ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES (ACE) 
AND BREAKING THE CYCLE OF HOMELESSNESS

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The Committee on the Shelterless (COTS)

- Comprehensive, integrated programming
  - ACE research w/ Heather
  - Using resilience & recovery knowledge
  - Develop a “whole person” approach ([www.cots-homeless.org](http://www.cots-homeless.org))

- Leadership & culture
COTS’ Mission

Our mission is to break the cycle of homelessness for children, their families and single adults without children in their care.
COTS Agency Overview

- 500 individuals at the Mary Isaak Center, 50 adults in Transitional Housing
- 44 families each year in Shared Transitional Housing
- COTS provides 100,000 bednights a year, 110,000 meals, and delivers 700,000 lbs of food to the community

Family Programs
- MIC Family Center (35 beds family TH)
- 7 Shared Transitional Homes (60 beds)
- 3 Intention Houses (12 Beds single family transitional housing)
- Vida Nueva (75 beds PSH)

Food Programs
- Petaluma Kitchen (110,000 meals/yr)
- Food Box Program (700,000 lbs/yr)

Adult Programs
- Mary Isaak Center, ES (100 Beds emerg. shelter)
- 4 Shared Transitional Homes (32 beds)
- 3 Integrity Houses (12 beds PSH)

Integrated Programs
How do we become homeless?
Homelessness, Trauma & Recovery

- ACEs, adult experiences, homelessness
- Risk behaviors as solutions
- People are not the sum of their problems
  - Body/Mind/Spirit
- Leverage strengths & resilience
The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study

Summary of Findings:

• (ACEs) are very common
• ACEs are strong predictors of adult health risks and disease
• ACEs are implicated in the 10 leading causes of death in the U.S.!
• “I was actually stunned and I wept over what I saw.” ACEs researcher Rob Anda, M.D.
• Virtually every study shows that ACEs are strong predictors of homelessness (Burt, 2001)
What are ACEs? (10 categories)

Adverse Childhood Experiences

1. Sexual abuse before age 18
2. Emotional abuse by parent or loved one
3. Physical abuse by parent or loved one
4. Emotional neglect by parent or loved one
5. Physical neglect by parent or loved one
6. Loss /abandonment of or by parent
7. Witnessed abuse of a loved one
8. Drug/alcohol abuse in the household
9. Mental illness in the household
10. Loved one incarcerated
Adverse Childhood Experiences Score

- **Original ACE Study**
  - More than *half have at least one ACE*
  - > than 25% have 2 – 4 ACE categories

- **1997: ACEs & Homelessness Risk**
  - Lack of care + abuse = increase risk by factor of 26
  - Any ACE increased risk by factor of 8

- **Current Homeless Respondents**
  - > 85% ACE Score of 1 or higher
  - > half (52.4%) ACE Score > than 4
Childhood Experiences vs. Adult Alcoholism

- ACE Score 0: 1
- ACE Score 1: 2
- ACE Score 2: 3
- ACE Score 4+: 4

% Alcoholic
Childhood Experiences Underlie Chronic Depression
Childhood Experiences Underlie Suicide

% Attempting Suicide

ACE Score

0 1 2 3 4+

25 20 15 10 5 0
ACE Score and Hallucinations

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<th>Ever Hallucinated* (%)</th>
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*Adjusted for age, sex, race, and education.
ACE Score vs. Intravenous Drug Use

N = 8,022  p<0.001
ACE Score vs. Serious Job Problems

% with Job Problems

ACE Score

0 1 2 3 4 or more
Mechanisms by Which Adverse Childhood Experiences Influence Health and Well-being Throughout the Lifespan
Causes of Homelessness

**INTERIOR INDIVIDUAL:**
- ACE impact on developing self
- Overwhelming emotions
- Derailed psychological development
- Cognitive deficits
- Poor self-esteem

**EXTERIOR INDIVIDUAL:**
- Substance abuse
- Disruptive behaviors
- Inability to hold a job
- Poor health/illness/injury

**INTERIOR COLLECTIVE:**
- Lack of supports
- Inter-subjective stories of failure
- Victim blaming in larger culture

**EXTERIOR COLLECTIVE:**
Family relational system/ACEs
- Lack of jobs
- Lack of affordable housing
- Inadequate access to insurance or treatment
- Poverty, social violence
OK,
SO WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT IT?
Know what you can and can’t do

- For most providers, long-term therapy for clients is not an option

- More effective to work with *behaviors* that result from ACES

- You can shift *culture* to change behavior!
Promoting Resilience, Recovery, and Transformation
"...everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms -- to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."

- Victor Frankl
COTS’ Organizational Development

• “ACE-informed” programming
  • ACE awareness in agency culture
  • ACE-informed vs. trauma-informed
  • Mobilization of resilience, recovery & transformation

• Staff engagement
  • Best practices
  • Articulation of values & principles
  • Connection, Hope, Intention, Integrity
  • The Four Agreements

• Leadership sets an example
Resilience & Recovery

- **Resiliency research (Frankl)**
  - Individual & community support each other
  - a personal connection with someone who believes in him/her
  - a sense that others have high expectations of him/her
  - Growth = Challenge + Support
  - opportunities to make choices – find purpose

- **Recovery**
  - Identity, attitude, values, goals are all strengthened and shaped by resilience
Culture & workforce

- **Compassionate culture**
  - Personal development of staff with ACE scores
  - Therapeutic community for clients recovering from ACEs (and other trauma)
  - Staff builds relationships and models behavior
  - Self care needed – Empathy is risky!
  - Prevention of vicarious traumatization
    - Rest, renewal, development
    - Builds staff resilience!
Policies in support of culture

- **Health & safety prioritized**
  - Creates a welcoming environment

- **No use drug & alcohol policy**
  - Random and for cause testing for all

- **Clear rules & expectations**
  - Extends into the community – mirrors community values
COTS’ ACE Response
Supporting the “I” space

- More positive Explicatory Narrative
- Intention, plans and goals, using motivational interviewing
- New coping skills for anger, stress and grief
- Meditation
- Yoga Nidra / Chi Gung (At Home Within offered with IONS)
- Recovery from psychological component of addictions
- Relapse prevention skills building

- Life skills: { Rent Right, Work Right, Kids First, Money Smart }
ACE-informed Programming
Supporting the “IT” space

• Meet basic needs (Maslow’s Hierarchy)
• Work with the body in support of healing through on-site clinics
  • Medical
  • Dental
  • Trauma (Somatic Experiencing; volunteers)
  • Acupuncture (volunteers)
• AA/NA recovery from physical aspects of addiction
ACE-informed Programming

Supporting the “WE” space

- Therapeutic and learning communities
- Culture of recovery and transformation
- Connection with faith communities
- Peer support groups
- Mentoring from senior program participants
- Working in groups, classes and workshops on common goals
- Reconnection with community through community service
ACE-informed Programming

Supporting the “ITS” space

- Policies and procedures support program culture
  - Rules of Decorum
  - Intake procedure and requirements
  - Drug / alcohol testing
- Shelter Management System to manage the programs and participants’ data
- Case management wiki supports service delivery and collaboration among service providers
HEARTS trump ACEs

- Healthy
- Environments
- And
- Relationships
- That
- Support

Promotes individuals’ strength and resiliency, preventing and intervening with ACEs – happens mostly in the LL and LR quadrants.
Results of ACE Informed Programs

ACE knowledge + Program Development + Culture = Results!

- In 2004 – 2005, COTS housed 0.01% (8 of 646) single adults with the same # of staff in drop-in center and winter shelter programs

- In 2008 – 2009, 48% (283 of 590) unduplicated individuals were successfully housed in transitional or permanent housing with ACEs informed programming at the Mary Isaak Center.
Questions?