



**INTERFAITH**  
**ACTION** OF GREATER  
SAINT PAUL

## Opportunity Saint Paul Integrating Trauma-Informed Care

*Trauma-informed care is acknowledging some of the adverse experiences that children have encountered in their lives.*

— Aiyana Machado

### Looking for ACES

Opportunity Saint Paul (OSP) volunteers work in partnership with a broad spectrum of individuals, who come from a wide variety of circumstances. Through this collaborative work, OSP volunteers seek to offer new skills and opportunities. OSP placements — including in adult job coaching and youth mentoring — often put volunteers in contact with people who are struggling to make a difference in their own lives. In many cases, their struggles stem from difficult social and economic circumstances encountered early in their lives.

A landmark study undertaken by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Kaiser Permanente's Health Appraisal Clinic defined these early traumatic episodes as Adverse Childhood Experiences, or ACES.

*"It is critical to understand how some of the worst health and social problems in our nation can arise as a consequence of adverse childhood experiences."*

— Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

ACES can have significant impacts on childhood development, due to the ways in which they inform brain function. At a recent Opportunity Saint Paul event, organizer and activist Aiyana Machado discussed the role of ACES, noting that the malleable neuro-tissue of our brains literally responds to our experiences. Prior exposure to ACES can modify a child's ability to respond to adult attempts to intervene, teach, or mentor, such as in a classroom or volunteer setting. Recognizing the existence of ACES is a first step in learning to work effectively with individuals who have experienced trauma. Machado also noted that positive adult interactions are a key to undoing ACES.

*"When someone is experiencing trauma, their brain responds. And when you're in that "survivor" mode, you're not in the space of learning."*

—Aiyana Machado

## Trauma-informed Care

Trauma-informed care is a methodology for working with trauma-impacted individuals by recognizing their trauma and incorporating their experiences into positive steps forward. As described by Machado, trauma-informed care can work in an educational setting, in a clinic setting, or in supportive adult relationships. The approach “is one of understanding and responsiveness,” and of acknowledging trauma as a way of building trusting relationships that can move individuals forward.

By creating positive experiences and relationships, teachers and volunteers can use the brain’s malleability to a positive advantage. Just as negative experiences can “wire” the brain in certain ways, positive experiences can help to “re-wire” the brain to facilitate learning and trust-building.

*“Creating positive experiences with students is 99% of the work that volunteers should be doing.” —Aiyana Machado*

## Using an Assets-based Approach

In working with trauma-impacted individuals, Machado also stressed the importance of using an “assets-based” approach to trauma-informed practices, once trauma has been recognized. This approach seeks to highlight the strengths of the individuals a volunteer works with, rather than primarily focusing on overcoming problems or deficits. Recognizing and identifying strengths helps to build the positive rapport necessary to overcome early, adverse experiences. This leads to trust and confidence and can open doors to education and skill-building — and eventually to discussing an individual’s problems, and how to address them.

## Faith Perspective

At the end of Opportunity Saint Paul’s recent learning event, presenter Bashir Imady reflected on lessons from the Koran that speak to the work of volunteers in a diverse and interconnected world. Bashir noted that the Koranic text posed key theological questions about why there are differences in religious and social traditions in our complex and multi-faceted world. He further noted that the text stated that while we all live in accordance with God’s will, what that looks like differs from one community to another. The commonality, he noted, was that all should strive to do as much good as they can for their neighbors.

*“The Koran tells us that we should all be competing with one another to do the most good ...As the Koran puts it, we strive to do as much good as we can.” — Bashir Imady*