

Can Resiliency Centers Help with Recovery in the Aftermath of a Mass Crisis?

What is a Resiliency Center?

A Resiliency Center provides a framework for long-term recovery. These Centers play a central role in ensuring that victims of a mass violence event, and the surrounding community, have access to a wide variety of services that are both victim-centered and trauma-informed. A Resiliency Center has been described as a “safety net,” a place that can provide services and activities that are not already provided in the community and can address the needs of people in the aftermath of a traumatic event.

A Resiliency Center is designed to address the vast needs of a community that was subjected to an unprecedented major trauma. It is a partnership of people and organizations. The space is community-owned, meaning that it is a place where people can gather as a community. The Centers are usually located near the place where the attack occurred so that people who are affected by the tragedy have easy access to them.

Resiliency Centers are not only a place to gather, reflect, and connect, they also offer behavioral health resources, wellness classes, educational programming, and ongoing support for those who need help. Activities and programs are self-directed and encourage individuals to engage in ways that build hope and connectivity and, ultimately, foster well-being. They also provide training and professional development opportunities. The services are free for anyone in need. The staff at a Resiliency Center ensure compassionate and sensitive delivery of services in a nonjudgmental manner. A Resiliency Center also provides a central communication channel for everyone seeking help and healing from trauma.

Why Should Someone go to a Resiliency Center?

Everyone copes with trauma differently. While seeing a counselor may be helpful for some, it might not be needed for others. A Resiliency Center provides an opportunity for people to see a therapist, when desired. The Centers also connect individuals to resources and services that foster well-being and support, such as taking part in discussions and events, participating in wellness activities, visiting with therapy dogs, or merely hanging out with friends. It is a safe haven and communication hub for those seeking help, those who are on their journey of healing from trauma, and those who just want the comfort of being with friends. It is a resource center for information on dealing with grief, trauma, coping with stress after a traumatic event, and dealing with commemorations and holidays.

After a mass violence event, people often need support for an extended period of time, and having a place that is familiar, with a variety of services, can be very helpful. Services are usually offered through a physical location as well as through a website.

What is the Effectiveness of a Resiliency Center?

Although there has not been formal research conducted on the success of Resiliency Centers, it has become an accepted practice that community Resiliency Centers can be a positive option in the recovery process after a mass violence event. The U.S. Department of Justice-Office for Victims of Crime encourages the development of Resiliency Centers as part of the recovery process.¹

Resiliency Centers have been established across the country, and they usually operate for a few years after a mass violence event. Resiliency Centers have been developed in the aftermath of numerous mass violence events, including the shootings at Columbine High School, Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, Sandy Hook Elementary School, the Route 91 Harvest Festival in Las Vegas, the movie theater in Aurora, Colorado, Mother Emanuel AME Church in South Carolina, the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, and following the bombing at the Boston Marathon.

The success of a Resiliency Center depends on the collaboration of several groups that come together to provide services. When a mass violence event takes place at a school, it is imperative that students, faculty, PTOs, and the community be involved in the planning of the Center. Linkages should be formed with community institutions such as faith-based organizations and groups, health facilities, major employers, recreation providers, and other organizations that can help address identified needs.

The goals of a Resiliency Center need to be determined early on. For schools, these can include:

- Developing a specialized, local place in the community for providing services to victims and the school.
- Providing easy access to a wide array of the services, information, and opportunities needed for victims to heal in the aftermath of the tragedy.
- Offering a variety of services, including counseling for students and parents, parent and teen education, and peer counseling.
- Establishing a youth drop-in center that can provide a nurturing environment where students can feel safe, be together, and have access to supportive adults if such help is needed.
- Providing community outreach and linkages involving recreational agencies, the faith community, arts community, and educational system.
- Accessing community mental health programs for behavioral health treatment services for children, youth, adults, and families at the Center and in the school and community.
- Providing psychoeducational information on all aspects of trauma recovery for both victims and those who have been traumatized by the event.

¹ Helping Victims of Mass Violence & Terrorism, Planning, Response, Recovery, and Resources toolkit: <https://www.ovc.gov/pubs/mvt-toolkit/recovery.html>

- Establishing a strong outreach component, based out of the Center, to provide both psychoeducation and treatment to individuals who are not actively seeking assistance.
- Developing specialized programs for affected youth in order to provide a safe place, both physically and emotionally, for them to process the full range of emotions evoked by the tragedy.

Resiliency Centers That Were Developed in Colorado After Two School Shootings

When a shooting takes place at a school, one of the most effective recovery support systems for students is contact with their peers; therefore, providing a nurturing environment where students can feel safe, be together, and have access to supportive adults can help with the recovery process.

In Colorado, Resiliency Centers were set up after two school shootings, one at Columbine High School (Columbine) and the other at Platte Canyon High School (Bailey).

Columbine High School created Columbine Connections, a community resource center located near Columbine High School. A teen component, SHOUTS (Students Helping Others Unite Together Socially), was created to provide additional support for traumatized youth who were potentially at higher risk for developing symptoms of depression and/or posttraumatic stress disorder. At SHOUTS, youths participated in a variety of recreational activities and spent time socializing with peers. There was a large open area with couches and chairs, a dance floor, a café, and a recording studio. Youths also had access to counseling and support groups. In addition to being a teen drop-in center, Colorado Connections provided adult members of the community a place to gather as well. Saturday evenings were community nights when teens and families came together.²

Platte Canyon established a drop-in center for high school and middle school students that provided a safe and nurturing environment. The center offered a variety of activities, an opportunity to spend time with friends, and homework help. An advisory board, composed of students, community members, and involved organizations, provided guidance on the daily operation of the center.

As part of the After Action Report from Platte Canyon, feedback was gathered from students, parents, and staff. Some of the comments are listed below:³

- “Being around someone else who knew what I was going through was helpful.”

² School Violence, Assessment, Management Prevention/Columbine High School Shootings, Community Response; Philippe Weintraub, M.D., Harriet L. Hall, Ph.D., Robert S. Pynoos, M.D., M.P.H., American Psychiatric Publishing, Inc. Washington, D.C., and London, England.

³ Lessons Learned, A Victim Assistance Perspective, 2006 Tragedy at Platte Canyon High School, Bailey, Colorado, Marilyn Saltzman.

- “Just having someone listen was great.”
- “I liked the freedom to get help from whom you wish to get help from and the option to get help from any of the other sources because there were so many available.”
- “I also liked it best when the healer didn’t have any expectations and just wanted me to say what I felt.”
- “I found that after 6 months, it seemed too late to actually talk to somebody, and that’s when I really needed to talk to somebody.”
- “I was in denial for a really long time after it happened. I thought if I didn’t think about it, I wouldn’t be hurt, but as soon as school was out for the summer, I got really depressed and everyone else was already over the worst of their grief, so I felt like no one understood me.”
- “After about 4 months, I was feeling ok, but when the 1-year anniversary came around, it felt like the tragedy had happened just yesterday.”
- “I personally have moments when, for no reason at all, I can’t get it out of my mind, and that is when I need people and help so badly it hurts.”
- “I didn’t want help at first because I believed it wasn’t a big issue, but eventually, my mother forced me. In the end, it was a lot better than before.”
- “I felt being around my friends and classmates helped more. They understood what we all were going through more than anyone else in the world.”
- “I was glad they were there if we needed them. If we wanted their help, we approached them. They didn’t force themselves on us.”
- “It is completely ok to need help, that everybody else was feeling the exact same feelings or varying degrees. Don’t close up and not let anybody in. Your community, family, and friends will be there for you.”
- “Spend time with other students who are going through the same thing.”
- “Ask for help.”
- “Turn to each other. They will understand you better than anyone. Don’t internalize your feelings.”
- “The information we received was very helpful, as was the counseling.”
- “Information about what was there if and when needed.”
- “Knowing that other people there have the same feelings and that you are not alone.”
- “Family and friends support. The community gathering 1 year later was helpful.”
- “Even if you don’t think you need it, talk to someone about the incident. I thought my kids were ok but found out through talking with others that some things they were saying indicated they were struggling with what happened, and I got them some counseling so they could talk about it.”
- “After family, friends are usually the most helpful to students.”
- “Don’t wait for people to ask for help. Offer services to everyone.”
- “Acknowledging that I needed help was the best thing I could have done; however, it took 6 months after the incident to realize that I needed help.”
- “Each child can react differently to trauma. It may not show up until 6 months to 2–4 years after the event.”

- “Just listen, be patient, and understanding with your kids. Let them go through all the emotions, and whatever it takes to heal them, let them go through it. Don’t let them shut you out. Talk!!”

Conclusion

Resiliency Centers can provide an opportunity for the community to heal together in a safe, nurturing, and fun place. As it has been said before, “It Takes a Village!”