



## WEST VIRGINIA CENTER FOR CHILDREN'S JUSTICE

PROTECT • HEAL • THRIVE

# Handle With Care

### OVERVIEW:

A recent national survey of the incidence and prevalence of children's exposure to violence and trauma revealed that 60% of American children have been exposed to violence, crime or abuse. Forty percent were direct victims of two or more violent acts. Prolonged exposure to violence and trauma can seriously undermine children's ability to focus, behave appropriately, and learn in school. It often leads to school failure, truancy, suspension or expulsion, dropping out, or involvement in the juvenile justice system.

The West Virginia Defending Childhood Initiative, commonly referred to as "Handle With Care," is tailored to reflect the needs and issues affecting children in West Virginia. The Initiative, a result of a collaborative effort of key stakeholders and partners, builds upon the success of proven programs throughout the country. The goal of the Initiative is to prevent children's exposure to trauma and violence, mitigate negative affects experienced by children's exposure to trauma, and to increase knowledge and awareness of this issue.

Model Handle With Care ("HWC") programs promote safe and supportive homes, schools and communities that *protect* children, and help traumatized children *heal* and *thrive*. HWC promotes school-community partnerships aimed at ensuring that children who are exposed to trauma in their home, school or community receive appropriate interventions to help them achieve academically at their highest levels despite whatever traumatic circumstances they may have endured. The ultimate goal of HWC is to help students to succeed in school. Regardless of the source of trauma, the common thread for effective intervention is the school. Research now shows that trauma can undermine children's ability to learn, form relationships, and function appropriately in the classroom. HWC programs support children exposed to trauma and violence through improved communication and collaboration between law enforcement, schools and mental health providers, and connects families, schools and communities to mental health services.

### PILOT:

"Handle with Care" is an initiative currently being piloted at Mary C. Snow West Side Elementary School in Charleston, WV. The school, located in an urban area of the city plagued by drug and violent crime, houses approximately 500 students. Ninety-Three percent of the students come from low-income families. The school has ranked 398 out of 404 elementary schools in West Virginia for poor performance. In conjunction with "Handle With Care," the United States Attorney's Office has launched a Drug Market Intervention in the area to address high level drug and street crime.

#### **LAW ENFORCEMENT:**

"Handle with Care" provides the school with a "heads up" when a child has been identified at the scene of a traumatic event. It could be a meth lab explosion, a domestic violence situation, a shooting in the neighborhood, witnessing a malicious wounding, a drug raid at the home, etc. Police are trained to identify children at the scene, find out where they go to school and send the school a confidential email or fax that simply says . . . "Handle Johnny with care". That's it. No other details.

In addition to providing notice, officers also build positive relationships with students by interacting on a regular basis. They visit classrooms, stop by for lunch, and simply chat with students to help promote positive relationships and perceptions of officers.

#### **SCHOOLS:**

Teachers have been trained on the impact of trauma on learning, and are incorporating many interventions to mitigate the negative impact of trauma for identified students, including: sending students to the clinic to rest (when a HWC has been received and the child is having trouble staying awake or focusing); re-teaching lessons; postponing testing; small group counseling by school counselors; and referrals to counseling, social service or advocacy programs. The school has also implemented many school-wide interventions to help create a trauma sensitive school (Greeters; pairing students with an adult mentor in the school; utilization of a therapy dog; and "thumbs up/thumbs down" to indicate if a student is having a good day or a bad day).

#### **COUNSELING:**

When identified students exhibit continued behavioral or emotional problems in the classroom, the counselor or principal refers the parent to a counseling agency which provides trauma-focused therapy. Currently, there are two partnering agencies providing trauma focused therapy on site at the school in a room provided by the Family Care Health Center housed within the school. Once the counseling agency has received a referral and parental consent, students can receive on-site counseling.

The counseling is provided to children and families at times which are least disruptive for the student. The counselors also participate in MDT, SAT and other meetings deemed necessary by school personnel, and as authorized by the child's parent or guardian. Counselors provide assessments of the child's need, psychological testing, treatment recommendations, accommodation recommendations, and status updates to key school personnel as authorized by the child's parent or guardian.

#### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:**

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**The "Handle With Care" Model:**

If a law enforcement officer encounters a child during a call, that child's information is forwarded to the school before the school bell rings the next day. The school implements individual, class and whole school trauma-sensitive curricula so that traumatized children are "Handled With Care". If a child needs more intervention, on-site trauma-focused mental healthcare is available at the school.

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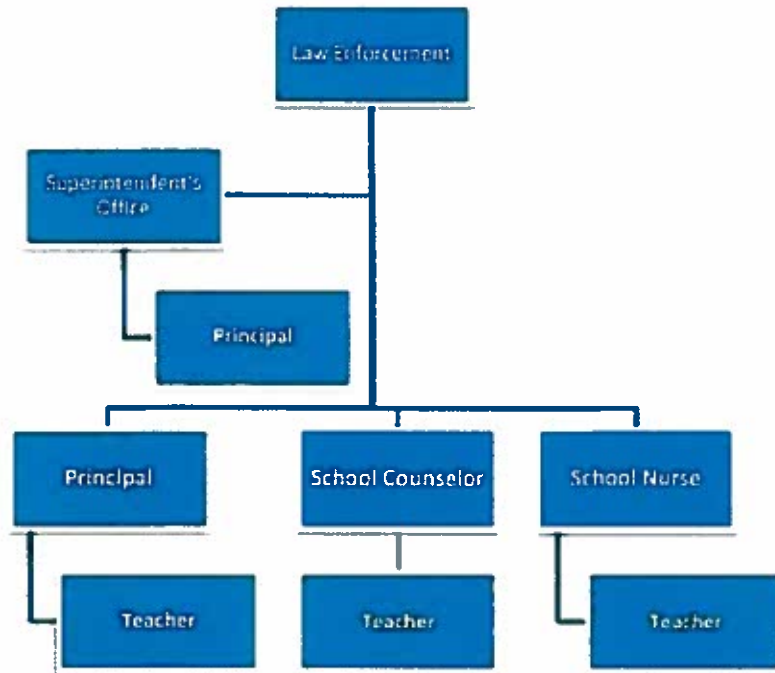
### Education Protocol

- When a child is exposed to violence or trauma, a law enforcement officer or CPS worker will contact the identified school personnel (superintendent's office, principal or counselor) who will take the initial information (Handle With Care Notice).
- The superintendent's office, principal or counselor will then ensure notification is provided to appropriate teacher(s).
- Teachers will observe child's behavior/academic performance and utilize trauma sensitive interventions as appropriate.
- If child exhibits problems (emotional/behavioral/academic, etc.), the teacher will refer the child to the school counselor.
- The school counselor will assess the child's needs to determine if counseling/services are needed and make a recommendation to the parent/guardian.
- The counselor or social worker will refer the caregiver/child for follow-up services as deemed appropriate.
- The school will attempt to obtain written consent from the parent/guardian for care providers and school staff to communicate about the best interest of the child.
- School to provide trauma sensitive training to ALL school employees. A process will be developed to alert appropriate school staff of the child's exposure to violence.
- School to provide space for law enforcement desensitization process.
- School to provide space for specialized trauma therapist.
- Quarterly Defending Childhood Initiative Team Meeting.
  - At least quarterly, key DCI stakeholders will review and evaluate DCI and make recommendations for improvement as necessary.
  - Law Enforcement
  - School
  - Advocates
  - Counselors
- Case workers

- Community partners
- Parents
- Others

The Team will assess the following to determine the effectiveness of DCI: academic achievements; truancies; and disciplinary reports. The meeting will not focus on specific cases.

**School based Trauma Flow Chart**



### Sample MOU Between School and Mental Health Provider

Click here ([docs/Sample MOU School and Mental Health.docx](#)) to download.

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