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Oregon should be first trauma-informed state

BY BOB DOPPELT

For The Register-Guard

MAY 26, 2016

Oregon needs a positive vision to guide efforts to restructure the economy and communities so we can thrive while restoring the climate. Our vision of success must also address people. A centerpiece of my vision is that Oregon will become the first trauma-informed state in the nation. This is not a far-fetched idea.

Oregon Gov. Kate Brown recently signed a bill to address chronic student absences in public schools through the development of “trauma-informed” approaches. House Bill 4002 emerged from research that found that roughly half the children in Oregon experience significant trauma. This can include witnessing or experiencing abuse, neglect or domestic violence. It can also include living with a caretaker with severe mental health, alcohol or drug problems, or who is incarcerated.

Traumatized children often have difficulty learning because their mental resources are focused on self-protection. Impaired social and emotional skills frequently result. School absences are one consequence. The new legislation essentially says that schools must be sensitive to this fact, regardless of whether a child is actually being treated for trauma, and develop methods to help students cope with adversity without retraumatizing them. Trauma-informed approaches, often called trauma-informed care, have become the norm in many social services agencies. Expanding this to public schools makes sense. It makes even more sense to expand it to the entire population.

Today, the number of traumatized people goes far beyond impaired youth. One in four women, and nearly 3 million men, experience domestic violence. A quarter of Americans have recently had some type of significant financial problem or are having serious trouble making ends meet.

Millions more are traumatized by being involved with, witnessing or hearing about school shootings and other mass murders, homicides, terrorist attacks and other forms of violence. People of color are traumatized by racial harassment, humiliation, economic discrimination and other forms of oppression.

The list of today’s traumas and toxic stresses goes on.

Climate disruption is aggravating many of these causes of adversity, and adding ample new ones. The injury and losses resulting from more frequent and extreme storms, combined with the distress of dealing with droughts, heat waves, new diseases such as the Zika virus and resource shortages are generating rising levels of anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, suicides, hopelessness and more.

Psychosocial maladies are also increasing. Research has found that most hotter cities in the United States have higher rates of violence than cooler cities, and that in many locations violence rises in the summer compared to winter months. Higher temperatures also tend to increase alcohol and drug abuse, rape, robbery and burglaries. An analysis of 60 research reports from 27 industrial nations found that social conflict and violence rose everywhere when drought, extreme weather and temperatures increased.

These woes result from how the human mind and body react to threats. As seen in children who experience trauma, we often harm ourselves, other people or the environment when we remain stuck in fear-based fight, flight or freeze reactions. With global surface temperatures set to rise by 3.6 degrees Fahrenheit or more above preindustrial levels, without comprehensive preventive efforts, these problems will skyrocket. Becoming a trauma-informed, resilience-enhancing state — and nation — is one of the most promising ways to get out in front of these risks.

My vision is that policies will be enacted that establish broad-based human resilience-building teams in every community that works with local businesses, public agencies, nonprofit groups, schools, faith communities and civic organizations to ensure that every adult and child learns how trauma and persistent stress, if left unaddressed, can trigger harmful reactions. The entire population will become trauma-informed, and will have the opportunity to learn simple skills to calm their mind and body in the midst of adversity and avoid harmful reactions. Everyone would also be taught how to use adversity as a catalyst to learn, grow and thrive.

Further, every senior public official will learn how to identify when his or her organization or community is fostering trauma and how to transition to a human resilience-enhancing entity.

Research shows that when people obtain this type of knowledge and skill, most personal mental health and psychosocial troubles can be prevented or rapidly reduced. Equally important, resilience skills often spur people to rise above their self-interest to focus on helping others as a way to increase their own happiness.

Oregon can establish a much-needed model for the nation. Pursuing this vision will help everyone thrive as we reduce climate disruption to manageable levels.

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