

Community in Need

A Racine Case Study

“I watched *skepticism*
turn into *belief...*”



A COUNTY IN NEED OF SUPPORT

In 2017, Racine County had its highest number of children in out-of-home care (foster care, etc.). Case managers already couldn't keep up with the workload, and early data from community **Adverse Childhood Experiences** (ACE) surveys and local home studies showed that there was significant trauma in children and families in Racine.

Something had to be done, or the numbers were bound to climb.

Kerry Milkie, current manager of 12 years at the Racine County Human Services Department had a plan. She sat down with the County Executive to explain exactly what she needed to reverse their current trends.

"I didn't ask for additional [direct care/case management] staff, but I did ask for additional supervisory staff so case managers could have more time with supervisors to look at more difficult cases," she said. "We needed to embed trauma-informed care into our practice."

“Anyone can return kids *home* — the real challenge is making sure they don't *come back*.”

NEW PLAYERS AT THE TABLE

The first round of training took place in 2018. Child welfare staff along with staff from the Racine Unified School District, were brought together for Trauma Informed Care and Trauma Sensitive Schools training delivered by Wellpoint Care Network (then SaintA).

Overall, 300 staff were educated on understanding trauma and its impact on the children and families they care for.

It made sense for social workers, supervisors, and school counselors to be versed in trauma-informed care, Milkie says, but in the second year, some non-traditional players were brought into the mix. Police officers, district attorneys, judges, and probation and parole officers were the focus of the next sessions. While staff in these services interact with clients in equally-significant ways, they aren't always equipped with the skills to understand how trauma can affect an individual's journey.

PARTNERSHIP WITH WELLPOINT

By the end of the second year, the county hosted a special version of Wellpoint's **Seven Essential Ingredients of Trauma Informed Care** training, tailored to those in law enforcement. For this unique course, Wellpoint's Senior Trainer Tim Grove teamed up with Corey Norlander, a Trainer and Consultant who also serves as a Captain in the Sheboygan County Sheriff's Department.

"Often, they [police officers] see the worst of the worst," Milkie says. In the years prior, Racine had experienced a few officer-involved shootings, and the community was growing concerned.

Every law enforcement jurisdiction except for one was able to send an officer to be trained in trauma-informed care. Together, they learned more about **community policing** and the importance of relationship building with the communities they serve. Participants were also introduced to **historical trauma**, a concept that describes the collective, multigenerational trauma experienced by a group because of their culture, race or ethnicity — such as enslavement or genocide — and can how it can pass down through generations. The session also covered how systemic racism and oppression influence how people respond to and interact with officers in their community.

"I watched skepticism turn into belief, which turned into wondering how we can implement a trauma informed framework into practice," Milkie says. One jurisdiction even developed a sensory room for their officers to self-regulate and manage the stress of the job, which they continue to use to this day.

RESULTS IN CHILD WELFARE

With a new focus on what happened to families, instead of what the family did or didn't do, Racine County was able to make impactful changes in their outcomes. Since 2017, there has been a **50% decrease** in children in out-of-home care. From a consistent 400 children each month in 2017, to 250 children in 2018 and around 174 children in the final months of 2020, Racine County has seen an incredible amount of success in keeping kids safe at home and out of the system.

For Milkie, it wasn't only about lowering the numbers. "Anyone can return kids home, but the real challenge is making sure they don't come back."

A "driver county" is a county with numbers are so big they drive the data for the state. Racine was the only county out of the five largest in Wisconsin that was able to exceed the federal requirement of children returning home from care. Generally, **less than 4% of kids** now return to care after being reunified.

It started by developing strategies and programs that serve the entire family. "We don't want families to rely on human services workers. We have to help them work through poverty, develop social and emotional learning skills and understand historical trauma to stop families from coming in and out of the system."

THE NEXT STEPS

COVID-19 has created new challenges for Milkie and her team, but a trauma-informed perspective has made it easier than ever to adapt. While much of their work is best done face-to-face, they have found creative ways to reach their clients, like the **Here to Help Line**, which makes resources for families a phone call away during these difficult times.

The department's introduction to historical trauma has also been helpful for navigating the pandemic. Milkie says her team acknowledges that Black and Brown communities have been more affected because of systemic issues.

“If the last three years has proven anything, it’s that change is *always* possible.”

Regardless of the county, families of color are often disproportionately represented in child welfare, and Racine is no exception. Milkie admits that they can do better, but are actively trying to always ask: *Are we being inclusive, and do we look like our community?*

“We’re a government system, and most systems don’t like change,” Milkie says. “But if the last three years has proven anything, it’s that change is always possible.”



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