



Promising Practices

Handle With Care: Meeting the Needs of Children Who Experience Trauma

The West Virginia Defending Childhood Initiative, commonly referred to as Handle With Care, was piloted in 2013 in Charleston to address the needs of children who experience trauma due to exposure to violence, crime or abuse. Its success and popularity led Governor Jim Justice to award \$1 million in Statewide Implementation, Enhancement, and Evaluation Projects (SIEEP) funding to the West Virginia State Police in 2020 to expand the program.

It is estimated that between [46 percent](#) and [60 percent](#) of children in America will experience at least one traumatic event; many will suffer multiple abuses, witness community and family violence and experience serious instability.

This exposure can lead to developmental problems, school failure, juvenile justice system involvement and increase risk-taking behavior and suicide attempts. The goals of the Handle With Care program are to mitigate the negative effects of exposure to trauma and to minimize further traumatization by making schools and teachers aware when students have experienced a traumatic and violent event.

How it Works

When a law enforcement officer encounters a child who has experienced or been exposed to violence or trauma, that child's name is forwarded to the relevant school or childcare agency before the start of the next day along with the words, "handle with care." No details of the incident are provided. The key to the program is the awareness that a student is in need. The school or agency implements individual, class and whole-school [trauma-informed](#) curricula so that identified children are treated sensitively and respectfully. This level of intervention is sufficient in 90 percent of cases,

but on-site counseling or mental healthcare is made available when needed.

Regardless of the source of trauma, the common thread for effective intervention is the school or childcare agency. Research shows that trauma can undermine a child's ability to learn, form relationships and function appropriately in the classroom. Handle With Care programs support children exposed to trauma and violence through improved communication and collaboration between law enforcement, schools, childcare agencies and mental health providers, and connect families, schools and communities to mental health services.

Outcomes

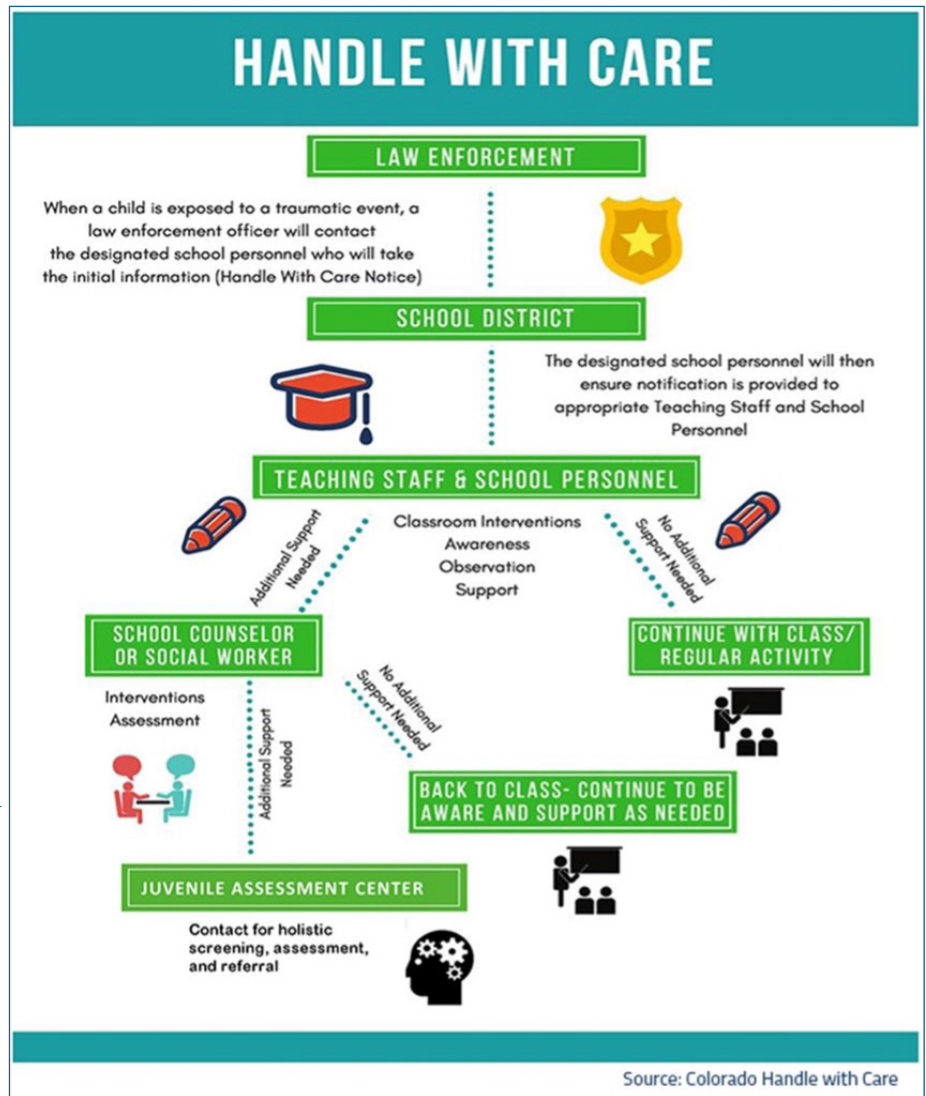
During the initial pilot period beginning in 2013, the [West Virginia program](#) sent 527 notices to schools involving 959 children—with 130 children receiving counseling services on-site. Relationships between the education system and law enforcement have been greatly improved due to the collaborative nature of the program. Law enforcement officers now routinely call and interact with the schools, teachers are better able to address issues in the classroom and mental health providers are able to see children interacting

in their school environments. Other states that operate Handle with Care initiatives report similar data and experiences.

A Model Program

In most cases, counseling and behavioral health resources are already available in school systems. Law enforcement and school personnel need training to recognize when a child has been exposed to trauma and how to connect them with services in a way that is discreet, effective and does not compound the harm experienced. The nonprofit Salud America! has [resources and training available](#) to help jurisdictions who are interested in bringing Handle with Care programs to their city or state.

The program has been replicated across West Virginia, in several other states (including, but not limited to [Ohio](#), [Florida](#), [New Jersey](#), [Kentucky](#) and [Colorado](#)) and in at least 65 cities. In Maryland, several counties were operating Handle with Care or a similar program in 2018 when Governor Hogan tasked his Office of Crime Prevention, Youth and Victim Services with implementing it statewide. To date, 19 of the state’s 24 jurisdictions have implemented Handle with Care and the state has launched an [online dashboard](#) to track their operation.



In 2018, Senators Tim Kaine (VA), Joe Manchin (WV) and Shelley Moore Capito (WV) introduced the “[Handle with Care Act](#)” that would have authorized \$10 million in federal funding to establish five-year demonstration grants and would have established the program as a national model for replication. While the bill failed to pass, many jurisdictions have implemented the Handle With Care program using other funding sources, including Byrne Justice Assistance Grant funding.