbyterian Church brought together residents and nonprofit leaders to address the violence, under the leadership of Rev. Liz Walker. When asked about the root cause, one participant stated, “too much untreated PTSD and too many guns.” In response, the SIC worked with Partners HealthCare, Brigham & Women's Hospital, and community members to launch The Cory Johnson Program for Post-Traumatic Healing (CJP) in September 2014 - named after a promising young church member who was murdered in 2010.

The Cory Johnson Program provides weekly trauma support using a community-based approach to foster recovery and healing from all sources of post-traumatic stress, including exposure to violence, poverty, and racism. The program currently serves over 1800 people per year. Programming addresses all aspects of trauma’s impact on the body, mind, and spirit.

Cory Johnson Program Goals and Objectives

- Increase awareness and understanding of trauma and post-traumatic stress, grief and loss, and the healing process within community.
- Provide relief from traumatic stress.
- Deliver mental health supports beyond regular service hours to people who otherwise might not receive them, both within the program and through referrals.
- Provide safe space for the sharing of painful stories with no cost or barriers to access.

Can We Talk? The Cornerstone of the Program is Sharing One’s Story in Community

Words to express the story of what happens during a traumatic experience are not encoded in memory during the event. *Can We Talk?* assists people in expressing the story in a way that helps them to integrate their memories, a necessary part of the healing process. People share their stories of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse; violence in the home and street; bullying; job loss; betrayal; and racism. They also share stories of hope, healing, and growth. Men and women, young and old, from different ethnic, racial, religious, sexual, and gender orientations tell their stories and listen to each other. As people share their stories within safe and consistent space, they experience a decrease in isolation and an increase in a sense of connection, which are the other main aspects of the trauma healing process.

Expanding Access

The Cory Johnson Program engages community members without church affiliation, while leveraging the propensity of African Americans to view church as a safe space and place to turn for help. All the programming, but especially *Can We Talk?*, provides peer support which can guard against the stigmatization of formal treatment. Community companions, many trauma survivors themselves, take part in a 20-hour training on trauma and the healing process. By providing services in the community each week without requiring a referral, free of charge, and with the participation of community members in service delivery; the program is offered without typical barriers to accessing support.

2017-2020 Cory Johnson Program (CJP) Highlights

2017 – CJP served 1200 people; expanded programming & completed a program evaluation

Each program component includes dinner, childcare, and community companion support

- ***Can We Talk? Community Conversation on Trauma*** – monthly evening where 50-60 people share their stories and artists-in-residence offer music and dance expression.
- ***Mothers' Group*** – a support program that offers wide and deep assistance for mothers who have lost children to homicide; includes a weekly group as well as individual support as needed.
- ***Men's Support Group*** – bi-weekly support group addressing trauma and addiction.
- ***Mind-Body Healing*** – monthly evening offering movement to address trauma's impact on the body.
- ***Trauma Education*** – monthly evening with presentation and discussion on aspects of trauma and the healing process.
- ***Writing Our Stories*** – monthly evening with opportunity to write part of one's story and share with others.
- ***Support and referral services*** – In addition to referring people as needed for medical and mental health services, the licensed mental health clinician is available to support people in their relationships and encounters with service providers and systems of care. Examples are medical and mental health appointments, IEP appointments at their children's schools, meetings with the Department of Children and Families, housing, and legal appointments.

In 2017 an evaluator was hired to create, deliver, and assess an evaluation of the program.

2018 – CJP served 1400 people; replication of the Can We Talk? model

In 2018, CJP began engaging with other local and national communities interested in replicating the *Can We Talk?* model. Each of the replication sites reached out to the program to explore how *Can We Talk?* might be brought to their community – CJP did not seek them out. Sites agree to follow the *Can We Talk?* model, receive training, and form a partnership relationship.

As a component of the engagement with replication sites, CJP is building (1) a learning community that increases awareness and understanding of trauma and healing; and, (2) a healing community that supports recovery for the mind, body, and spirit impacts of trauma. The plan is to continue to build these connections through facilitating an online trauma healing network that meets regularly and includes annual conferences to support connection and best practices. Currently, in 2020, there are nine churches and organizations, six in the Greater Boston area and three in other states, that have either replicated or are in the process of replicating the program and receiving training.

2019 – CJP served 1600 people; deepened program components, including trauma-informed childcare

Since the beginning of the program in 2014, CJP offers childcare while parents attend the weekly programming. In 2019 the program transformed and deepened the trauma-informed childcare services offered by engaging a nationally recognized psychologist and child trauma specialist, Elizabeth Warner, PsyD. to be part of the trauma support team. The purpose of this deepened work is to help parents and caregivers better understand the impact of trauma, including effects of poverty, racism, and community violence, on children and families as well as to support their relationships with systems of care. Children who attend the childcare component of the program receive some trauma support intervention through play and the SMART approach. The SMART, Sensory Motor Arousal Regulation Treatment, approach targets somatic dysregulation as an avenue to behavioral and emotional regulation. Children learn to better control their emotions, and parents/caregivers learn how to improve their response to their children's behaviors. Families are also able to meet individually with Elizabeth.

In 2019 CJP deepened the program components by developing a traumatic stress and healing curriculum that has monthly themes. The *Exploring Our Stories* series provides community members with trauma education to better understand the biopsychosocial effects of traumatic stress, as well as the core elements of the healing process; while the *Reimagining Our Stories* series allows participants to take control of their narrative and process trauma through creative artistic expression and therapeutic writing. Built into each program component offering are mind-body healing techniques, such as breathing, meditation, EFT tapping, and tools for emotional regulation that can be used by people in their daily lives as a way to release and address the traumatic stress held in their bodies.

Monthly Program components include: (deepening of program underlined); dinner & childcare provided

- ***Can We Talk? Community Conversation on Trauma*** – monthly evening where 50-60 people share their stories and artists-in-residence offer music and dance expression. Community companions more actively engage with people weekly and monthly; offering ability to connect by phone as needed.
- ***Mothers' Support Groups*** – in addition to the ongoing weekly support for a small group of mothers who have lost children to homicide; CJP added an open monthly drop-in support group for mothers who have lost children in any way.
- ***Men's Support Group*** – this group became an ongoing bi-weekly drop-in group for men.
- ***Mind-Body Healing*** – breathing and mindfulness practices are included during each weekly program offering.
- ***Exploring Our Stories*** – the next level of Trauma Education Nights, a 10-month curriculum addressing all aspects of trauma healing and recovery, with themes that build across weeks and months.
- ***Reimagining Our Stories through Art and Writing*** – an expansion of *Writing Our Stories*, to include artistic expressions, offering opportunity to deepen the healing process.
- ***Support and referral services*** - In addition to referring people as needed for medical and mental health services, the licensed mental health clinician is available to support people in their relationships and encounters with service providers and systems of care. Examples are medical and mental health appointments, IEP appointments at their children's schools, meetings with the Department of Children and Families, housing, and legal appointments.

2020 – CJP on track to serve 1800 people; deepened trauma support through creation of Community Trauma Healing Specialist position

In January 2020, with funding from Partners HealthCare (now Mass General Brigham) CJP expanded trauma support by creating a full-time Community Trauma Healing Specialist (CTHS) position. This is filled by Shondell Davis, a homicide survivor, who is trained in specialized skills to provide trauma intervention and trauma-focused mental health support over the long haul, after first responders have moved on. She provides mental health assistance and support in the aftermath of a traumatic event, supports healing through consistent and on-going engagement for as long as needed for a caseload of families, and connects people to social and medical services in the community.



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COVID-19 Assistance and Support

The COVID-19 pandemic increased the need for individual and community post-traumatic stress support. The Cory Johnson Program retooled programming and assistance to meet the needs of the community. The CTHS and the entire trauma support team are assisting people in their struggles with housing, food insecurity, legal assistance, and medical and mental healthcare. In keeping with public health guidelines, the assistance is offered virtually over the telephone and through use of Zoom.

CJP continues to accompany people around trauma and loss and to educate about how this pandemic is affecting them in addition to their previous traumatic experiences. Programming and service delivery adjustments are as follows:

- ***Can We Talk? Community Conversation on Trauma*** is now offered weekly via Zoom on Thursdays instead of monthly, providing support in a time of increased need. Participants share their stories, thoughts, and feelings along with the artists-in-residence offering support through music. There is a consistent weekly virtual attendance between 35 and 40 people.
- ***Can We Talk? on Racism*** has been offered since June every three weeks on a Tuesday, offering a safe space to share stories and voices about racism and its traumatic impacts. There is a consistent virtual attendance between 40 and 50 people.
- ***Men's Support Group*** is offered biweekly virtually via Zoom.
- ***Mothers' Support Groups*** – the weekly smaller support group continues to meet virtually; the drop-in group for mothers who have lost children in any way is offered monthly via Zoom.
- ***Exploring Our Stories*** will be offered twice a month via Zoom starting in September. Given the times we are in, the topics for this trauma education component will focus on trauma and racism, systemic and structural racism, historical trauma, generational trauma, and internalized oppression; as well as trauma and COVID19.
- ***Reimagining Our Stories through Art and Writing*** will start at some point in the fall or winter.
- ***Support & Referral Services***
 - Community Companions offer telephone support to individuals who request it.
 - Community Trauma Healing Specialist, as well as the program director/counselor, continue to offer full-time 24/7 support and referral services for individuals and families as needed, including virtual attendance to support medical, psychological, IEP, DCF, and other meetings.

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