

## Peace4Tarpon Knows It Takes a Village

By Andrea Blanch, PhD

“There is no trauma-free zone,” reads a poster announcing Peace4Tarpon, a community-wide effort to introduce trauma-informed principles in TarponSprings, Florida. The mission of Peace4Tarpon is “to provide *everyone* in our community with information on the causes and consequences of trauma” and to support “public and provider education, resource assistance, and advocacy for appropriate prevention and intervention services.” Peace4Tarpon includes virtually every group and civic organization in the city—the mayor’s office and city council, the city manager’s office, the police and fire departments, the housing authority, the school system, health and human services, the business community, the faith-based community, and the local college, art museum, and library. These disparate groups work together with a common mission — to make Tarpon Springs a safe, healthy, healing, and productive community.

Peace4Tarpon was the inspiration of the city’s vice-mayor, Robin Saenger, a passionate advocate experienced in local politics. But it also grew directly out of a mounting national movement. When the vice-mayor was first introduced to the concept of trauma-informed care, she immediately saw its potential for community development. She didn’t have far to go to find knowledge and expertise — the National Center on Trauma-Informed Care had been training the Florida behavioral health and justice systems for several years, and there were people nearby to provide advice and support. After preliminary discussions with community leaders, Saenger arranged for short presentations on trauma-informed care to be made to the city council and to a group of community stakeholders. Both groups were profoundly moved by data showing the relationship between “adverse childhood experiences” and health and social problems. The framework of trauma-informed care seemed relevant to everyone: business leaders started discussing implications for the workforce; the mayor wrote an editorial about the importance of human capital in community development; and the chief of police commented, “*This* we can understand and get behind. We deal with the consequences of violence every day.” A steering committee with open membership was formed, and all members signed a Memorandum of Understanding. Membership continues to expand — a mark of growing community interest. While there is no external funding for the initiative, members have been very creative in accessing resources. During its first year, Peace4Tarpon received a \$1,000 grant from the Rotary Club, was named the “North County site” in a countywide children’s initiative, and received \$18,000 for public education from the Juvenile Welfare Board. In addition, the library purchased a collection of books on trauma for children and adults, the local art museum partnered with a nearby college to offer art therapy sessions for traumatized children, and other organizations and individuals contributed time, expertise, and in-kind resources.

Because the impetus for Peace4Tarpon came from the community, the initial focus was on public education. The premise was that many trauma survivors could be helped, and many harmful interactions avoided, if ordinary citizens understood trauma, knew what to look for, and were familiar with some fundamental do’s and don’ts. Almost 300 people attended a Saturday training event that formally launched the initiative. Discussions at steering committee meetings have since demonstrated how an understanding of trauma can change people’s assumptions and behaviors. One woman described how after the training, she was able to intervene in a situation in which her neighbor was being unintentionally retraumatized by first responders who didn’t know her trauma history. In the past few months, a social marketing subcommittee has made plans to reach broadly into the community using posters, t-shirts, storefront signs, local media, and Facebook. A trauma survivor from a nearby community has offered to help organize the peer voice, and a youth summit, teacher education event, and trainings for first responders have been planned.

Most agencies represented on the steering committee have also expressed their desire to become trauma-informed. The community mental health center has played a key role in demonstrating the depth of that undertaking. After extensive staff training and a complete revision of assessment instruments, the agency director asked a friend with a trauma history to enroll as a client, unknown to staff, and to report on her experience. Much to the director’s chagrin, the agency failed the test completely — the woman experienced the intake process and environment as inconsistent with basic principles of trauma-informed care. To the agency’s credit, they took the feedback seriously and have since made major changes, providing a wonderful model to other agencies.

Peace4Tarpon will soon begin a pilot project in one elementary school as part of an overall focus on school children. The project will identify high risk children and families, use trusted community members to broker relationships, draw on all relevant agencies to meet identified needs of the child and the family, and use a "time bank" (a pool for trading skills and resources) to give families an opportunity to give back to the community. There has recently been a re-emergence of local community organizing as a viable strategy for change. Grassroots efforts to develop resilient and sustainable approaches to the environment and the economy have been springing up across the country and across the globe. Peace4Tarpon is a similar effort, focusing on social and behavioral resilience. Clearly, the health and social welfare of a community and the people who live there are as important to long-term sustainability as the environment and the economy. Tarpon Springs has made trauma-informed care mainstream, and other communities are already considering similar efforts. National Council members are in a prized position to provide the inspiration and local leadership to make it happen.