

# HEARTLAND ALLIANCE NEWS

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## TREATING TRAUMA



[www.heartlandalliance.org](http://www.heartlandalliance.org)

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## Our Commitment to Treating Trauma

Trauma is one of those “hidden” conditions: It has a huge impact on many people’s lives, but for those of us who are blessed never to have encountered it, it is often invisible. Yet for anyone who has been traumatized, the effects can be debilitating.

Heartland Alliance provides a wide range of services, and sometimes people ask me why we’re involved with housing, mental health services, medical care, employment, international work, and much more. To those of us at Heartland Alliance, the connections are clear: Everything we do is about human rights, about helping the most vulnerable among us, about comprehensive services that work in concert to allow someone to rise out of danger into stability and success.

Treating trauma is another thread that runs throughout our work. The people we serve have experienced isolation, hopelessness, poverty, homelessness, civil and political brutality, domestic violence, genocide, war, and the ravages of natural disasters. They’ve been in situations that test the limits of hope and the strength of the human spirit.

As the people we serve connect to our programs, regardless of the exact circumstances that they’ve lived through, we recognize that each may be living with trauma, and we take the implications of that reality into all of our work. We also recognize people’s resilience. I often hear from our staff about the strength and capacity for renewal of our program participants. I know I have seen it many times myself.

Trauma can limit a person’s life, as well as the lives of his or her family and community. When we treat trauma, we can make a profound difference, opening up new possibilities for a happy, productive, emotionally full life. Simply put, that is why it is a priority and focus at Heartland Alliance.



Sid L. Mohn, President



## Philosophy of Care

HEARTLAND ALLIANCE’S PHILOSOPHY OF CARE provides a unique approach to providing services that promote human dignity and empower our participants. The hallmarks of this approach are our commitment to each person’s human rights and dignity; recognizing our participants’ strength and potential for recovery; and embracing diversity in all its forms.

# Trouble in Mind

IT CAN CAUSE A STUDENT TO DIVE under her desk at the sound of a siren on the street. It can keep a man up at night, unable to fall asleep or awakened with night terrors. It can lead to depression and distraction, or rage and confusion.

It's trauma, a powerful response to terrible events in a person's life and a condition that is more common than most of us realize. Seeing or experiencing violence first-hand, living through a natural disaster or a brutal accident—certainly all of these can be traumatic. But so can suffering through extreme poverty, being homeless or threatened with homelessness, or living in the shadow of danger.

"With trauma, the past continues to invade the present," says Thad Rydberg, the clinical manager of a Heartland Alliance program that provides community-based mental health services for refugees and asylum seekers. "It can be enormously disruptive, impacting someone's ability to live their life."

The participants who come to this program have typically been through multiple traumatic events, from fleeing war to living in refugee camps. "There can be a significant amount of violence in the camps, and being held for years in limbo is traumatic as well," Rydberg says.

## Trauma Comes From Many Places

A great deal of the power of trauma is feeling a loss of control during painful and frightening circumstances, whether it's a wife facing an

abusive husband or the father of a family living in poverty, who never knows if he'll be able to pay the rent next month.

"When being free of pain or fear is out of someone's hands, that's traumatic," says Ed Stellan, the director of community development at Heartland Alliance. With nearly 20 years of experience in the field, Stellan says that trauma is both a cause and an effect of living without a home or of "hidden homelessness," where a person or family is able to stay off the streets but don't have their own place to live.

"Think about housing at the most primal level," Stellan says. "It's safety; it's literally a door that can be locked to keep danger out. That's

a big reason homelessness is generally very traumatizing."

## A Life Held Hostage

The symptoms of trauma can vary as much as the cause. A person who has been traumatized can become hyper-sensitive to a stressful situation, alert for danger at a moment's notice, flooded with stress hormones. Or they can have difficulty concentrating or remembering.

Some people get very sad or tearful, others become distant and don't show much emotion at all. Children who have been traumatized can have difficulty controlling their emotions or forming close relationships later in life. Some survivors experience repetitive, unwanted remembering—including "flashbacks" to an event—sometimes triggered by a similar experience.

With trauma, the past continues to invade the present.

“For rape victims or with instances of violence, for instance, people may avoid the place where they were attacked, or places associated with those events,” says Karen Batia, the chief clinical officer of Heartland Alliance. “For people from other cultures, who might not have the language to talk about it in mental health terms, they’ll often have physical complaints—stomach problems, their arm hurts, they don’t want to eat or can’t sleep.”

For Libelula\* trauma began early in her life in Mexico. Her mother made it clear she was unwanted, and had her working by the age of four, taking the money she earned cleaning and cooking. She was married off before she was 16, and her husband bullied and occasionally hit her. When she came to the U.S. to escape, the man she met in Chicago was cruel and abusive as well.

“He slapped me, and told me I was not able to go out and speak to anyone or he’d be sure I was deported,” Libelula says. She heard that there were alternatives. One day three years ago, she gathered her courage, and with her two children left for a shelter for women who had suffered domestic violence.



### **Strength and Recovery**

Despite the many ways that trauma can manifest itself, there is one constant that survivors share: A resiliency and capacity to continue. At Heartland Alliance, that asset is at the core of the recovery process.

Today, Libelula and her children live on their own, and she says she’s happier than she ever

thought possible. Working with a trauma support case manager at Heartland Alliance, she has faced the events that kept her in fear for so long.

“I’ve learned to take care of myself and I’ve learned I have the courage to see that I am not less than anybody. I’ve learned how to help my children,” Libelula says. “I was

The person in front of us is a survivor, not a victim, and that strength is the basis of our work together

scared for so long about the world, about my life. I'm not afraid anymore about anybody."

"Across our programs, as therapists and as a partner, we bear witness to the journey they've taken and recognize their resilience," Batia says. "The person in front of us is a survivor, not a victim, and that strength is the basis of our work together to help each person be able to live the life they choose."

Batia is the primary author of the Heartland Alliance Philosophy of Care (see lower left), which includes a focus on trauma-informed treatment. Across the many services that we provide, our practitioners begin each relationship knowing that the participant may have survived trauma.

For some survivors, recovery includes understanding the traumatic events and recognizing their effect. Others prefer to deal with the manifestations of the trauma without ever delving deeply into the past. Because much of trauma's impact comes from a loss of control, the goal of our programs is to help the survivor decide how to proceed.

"We've learned that what works best is our ability to adapt to what the participant needs," Rydberg says. "They've been through things that make someone ask whether they can even trust human nature. We connect them to services, help them find their way, build a trusting relationship with each participant. All of it helps rebuild a sense of safety." ■

## A Specialty in Recovery from Torture

FOR MANY OF THE HUNDREDS OF men or women who walk into Heartland Alliance's Marjorie Kovler Center looking for help to rebuild a life damaged by torture, one of the first people they spend time with is Mary Bunn. A licensed clinical social worker and the associate director of the center, Bunn spends several counseling sessions getting to know the participant and determining which of the center's volunteer therapists is the best match for ongoing long-term treatment.

Bunn came to Heartland Alliance through our program that has built a rural mental health system in Iraq, and she has specific expertise in developing mental health services for Southeast Asian communities, having worked in Cambodia and Thailand.

In many cases, Bunn is the first person to whom the participant has ever confided their story of being tortured. "As a clinician, the first time I meet someone at intake, I'm aware of the issue of trauma and that their experiences have broken in half the assumption that most of us have that the world is generally a good place," she says.

Bunn also connects her clients to appropriate medical, legal, emergency, and other crucial services. By offering a wide range of supports and by putting the recovery process in the context of family and community, Bunn and her colleagues at the Kovler Center are able to provide a comprehensive, safe environment to heal from the trauma of torture. ■

## An Earthquake's Legacy in Haiti



IN THE MASSIVE EARTHQUAKE THAT devastated Haiti in January 2010, people lost homes, possessions, family members, friends, and livelihoods. The work is slowly moving ahead to replace what can be rebuilt and to mourn what is gone. For many, however, there is little help in managing the emotional and psychological stress caused by the traumatic events.

Fritzner Benoît\*, a thirty-four year old father of two, lost his home in the earthquake. Reeling from the deaths of friends and relatives, he and his family moved to a settlement in Petit Goave, a town of 30,000 near the epicenter of the quake. Within a week, the debilitating psychological effects began to take their toll. He suffered from insomnia and nervous tension, and refused to speak with others. Prior to the earthquake, he planted crops and worked as a mason. But when those around him began to return to work, Fritzner stayed home. He became physically and verbally abusive with his partner, Marie, and their young daughter.

Marie brought him to see Heartland Alliance social workers, who were providing counseling at the camp using lessons learned from Heartland Alliance's U.S. trauma work.

The psychologist found Fritzner reticent and uninterested, but after inviting the couple to

speaking more privately, Fritzner gradually opened up. During their next meeting, the psychologist noticed that Fritzner made eye contact when he spoke; Marie said he had started to sleep more and talk less by himself. At their third meeting, Fritzner spoke freely of the difficulties he faced with his family and of his frustrations at not being able to provide for them.

For the first time, he described the physical problems that afflicted him since the earthquake—headaches, lethargy, vertigo, and weakness in his legs—and found a concrete explanation for these symptoms, which had previously gone unexplained and untreated. With additional sessions planned, Fritzner seems likely to continue on the positive trajectory he has found through treatment, and gradually regain the life that he lost after the earthquake.

The program in Petit Goave offers community presentations and group discussions about reactions to the natural disaster and positive coping ideas, as well as individual and group therapy. All of the work is done by local staff trained by Heartland Alliance.

"We realized early that to be effective, we should have people from the community and the surrounding area working with individuals who have been displaced," says Michael Passarelli, one of Heartland Alliance's managers in Haiti.

"The program has resulted in a great relationship with the community and our ability to reach several thousand people," says Passarelli. "I keep hearing that it's had a great impact, and that nobody has ever offered services like this here before." ■

\* Some participant names have been changed to protect their identities.

## A Plan to End Poverty

AS THE ECONOMIC CRISIS DEEPENS in Illinois and poverty rates rise, Heartland Alliance has redoubled its efforts to fight extreme poverty, defined as living at 50 percent of the federal poverty line or less.

Extreme poverty means real trauma in the lives of close to 760,000 families in Illinois. Think of any hardship, and those living in extreme poverty are most likely going to be hit first and hardest. Over half of those in extreme poverty in Illinois are without health insurance. People in extreme poverty are three times as likely to be living in crowded housing. What might be a minor crisis in many lives—such as a trip to the emergency room—can be a devastating event that may take years to recover from.

Since 2006, Heartland Alliance's From Poverty to Opportunity Campaign has advocated the need to address the growing problem of extreme poverty in Illinois. As

a direct result of these efforts, the state of Illinois established the Commission on the Elimination of Poverty to develop a set of comprehensive recommendations that would cut extreme poverty in Illinois in half by 2015.

On December 9, 2010, the Commission released its plan. The Commission recommends empowering individuals and promoting self-sufficiency by increasing income and eliminating barriers to employment through education and job training.

To ensure that our lawmakers adopt the Commission's recommendations and begin the process of eliminating poverty in Illinois, we need you to make your voice heard. By endorsing the Commission's plan to halve extreme poverty, you will help to realize human rights in Illinois. ■



**ENDORSE THE PLAN at**  
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## February 25, 2011 • Gruen Galleries 226 West Superior Street, Chicago, Illinois

Ranked as one of Chicago's top 100 events, this benefit hosted by the Junior Board of Heartland Alliance features live and silent auctions of fine art. Join us for this after-work party which includes unique works of art from across the world, gourmet fare, cocktails, and music. NEW this year is a special gallery featuring artwork created by Heartland Alliance participants.

Proceeds from the event help Heartland Alliance provide housing, health care, economic security, and legal protection services to more than 600,000 people annually whose lives are threatened by poverty or danger.

Event sponsors include Sara Lee Foundation and the Robert & Patricia Moore Foundation.

For more information or to purchase tickets, please visit

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