

OWR's Mission to Make Hawai'i a Trauma-Informed State

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On February 20, Governor Josh Green, M.D., signed an executive order declaring Hawai'i a trauma-informed state. Becoming a trauma-informed state will help alleviate some of the impacts of trauma, and build resilience in our families, communities, and state workforce. The order invites state employees to take a survey from the Office of Wellness and Resilience (OWR) to help determine what is needed to provide trauma-informed and healing-centered care to the people they serve – and this starts with supporting our own staff's wellness and resilience.

“When we are well, we can be better for our families, the people we serve, and our state,” said Governor Green. “With the results, we will develop better services and programs that support the wellness and resilience of our people, including addressing community traumas we've lived through in the past several years, like the pandemic and Maui fires.”

Hawai'i's Trauma-Informed Care Task Force was established in 2021, to develop and make recommendations for trauma-informed care in the state. OWR was established in 2022, as a semi-autonomous authority to adopt and implement the trauma-informed care framework created by the task force.

Although several departments, such as the Department of Education, the Department of Health, and the Department of Human Services, have been working on trauma-informed care for more than a decade, the executive order will accelerate this culture shift.

“One way of thinking about it is that when a child is acting up in class, we currently ask, ‘What's wrong with you?!’,” said Tia L.R. Hartsock, director of the Office of Wellness and Resilience.

“We tend to focus solely on the behavior alone. We want to move toward an approach that asks instead, ‘What happened to you?’ because we want to get to the root cause of the behavior, and we know that trauma may be one possible cause.”

Trauma-informed care is built on six principles that foster this shift: (1) safety, (2) trust and transparency, (3) empowerment, known as “voice and choice,” (4) collaboration, (5) peer support, and (6) honoring cultural, gender and historical issues.

OWR will work closely with state departments to conduct trauma-informed care assessments, starting with the statewide well-being and quality of life survey in February and March, with a special focus on the state workforce. Based on this initial feedback, the Office will work with each department to meet its own goals, including providing training and technical assistance to support trauma-informed policies, practices, programs, and processes in each department. This may include training related to adverse childhood experiences and secondary traumatic stress, as well as workforce wellness strategies.

“Trauma-informed care acknowledges that our state agencies have the capacity to mitigate harm and promote healing on a systemic level,” said Hartsock. “By integrating what we know about trauma into our policies, procedures, and practices, we can help prevent trauma and actively avoid re-traumatization. Adopting trauma-informed care can improve people’s engagement with public services, as well as health outcomes and our workforce’s wellness, making our state more resilient.”

Researchers at the University of Hawai‘i (UH), in partnership with OWR, are interested in your thoughts about strengths and opportunities to better our well-being – in our homes, communities, and workplaces. Feedback from the state workforce, as well as community members statewide, will be used to create reports to inform and improve local programs and policies. For more information, visit: www.health-study.com, or email Trina Orimoto at UH: trinao@hawaii.edu.



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