



Planning Phase

# Linking Systems of Care for Ohio's Youth: Needs Assessment and Gap Analysis



## **AUTHORS:**

Sandra Ortega, Ph.D.  
Jo Ellen Simonsen, B.A.  
Shelly Bell, B.A.  
Sally Fitch, M.S.W.  
Jasmine Barfield, B.A.  
Michelle Coakley, M.S.



**DAVE YOST**

OHIO ATTORNEY GENERAL





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## Executive Summary

### Background

Ohio is one of four demonstration sites in the United States that received Linking Systems of Care funding from the U.S. Department of Justice's Office for Victims of Crime (OVC). The grant money is being used for Linking Systems of Care for Ohio's Youth (LSCOY), Ohio's effort to better coordinate and align health care, child welfare, justice, and other systems both statewide and locally to ensure that, regardless of the system of entry, young victims of traumatic violence and their families receive help in a timely and seamless manner.

LSCOY is directed by the Ohio Attorney General's Office; managed by its partner, the Ohio Domestic Violence Network; and supported by the project's academic research partner, the Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences at Case Western Reserve University. The project encompasses a broad group of 121 stakeholders representing more than 75 state, regional and local organizations whose work affects outcomes for child/youth victims throughout Ohio.

**LSCOY's guiding principle:** Children and youth who have been victimized deserve sensitive, protective, effective and just responses from local communities and the state of Ohio.

**LSCOY's goals:**

1. Ohio children and youth who have been victimized are accurately identified in a wide range of community settings.
2. Ohio children and youth who have been victimized and their families are effectively linked to high-quality resources in or near their communities.
3. Systems impacting child/youth victims are linked at the state level for greater coordination to improve family outcomes, responsiveness and efficiency and to increase leveraging and garnering of additional resources to support Ohio's child/youth victims.

### Needs Assessment and Gap Analysis

This Needs Assessment and Gap Analysis (NAGA) is a key product of the Planning Phase of the LSCOY project. The NAGA identifies:

- Major gaps related to identifying and responding to children and youth who have been victimized.
- Gaps in the training of professionals, available tools, policies and practices, and the current level of collaboration.

### Themed findings

The Needs Assessment and Gap Analysis yielded the following seven themes:

- 1. Linking systems of care to support child and youth victims of traumatic violent crimes requires not only collaboration but also a deep understanding of the relationship of trauma to the person as well as the person's greater social environment.**
  - Data indicates that traumas experienced by children and youth often occur in environments in which a child should feel safe, such as homes, schools and their communities. As a result, Ohio cannot effectively assist children who have been victimized without addressing the broader picture of the social context in which a child lives. This might include local and statewide employment rates and the

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availability of affordable housing, transportation and accessible health care. Social context also includes political will and current public policies; issues of bias and oppression; institutional infrastructure and governance; the service landscape (or resource distribution); and the fair application of justice.

- Many Ohio organizations and systems are actively making changes to strengthen their internal capacity and competencies to improve outcomes for Ohio's child/youth victims. The NAGA cataloged 23 Ohio-focused task forces and policy efforts aimed at addressing unique areas of need that are relevant to the LSCOY project population. Linking these systems will allow us to coordinate more sustainable changes throughout Ohio.
- Identifying opportunities where there is agreement on direction (e.g. building trauma-informed systems, addressing social determinants of health, etc.) and coupling that with measuring increments of change will help align messages and leverage resources. Understanding the intersection between systems and the services they provide to the child/youth victims and their families is crucial to successfully serving these children and youth.

### 2. Ohio's systems must have a child-first focus and keep the child's needs, wants and safety as priorities.

- Service providers are encouraged to consider the complexities, strategies and realities of the various systems involved in caring for child/youth victims and to match services to the child/youth being served. Such an approach creates a person-centered system that balances the needs, wants and overall well-being of survivors, with each child or youth being seen as an individual, thus replacing "cookie cutter" intervention.
- Successful outcomes should be based on what survivors say they need. A child-focused approach would measure survivor-driven, long-term goals when determining success before measuring system-driven goals (e.g. participation in prosecutions, family reunification, etc.).

### 3. A trauma-informed practice framework is needed to support young victims of crime and their families/caregivers.

- The NAGA identified a need for using trauma-informed approaches that help children and their families, community members and service providers recognize, report and respond to victims.
- The NAGA also identified several means of improving trauma-informed practice in systems of care throughout Ohio:
  - » **Training:** Increased training on trauma topics would result in system professionals responding more sensitively to victims and, in turn, victims receiving more appropriate services and support.
  - » **Addressing secondary trauma:** Addressing secondary trauma and the resulting staff turnover ultimately improves outcomes for children and youth. By incorporating key trauma-informed principles in workplaces – recognition of trauma and the importance of support, training in self-care and resilience skills, trauma-informed supervision, employee assistance programs, healthy workspaces and schedules, and adequate leave policies – make for healthy service providers, which translate to better services for children and youth. The NAGA also noted a need to place responsible limits on caseloads, to ensure thorough follow-through with each client; expansion of the workforce across systems, to manage increasing workloads; and improved educational preparation, to build a pipeline of future systems and related service professionals who are adequately prepared and motivated to take on the work.
  - » **Screening:** One goal of LSCOY is to accurately identify Ohio children and youth who have been victimized. The project research team, from Case Western Reserve University, identified a gap in existing trauma screening tools that, if met through innovation, would help trauma-exposed children be identified earlier; screened more accurately; and, when necessary, referred appropriately.

Additionally, stakeholders offered examples of poor screening (or none at all) that resulted in young people being overlooked, ignored, stereotyped, mislabeled, misunderstood or provided with inadequate and/or mismatched services.

- » **Victim safety and perpetrator accountability:** The NAGA found that some current policies and practices are not aligned with the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's trauma-informed principles of "safety" nor "empowerment, voice and choice" for victims. Physical and psychological safety are compromised when victims do not perceive responsible systems as protective or willing to hold perpetrators accountable. Coerced victim participation in unhealthy relationships or in "reparative" or "reunification" therapies against their protests or that assign shared blame and minimize or excuse perpetrator accountability place the child victim and nonoffending parent in unwarranted and potentially dangerous situations. Such practices often stem from a system's outdated knowledge about the dynamics of child abuse and domestic violence.

#### 4. Ohio child/youth victims of violence and their families and caregivers must have equitable access to needed services.

- Ohio is not unique in its need to work harder to ensure equitable access to needed services. Project stakeholders identified several ways in which the biases of system agents and institutions, whether implicit or overt, affect the experience of victims in seeking or receiving help. Generally, stakeholders (and especially survivors) reported that statements and feelings of child/youth victims are too readily discounted and that the experiences of females are too routinely disbelieved. Given such biases, victims of trafficking, domestic and sexual violence are particularly hindered in their ability to receive the services they need and want. The biases play out in varying ways for different members of the system:
  - » **Communities of color:** Key informants cited numerous examples of how marginalized populations often experience policies and practices rooted in historic oppression or current biases that block access to the services families need and want or deliver harsher responses once they are involved.
  - » **LGBTQ+:** Data indicates that LGBTQ+ victims of crime are frequently treated unjustly. Informants shared that access to services for these youths is often blocked by parents who do not support their sexuality and refuse to give them the documentation required for assistance. Unfortunately, once youth enter the system, they are often served by adults who are unaware of their implicit bias. Key informants shared a need for all service providers to know how to provide safe, inclusive and affirming care for all youth victims.
  - » **Deaf individuals and individuals with hearing loss:** Deaf victims of crime, including children and youth, experience additional obstacles compared with their hearing counterparts when seeking and receiving help. The obstacles stem from language deprivation; unsupported biases about their cognitive abilities; and inaccessibility to translated materials, interpretation services, education and employment (Garberoglio, 2018).

#### 5. Not all communities in Ohio have enough resources or services to address victim/family needs.

- Differences in community resources were identified as a barrier to timely and appropriate services. A review of directories and service area maps illustrated geographical gaps in resources and widely varying levels of services. Data indicates that:
  - » Only 32 percent of Ohio's counties are covered by Child Advocacy Center services.
  - » A total of 44 court-appointed special advocate (CASA) programs and guardian ad litem (GAL) programs serve 53 counties.
  - » Service providers for homeless youth are found in just 13 of Ohio's 88 counties.
  - » Facilities specifically for children/youth accredited by the Commission on Accreditation and

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Rehabilitation are available in 81 of the 88 counties, but not all have a full range of programs for children/youth.

- Other vital services identified as widely varied by community include transportation services for families who do not own automobiles, sufficient housing for youth who are aging out of the foster care system, representation for children in court proceedings, and forensic interviewers experienced in working with young children.

### 6. Mandated services place burdens on victims and their families and caregivers.

- Victims and their families are often referred to a multitude of mandatory services without consideration for how those obligations affect their lives, financially, emotionally, socially or otherwise.
- The financial cost of services can be a huge barrier to families, as the costs typically extend beyond services to those related to new housing, transportation to appointments and court cases, or integrative holistic treatment (which often is not covered by insurance). Also costly are Domestic Relations Court fees when domestic violence or child abuse is an issue and protection is sought.

### 7. Information sharing between the various systems is challenging.

- The NAGA reinforced that a common language is needed so that linked systems can communicate clearly and effectively. It also identified the need to link information systems such as case files, screening and assessment results, and other relevant data to reduce the need for the victims to recount their victimization multiple times and to expedite service provision.
- Stakeholders, however, cautioned that mechanisms developed for shared information need to consider access issues as well as confidentiality requirements. For example, protections must be in place to prevent the improper interpretation or use of information by perpetrators against the non-offending parent in a domestic relations case or other legal proceeding.
- To support coordination in administration and policy at the systems level, systems need a coordinated exchange of aggregate data on service use, costs and effectiveness. The exchange and thorough understanding of relevant data have the potential to inform programming, innovations and funding for child/youth victims.

## Recommendations

The LSCOY project team is encouraged to use the results of this NAGA to continue its strategic planning, keeping in mind the following recommendations:

- **Multi-system collaboration/mix of strategies:** The LSCOY project team should pursue a mix of strategies that leverage or extend current efforts throughout the state while also balancing efforts with strategies that address unique aspects that have been historically overlooked, require supportive leadership or have gone without a project home. Likewise, some needs are best suited to a system-specific solution created, owned and implemented by an individual system. The LSCOY project team should focus its attention on areas that would most benefit from and welcome multi-system collaboration and can unify critical messaging across many systems.
- **Cost-benefit:** Project resources are finite, so return on investment will be important. Resource-intensive strategies should be weighted by their potential for success, including the breadth and magnitude of impact. They should also be tempered by considerations for costs that may arise to survivors, families and stakeholders due to consequences of the strategy. Similarly, unless and until additional representation is garnered from lesser-engaged systems, the project should start by focusing on strategies that can be employed by capitalizing on the reach, expertise and will of the current roster of stakeholders.
- **Timeliness:** Strategies should be evaluated for optimal timing. Strategic planning should encompass matters such as prioritizing an action based on implications of current affairs or other issues occurring

as part of the current state context; an action that would be easily and quickly completed, helping to galvanize the project team, or an action that lends itself to a higher degree of sustainable outcomes beyond the grant period.

- **Alignment with project goals:** The strategic plan should meet the three LSCOY goals defined in the project logic model and referenced in the Background of this Executive Summary.