

# Approach to Environmental Scans of Statewide Trauma-Informed Work

In 2019, Governor Newsom appointed Dr. Nadine Burke Harris as California's first-ever Surgeon General. One of her first actions was a fact-finding process to learn about what was already being done and working well to address Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and toxic stress among children, families, and communities in California. This exploratory effort, which included a statewide listening tour and environmental scans to assess cross-governmental and community efforts, was designed to inform the planning process for cross-sector strategies to address ACEs and toxic stress statewide.

Multiple California state agencies collaborated with stakeholders to further the collective understanding of trauma-informed practices and policies that have been adopted and/or implemented across the state. The Injury and Violence Prevention Branch of the California Department of Public Health, the Office of Child Abuse Prevention of the California Department of Social Services, and the Essentials for Childhood (EfC) Initiative coalition and its Trauma-Informed Practices Subcommittee identified a need to determine what baseline efforts were underway across state organizations and agencies to make California a more trauma-informed and resilient state. To strengthen understanding in this area, a survey was initiated in March 2020 to collect information on current trauma-informed practices and policies in order to develop tools, trainings, and supports to help California state departments and agencies expand and build upon their existing efforts.

Further, ACEs Connection—an information-exchange catalyst and social network community of practice in the worldwide ACEs and toxic stress movement—had been working in partnership with the EfC Initiative to identify and document ACEs-related activities (e.g., trainings or events) at the local level. In this effort, ACEs Connection developed a mapping tool for displaying ACEs and trauma-informed organizational activities geographically and by sector.<sup>1529</sup> Three California counties (Fresno, San Diego, and Santa Barbara) have been piloting its use to help track their local ACEs-related work.

These multiple efforts to assess what state and local agencies and organizations

are doing to address ACEs and toxic stress were brought together through a partnership with the California Office of the Surgeon General (CA-OSG), Health in All Policies Task Force (HiAP), Public Health Institute, ACEs Connection, and the EfC Initiative. As a result of this collaborative partnership, these separate activities were coordinated using similar information-gathering processes with allied aims and tactics. Specifically, in consultation with the other partners, the CA-OSG developed a formal environmental scan survey to assess ACEs-related activities at the county level; and ACEs Connection and the EfC Initiative developed a state-governmental-level survey to document current state-level ACEs activities. The EfC Initiative workgroup, including ACEs Connection and the California Strategic Growth Council, piloted the state survey before it was released to the field in May 2020. As the two surveys were being developed, a coordinated effort was made to align the two sets of survey questions for consistency and comparability.

The two surveys were undertaken at a critical moment when many drivers of trauma, such as systemic racism and economic insecurity, had been laid bare and government systems tasked with addressing these ever-changing and complex issues were strained by added demands as a result of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic and historic wildfires. Trauma-informed systems, practices, and policies are one very important way to address these multifaceted and complex issues. Thus, there was a clear need to understand and advance the status of current state and local adoption and implementation of trauma-informed efforts.

## **PURPOSE OF THE STATE AND COUNTY SURVEYS**

The purpose of both surveys was to develop a baseline state-of-the-state understanding of the current level of awareness; training and education efforts; and adoption and implementation of ACEs-related and trauma-informed policies and practices throughout California.

The results of the surveys are intended to inform the cross-sector strategies, including of the ACEs Aware and EfC initiatives, around state- and local-level efforts to incorporate trauma-informed approaches into their systems and ultimately reduce ACEs. Results of the surveys will also be used to assess the state's capacity to enhance current efforts and inform future implementation of ACEs Aware. Results will also be used more broadly to aid the CA-OSG, California Department of Health Care Services, California Department of Public Health, Health in All Policies Task Force, the EfC Initiative, and Governor Gavin Newsom's administration in better supporting families and children, including those who have experienced ACEs or trauma. The survey results will also enable identification and promotion of existing promising practices, and pinpointing of

where work at the state and county levels can be supported and strengthened.

## **SURVEY QUESTIONS**

The surveys asked respondents about the reach and extent of their organization's work related to ACEs, toxic stress, and trauma-informed care, including training, screening, existing supports, funding, and challenges. Sample questions on both the state and county surveys include:

1. What steps has your organization taken to implement ACEs/toxic stress-responsive and/or trauma-informed practices, policies, or environments at an organizational/programmatic level?
2. What steps have staff in your organization taken to build awareness of ACEs science/toxic stress and/or incorporate trauma-informed practices, policies, or environments at an organizational level?
3. What training model does your organization use to incorporate ACEs/toxic stress-responsive and/or trauma-informed practices, policies, or environments?
4. What other factors have facilitated the ability of your organization to support ACEs/toxic stress-responsive and/or trauma-informed practices, policies, and environments, if any?
5. What other factors have challenged the ability of your organization to support ACEs/toxic stress-responsive and/or trauma-informed practices, policies, and environments, if any?
6. What resources are needed to support future implementation of ACEs/toxic stress-responsive and/or trauma-informed practices, policies, or environments?

The questions for both the state and local surveys were informed by ACEs Connection's Milestone Tracker,<sup>1605</sup> which organizations use to monitor progress toward to becoming more trauma-informed.

## **STATE SURVEY DISTRIBUTION**

In August 2020, the state survey was sent to contacts in healthcare and allied sectors, such as public health, education, early childhood, home visitation, justice, and social services. The state survey was distributed utilizing a broad methodology that relied on formal state organizational structure, and a targeted methodology using personal connections by the survey team to: key leaders at six state agencies and personal colleagues in work groups, task forces, and similar bodies linked to the EfC Initiative, Health in All Policies Task Force, and

CA-OSG.

In September 2020, initial outreach for the state survey reached approximately 330 individuals in approximately 40 state agencies, departments, boards, and offices. During the data collection period, the survey team identified gaps in participation and sent additional messages to increase the response rate. In all, approximately 400 individuals from 50 state departments were emailed directly about the survey.

## **COUNTY SURVEY DISTRIBUTION**

Also in August 2020, the county survey was distributed using a broad methodology to reach cross-sector county leaders from all 58 counties and 61 local health jurisdictions via personalized emails sent from the California Surgeon General, which also requested that they share the survey with other relevant parties in their county departments and agencies. The survey was also distributed using a targeted methodology: the survey team used their network of ACEs champions across the state to do further promotion, including asking key state partners to forward the survey request from CA-OSG to targeted county staff.

County staff that were contacted included health officers, maternal child adolescent health, public health, social services, behavioral health, substance use, and social services directors, chief probation officers, First 5 directors, superintendents of schools, and contacts within child abuse prevention coordinators and councils, and Help Me Grow. In all, approximately 550 individuals from 58 county organizations were emailed directly about the survey.

## **SURVEY RESPONSES**

In total, 261 individuals at 32 state departments responded to the state survey in September 2020. Of those respondents, most individuals worked at the program level (119) or branch/center/division level (106), while a few reported working at the department or agency-level (36). Some 257 individuals serving 57 of the 58 counties in California responded to the county survey. Respondents represented the healthcare, public health, social services, early childhood, justice, and education sectors, and included respondents from organizations such as First Five, Help Me Grow, and Parks and Recreation. This response rate was considered remarkable given the challenges facing state and county agencies in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## NEXT STEPS

Full analysis of the state and county surveys was not available at time of publication of this report. Plans include one or more written reports communicating these results, with release in spring 2021. These reports will include a summary of the results of the two surveys, as well as recommendations for state and local agencies and organizations regarding promising practices that can be used to make California a resilient and trauma-informed state, how to better meet the needs of the Californians who have faced adversity, and how to best support the staff who provide those services.

Preliminary review of the survey responses indicates significant activity underway in California's efforts to become a trauma-informed state. The findings will be used to educate stakeholders about the opportunity to engage best practices within state and local efforts to promote well-being and reduce negative health outcomes associated with ACEs and toxic stress. Survey results will also be used to identify where state- and county-level policies, programs, and interventions can be strengthened, aligned, and coordinated.

The survey team is deeply appreciative of the individuals who took time to respond to the local- and state-level environmental scan surveys. Despite the tremendous pressures brought about by the events of 2020, hundreds of individuals shared their existing efforts and recommendations to assist collaborative efforts and ensure that California becomes a more resilient and trauma-informed state.