



Rehumanizing Human Services through Mindful Communities

Neerja Singh, PhD; LICSW;LADC

Grounding on Human Dignity

- Nonviolence, truth, and compassion are the highest dharma. Bhagavad Gita, 16:2
- Thousands of candles can be lit from a single candle, and the life of the candle will not be shortened.— Dhammapada, Verse 102
- Whoever saves a life, it is as if they saved an entire world.-Mishnah Sanhedrin 4.5
- Whatever you did for one of the least of these, you did for me. Matthew 25.40
- Recognize all of mankind as a single caste of humanity. Dasam Granth
- The most honored of you in the sight of God is the most righteous of you. Qur'an 49.13



What Are We Doing Today

- Examine how systems designed to care for humans, perpetuate dehumanization and explore pathways to rehumanize practice.
- Recognize and honor our shared humanness with each other and with the ones we serve
- Realize self-care and collective care as essential components of sustainable, transformative practice.
- Commit to collective healing practices that bridge policy, advocacy, relationship and spirit.

My Hope for Us Today:

- We learn to pause and reflect to see the humanity in one another and in those we serve
- We find courage to name and dismantle dehumanizing practices in our systems.
- We leave here with a renewed sense of compassion and collective power to transform care.
- We nourish not only our professional practice but also our hearts and spirits.





Who Am I?

- Woman of color
 - First generation immigrant
 - Mother
 - Caregiver
 - Behavioral Health Professional
 - Human Services Public Servant
 - Teacher/Trainer
 - Bush Fellow-2023
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When I Say
Human
Services..

I am NOT referring to a single agency.

I am speaking about the HELPING
SYSTEM to support Humans in Need:

- Health care
- Mental health and substance use services
- Child welfare and family support
- Housing, food and basic needs programs
- Education and community services..
- Many more....



Humans Come to
Human Services System
when They Need Help:
Right?



When Do Humans Come to the System

- They have lost control over their life situation
- They are feeling powerless
- They have nowhere to go
- They are embarrassed
- They are ashamed
- They are tired

Some Questions to Consider

- Is the human being truly at the center of human services?
- Is human resilience recognized and celebrated?
- Is human vulnerability acknowledged without judgment?
- Are human stories, needs, and dignity guiding our decisions?



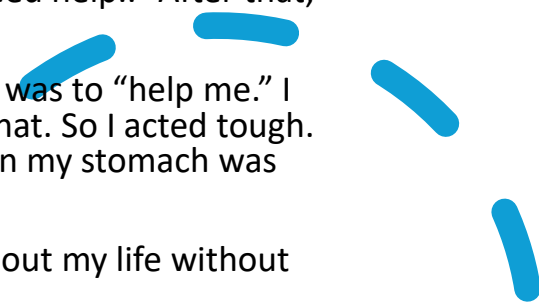


Let Us Let us Know the Human: Maria

- I remember that day like it was burned into my heart.
- I was at my kitchen table, sorting bills, deciding which ones could wait—when there was a knock at the door: Child Protective Services.
- They said “neglect” & possible “maltreatment.”
- I said, “doing my best.”

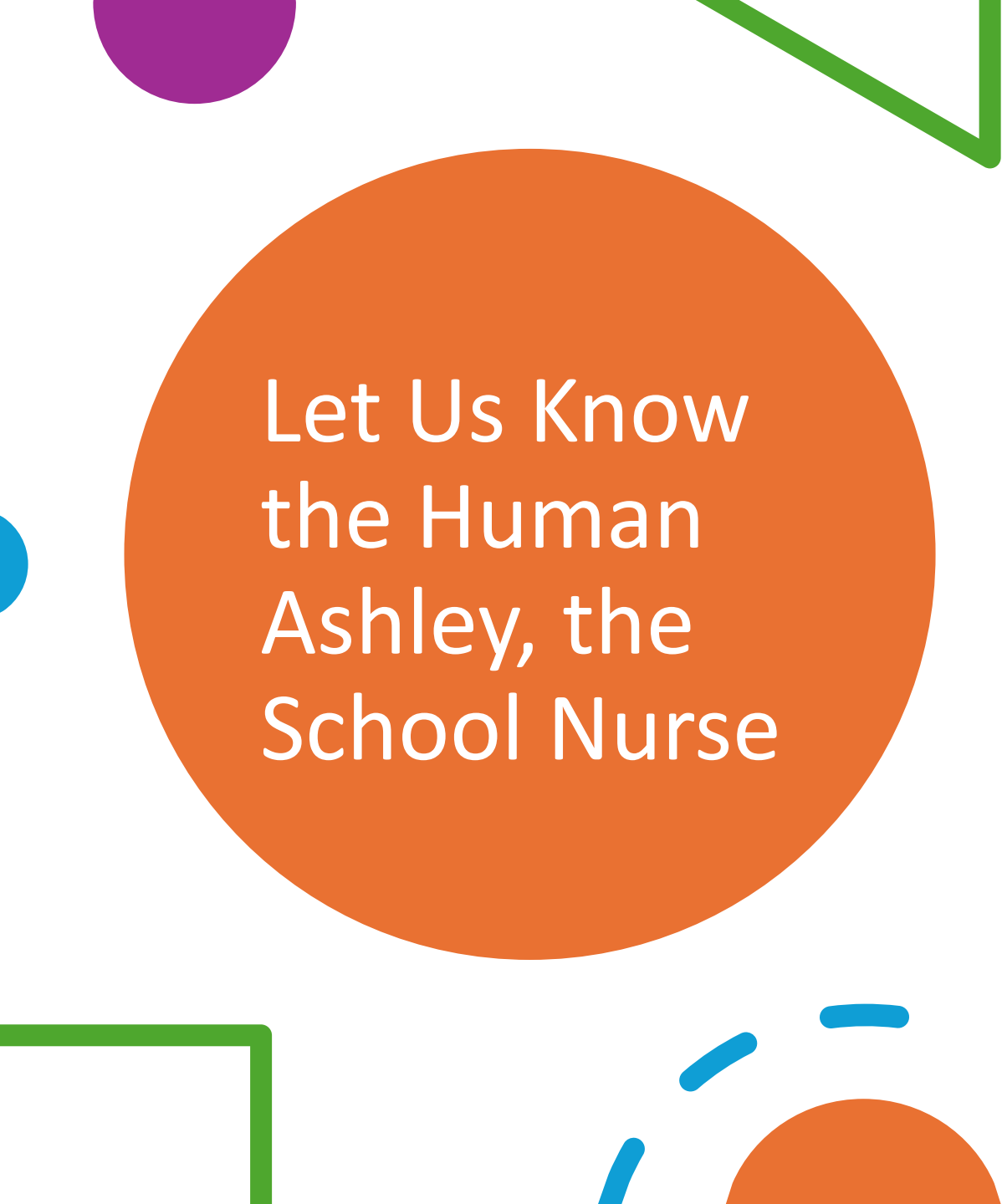


Let us Know the Human: James

- The first time I went to Juvenile Detention, I didn't really understand why. They told me I'd "broken the rules," and I "need help." After that, they sent me to residential facility.
 - It felt like a punishment, even though they said it was to "help me." I was sad... scared... but I couldn't let anyone see that. So I acted tough. I learned how to keep my face straight, even when my stomach was twisted in knots.
 - I couldn't trust anyone. Adults made decisions about my life without even looking me in the eyes.
 - I missed my mom every single day. But instead of going home, I was shipped from one place to another—like I was a problem to be moved, not a person to be understood.
 - Every time I started to get used to a place, they'd move me again. And with every move, the walls around my heart got a little higher.
 - No one ever asked me what I needed. No one told me what was wrong or how I could make it right
 - I started feeling like a "cargo..." only difference was I was scared and lonely... and still hoping someone would see the real me.
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Let us Know Maria's World: Two Conflicting Needs

- I work two jobs. Groceries and rent swallow almost everything I earn.
- I tried to go to the county office to apply for food stamps but the line was too long One day, son was kicked off the school bus for what they called “aggressive, out-of-control” behavior.
- With no bus service and no money for gas, I had no way to get my kids to school. I couldn't leave them home alone, but I had to go to work.
- I was trapped—between the need to provide and the need to protect.
- One afternoon, my son—along with a few other kids from the neighborhood—broke into a shop.
- They stole money. They hit the cashier.
- He was arrested and sent to Juvenile Detention. The system told me I couldn't control him, couldn't meet his needs.
- They said he needed to go somewhere “where he can get the mental health care he needs and learn good behavior”—while I worked on “learning to be a good mom.”



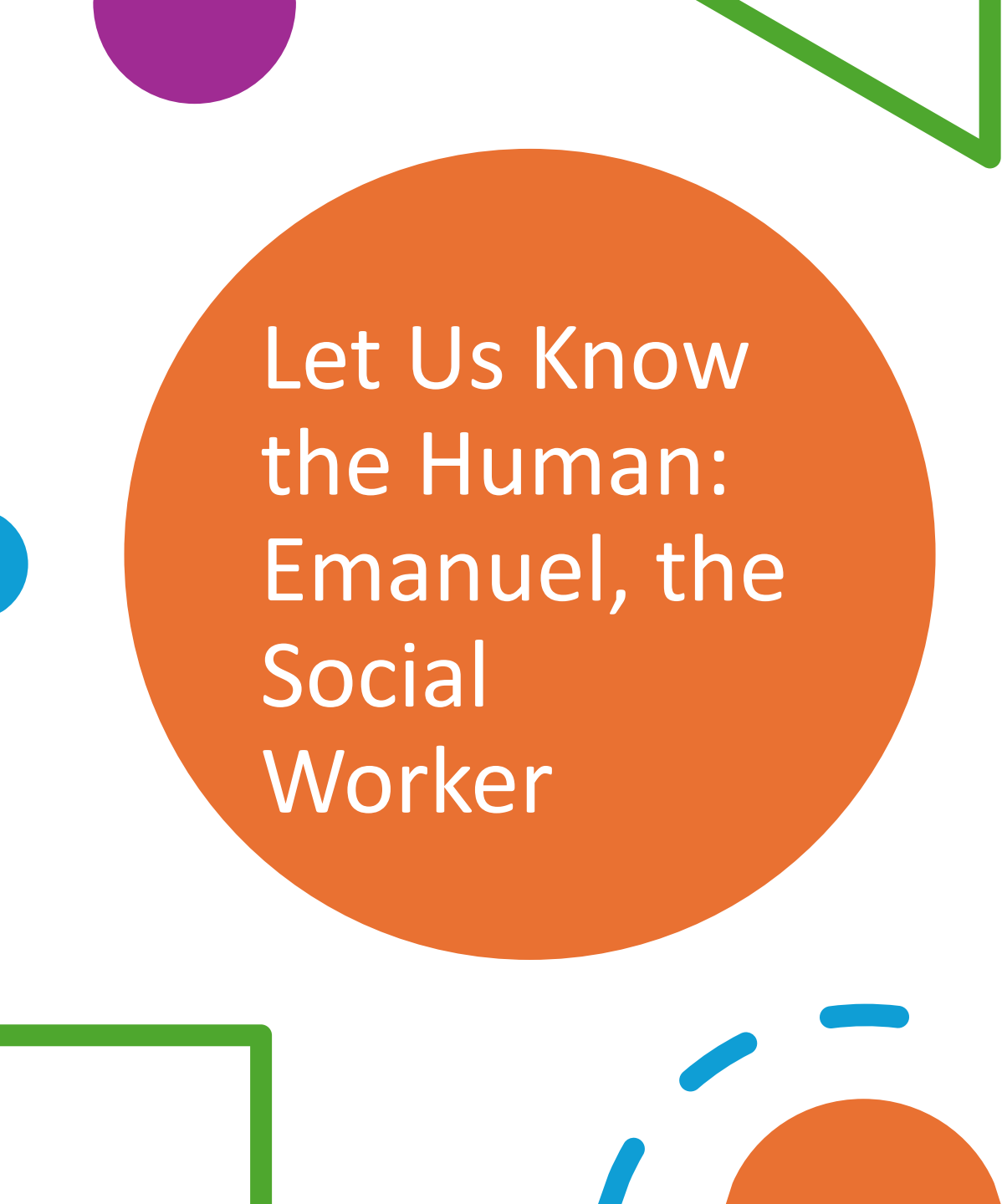
Let Us Know the Human Ashley, the School Nurse

- He is coming to school hungry, exhausted and withdrawn-far more than just “another kid with poor attendance.”
- Taking vitals felt hollow when his most urgent needs were different (food?? Safety?? Stability??
- She found herself silently asking: What good is checking his pulse, if his stomach is empty? What good is measuring growth, if he has no safe home to grow in.”
Ashley had 15 kids on her “list” to be seen in her “8 hours shift”
- Ashley felt the aching gap between her compassion and her capacity-trapped in a role that saw the symptoms but could not touch the root causes.
- The turmoil of wanting to help but being powerless, left her questioning her own humanity..



Let us Know the Human Lily, the MD for Maria

- Lily noticed:
The subtle tremors, pinpointed pupils and evasive answers that pointed “possible drug use..”
Behind the labs and symptoms, she saw a woman, unraveling under poverty, family pressure and trauma...
 - Her inner turmoil grew heavier when she knows:
Emanuel the Social Worker asked for the report to be forwarded to them and Maria had signed the ROI, as she is “open” with them..
 - Lily is torn” Crushing weight of responsibility documenting substance use, and how it might cost Maria her child, her dignity and her trust...
 - Wrestled with the fear that she is not caring for Maria but exposing her to more harm...Care and surveillance blurred into one. Helper became an unwilling enforcer...
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Let Us Know the Human: Emanuel, the Social Worker

- I became a social worker because I wanted to help children and families find hope and healing. But when I met James and his mom, Maria, I didn't feel like a healer.
- I felt like an enforcer. It was as if my job was to punish them—
- to document their failures instead of understanding their struggles.
- I spent hours buried in paperwork. Reports. Forms. Risk assessments.
- Technically, I was required to identify “strengths” in every case.
- I barely had enough hours in the day to meet the legal deadlines, let alone sit with James long enough to understand his fear, or with Maria to see her determination to keep her family together.
- The policies told me to be thorough. The system told me to be efficient.
- But my heart told me I was missing the most important part—seeing the human beings behind the case files.
- I went home every night with this ache in my chest—knowing I was following the rules but failing the people I came here to help. Am I safeguarding James, or am I pushing Maria further into despair?

Let Us Know the Human: Lucas, Therapist for James

- Saw James' fear and abandonment, but reports demanded checkboxes.
- Forms asked for 'mood stabilized, behavior managed'.
- James needed stability and trust.
- Asked: Am I helping James, or just documenting his survival?



What is Happening to Humans: My Experience

Families

Judged, scrutinized, and too often punished for struggling with circumstances that are rooted in poverty, trauma, or lack of support.

Their love for their children is overshadowed by reports, hearings, and labels that reduce them to “cases” rather than people.

Children

Lose far more than just a home address; stability, connection, and the threads of their identity.

Severed bonds and deepened mistrust.

Their stories are rarely told from their own perspective, and their voices are often drowned out by the noise of decisions made for them rather than with them.

Professionals

Enter the field driven by hope and purpose, only to find themselves caught in a relentless tide of paperwork, policy constraints, and overwhelming caseloads.

Drained from trying to patch cracks in a system that was never built to truly heal. Burnout isn't a rare occurrence—it's the norm.

Humans Are Treated AS

- Files
- Loads
- Cases
- Problems to be fixed





The Human Impact on Professionals

- Repeated exposure to poverty, hunger, housing crises → moral injury
 - Providers feel helpless inside systems designed only for treatment
 - Over time, empathy is dulled
 - Risk dehumanization: reduced to checklists, vitals, and the next patient
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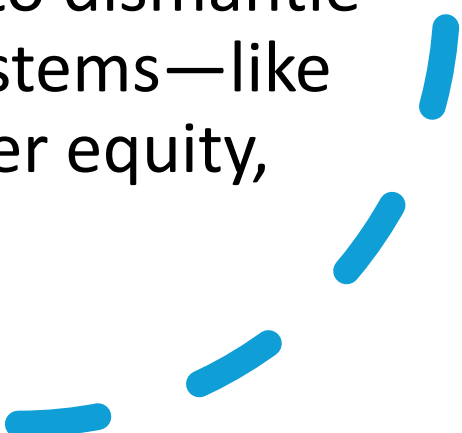


We All Deserve Better

- Humans, who are seen and heard, and workers who are empowered to help in ways that honor dignity and humanity.
 - It's time to reimagine a system that works with people, not against them—one that fosters trust, builds stability, and restores the belief that change is not only possible, but inevitable when we put the human back at the center of human services.
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Looking Back to Move Forward: Why History Matters?

- The history of human services is rooted in policies that often conflated poverty with neglect and embedded racial and cultural biases.
 - From the Elizabethan Poor Laws to modern welfare policies, systemic inequities have shaped who receives help, how it is delivered, and whose voices are heard.
 - Knowing this history is essential to dismantle entrenched biases and design systems—like Mindful Communities—that foster equity, trust, and cultural respect.
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From Control to Care: Lessons from History

Elizabethan Poor Laws

- Categorized 'worthy' poor (orphans, widows, disabled, elderly) and 'unworthy' poor (able-bodied unemployed).
- Enforcers decided who deserved aid and imposed work requirements.
- Punishments, including public whipping, for those who refused to work.

1601

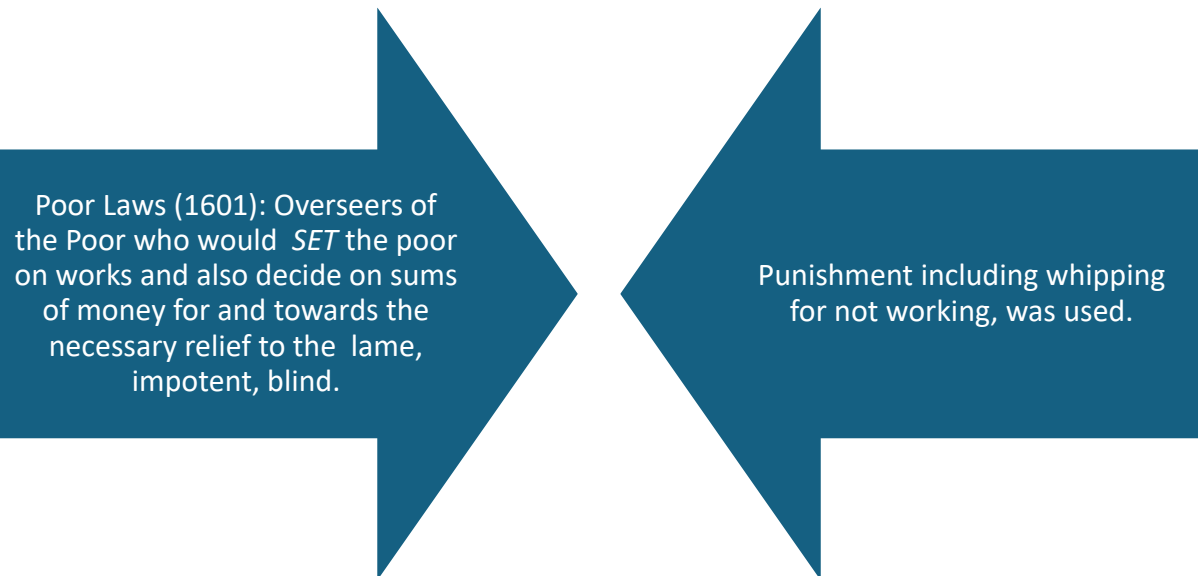
2025

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

- Eligibility tied to strict work requirements—20 hours/week for most able-bodied adults without dependents.
- Exclusions for undocumented immigrants, recent legal residents, or those who cannot prove compliance.
- Income thresholds at or below the poverty line.

Human Welfare: Power & Control

Then



Poor Laws (1601): Overseers of the Poor who would *SET* the poor on works and also decide on sums of money for and towards the necessary relief to the lame, impotent, blind.

Punishment including whipping for not working, was used.

Now

- Unemployment benefits (2024): Humans cannot get benefits after losing employment, if they “resigned” and were “not terminated.” Employment officer determines if the reason is “good enough” to “render” benefits.



Past Has Shaped Our Present

- For centuries, systems have treated human need as a problem to control, not an opportunity to support.
 - Support is conditional, monitored, and limited.
 - Burden is placed on individuals to 'prove' their worthiness.
 - Structural barriers remain unaddressed.
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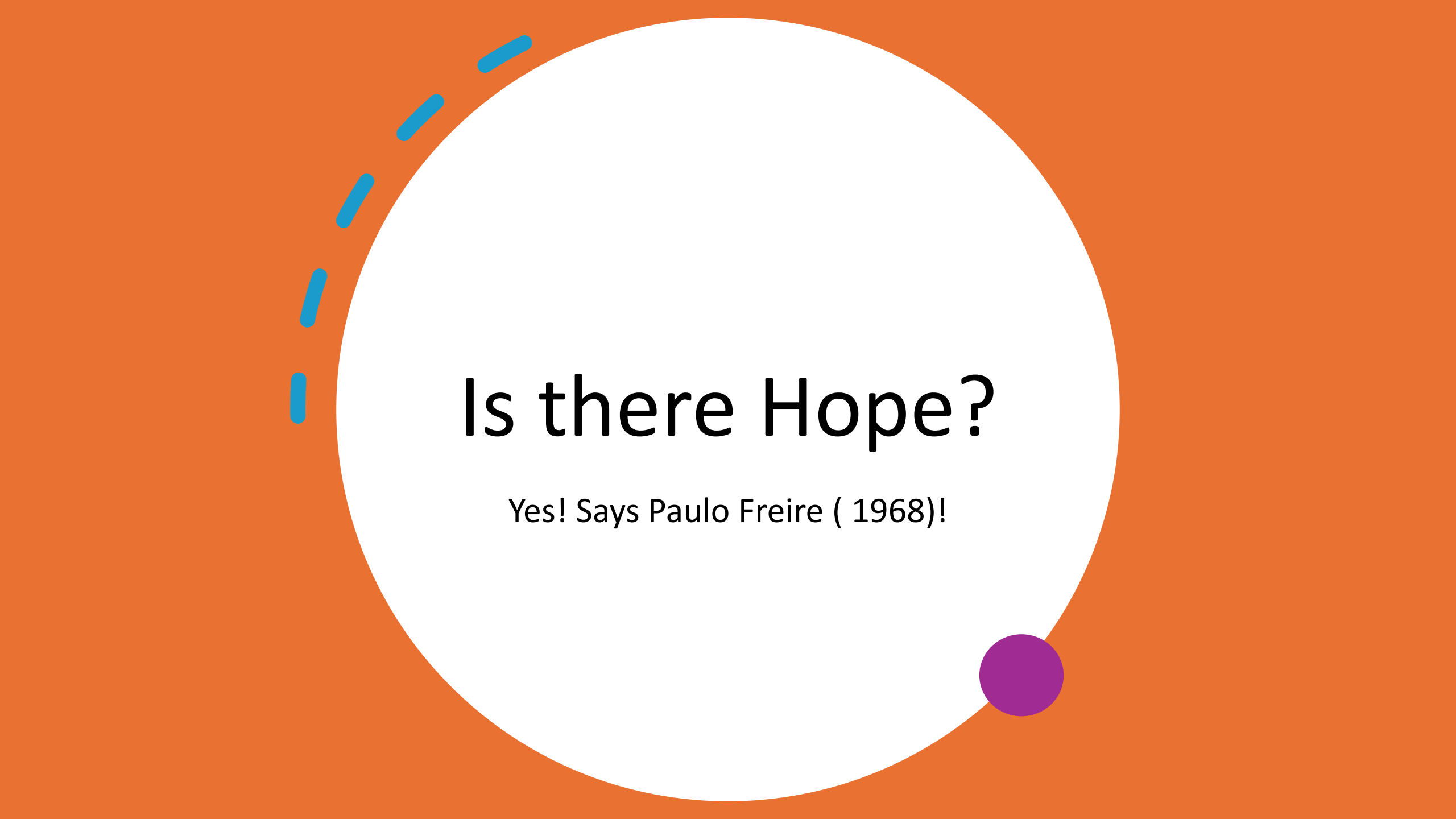


System We Work In Based On:

- Philosophy of Othering than Mutuality
- Oppression on the name of Equality
- Dominant Culture is Uncomfortable with Equity
- Wants Uniform Solutions for Unique Problems
- Civic Engagement is a Task not a Framework
- Dominant Culture's Discomfort is running the System

Current Human Services Absolves the Society of the Burden of Changing By:

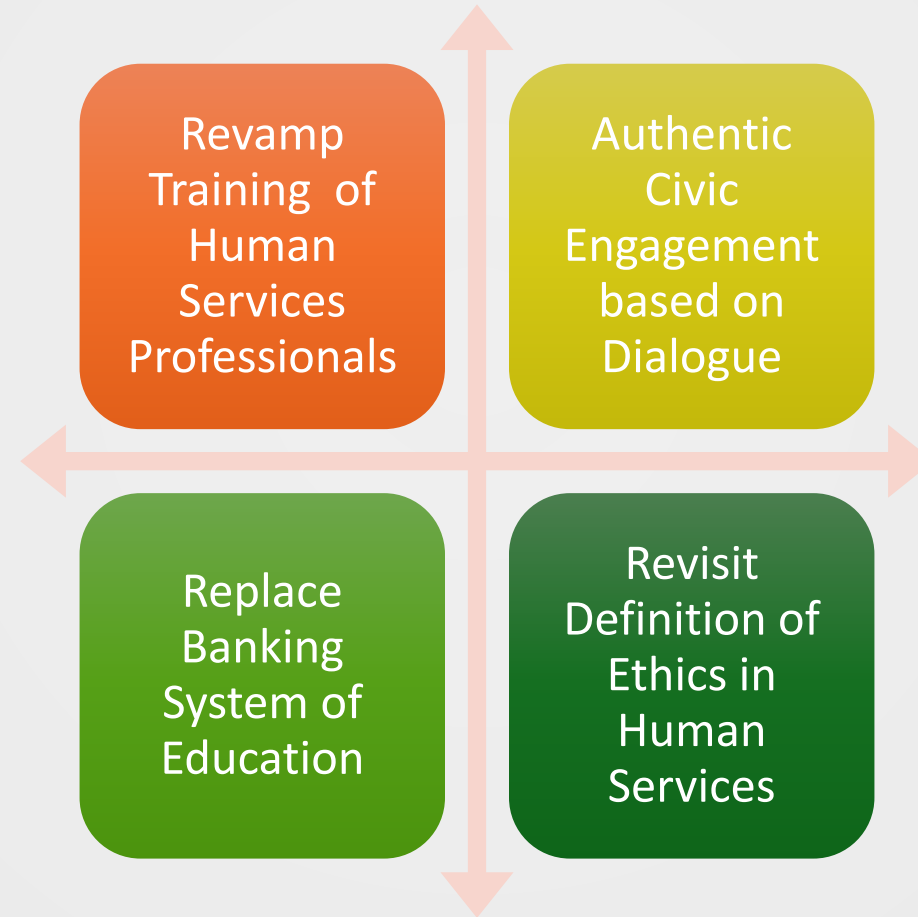
- Placing the burden of change on “deviant” humans and those hired to change them-human services professionals (e.g. social workers)
- Believing that solutions to racism, sexism and classism can be found in changing the humans rather than having to change the society’s exploitative structures.
- Reflecting subtle and not-so-subtle reflections of Social Darwinism that believed that certain humans were genetically better than others.
- Forcing assimilation of humans in dehumanizing melting pot



Is there Hope?

Yes! Says Paulo Freire (1968)!

Dismantle the Oppressive Framework: Create Mindful Communities





The Shape of Hope is
Mindful Communities.

Vision of the Mindful Communities Model



- Transform human services from a system of control into a system of care—one grounded in equity, respect, and community leadership.
- It's a framework that unites families, youth, service providers, and community members around shared goals: safety, belonging, and opportunity for all.
- Community engagement isn't an "add-on"—it's the pulse that drives everything.
- It means listening deeply to those most impacted, sharing power, and co-creating solutions with families, youth, and neighbors.
- It's about moving from "we know what's best for you" to "let's build this together."
- This isn't just about reforming programs—it's about reclaiming our shared humanity and reshaping the way we serve, support, and heal together

Mindfulness : Community Necessity

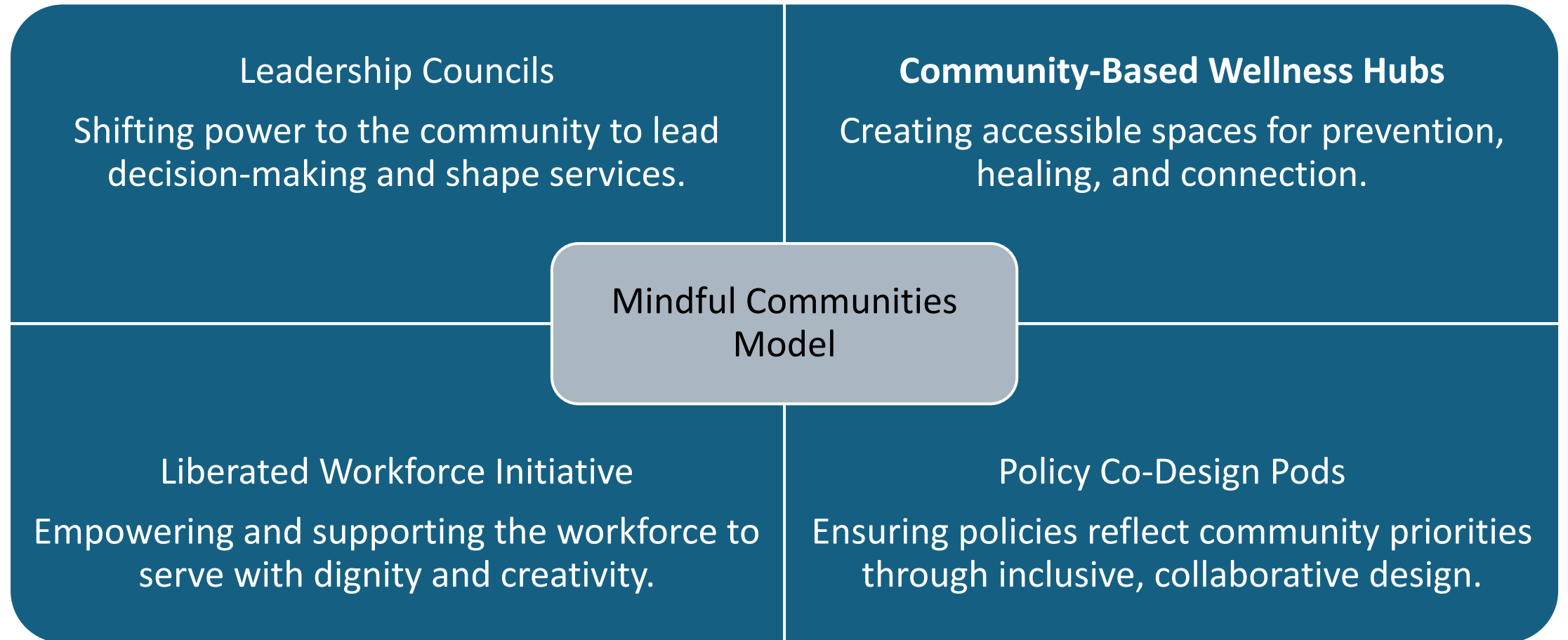
- In systems shaped by centuries of control, bias, and conditional aid, mindfulness provides:
- Awareness of historical harms and their ongoing impact.
- Presence and intentionality in how services are delivered.
- Space to listen deeply to those most affected before acting.
- Recognition of both resilience and vulnerability in individuals and communities.



Acknowledge ment of the Spirit of Health

- World Health Organization:
“Health is complete physical, mental, and social well-being—not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.”
- Beyond illness → wholeness, dignity, equity
- Health is relational: body, mind, spirit, community

Key Pillars of Mindful Communities



Pillar 1: Family Leadership Councils

“Ask WHY before you ACT — and let families lead that conversation.”

- Formal councils of humans with lived experience.
- Hold decision-making authority on policy, resource allocation, and program design.
- Ensure those most affected are not just consulted but have real influence on tough decisions impacting children and communities.
- Could be engaged in cases to ask critical questions like: “Why are parents unable to meet these ‘needs’?” and recommend supports instead of removals.
- Have a voice in shaping practices, ensuring cultural respect and fairness.
- Embedded in governance structures to create a continuous feedback loop.
- Builds trust, fosters shared ownership, and improves outcomes — not a symbolic gesture, but a structural shift in power.

Pillar 2: Community- Based Wellness Hubs

“Healing happens where people feel safe, seen, and supported.”

- Accessible, neighborhood-based spaces for prevention, healing, and connection.
- Offer culturally relevant mental health care, peer support, and resource navigation.
- Reduce barriers by co-locating services where families live, work, and gather.
- Create safe, stigma-free environments that encourage early help-seeking.
- Strengthen community bonds and collective resilience.

Pillar 3: Liberated Workforce Initiative

“When workers thrive, communities thrive.”

- Prioritizes worker well-being, autonomy, and creativity in service delivery.
- Reduces administrative burdens to allow more direct engagement with families.
- Provides ongoing professional development rooted in humility.
- Encourages innovation and adaptability to meet unique community needs.
- Retains skilled staff by fostering a culture of respect and support.

Pillar 4: Policy Co-Design Pods

“Nothing about us, without us — in policy, too.”

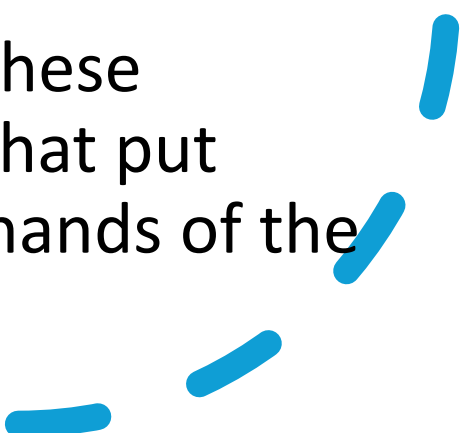
- Collaborative groups of community members, service providers, and policymakers.
- Co-create policies that reflect community priorities and lived realities.
- Test and refine policy ideas through real-world pilots and feedback loops.
- Build transparency and accountability into decision-making processes.
- Shift policy from top-down mandates to community-driven solutions.

Breaking Down Silos: Integration for True Transformation

- Break down silos between child welfare, mental health, education, and other systems.
- Coordinate services, responsible information sharing, and a seamless continuum of care for families. Example: Co-locating mental health professionals in child welfare offices speeds up assessments and reduces the need for families to navigate multiple agencies.
- Support holistic plans that address both immediate crises and long-term well-being.
- Maximize resources and improve outcomes.

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It Is Possible: Lessons from Around the World

- Participatory budgeting in Brazil and Portugal shows that giving communities direct control over public funds leads to more equitable and effective outcomes.
 - In West Africa, community-led child protection committees have significantly reduced child labor and exploitation.
 - These global examples prove that when communities are trusted and resourced, they create innovative, culturally relevant solutions to complex challenges.
 - Mindful Communities builds on these successes to reimagine systems that put power where it belongs—in the hands of the people.
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It Is Possible: Lessons from U.S. Initiatives

- New York City's Family Enrichment Centers are community-based hubs that offer resources, support, and connection without the stigma of child welfare involvement.
- Bring Up Nebraska is a statewide network of community collaboratives focused on preventing child abuse and neglect through local solutions.
- Both models demonstrate the power of community ownership and the importance of tailoring services to local needs.

5 Steps to Building Mindful Communities

1) Establish community leadership structures



2) Conduct needs assessments with local partners



3) Secure diverse funding sources: Reallocate with Courage



4) Develop pilot projects in high-need areas



5) Evaluate and scale successful strategies



What It Takes?

- Pilot Site Priorities
- Target communities with highest needs
- Leverage strong local leadership & readiness for change
- Use early implementation sites as learning & adaptation models
- Funding Strategies
- Implement participatory budgeting to increase transparency
- Blend public, private, and philanthropic funding sources
- Redirect funds from reactive services to preventive supports
- Workforce Transformation
- Reduce administrative burdens to free staff for relationship-building
- Create growth opportunities & value worker contributions
- Foster collaboration and a culture of care across the system



Tools for Our Tool Box

- Community Engagement
- Involve residents in planning, implementation, and evaluation
- Host storytelling forums & cultural healing collaboratives
- Ensure collaboration is continuous, transparent, and inclusive
- Measuring Success
- Use community-defined indicators of success
- Combine qualitative stories with quantitative data
- Apply participatory evaluation methods
- Projected Impact
- Reduce unnecessary child removals
- Improve mental health outcomes & family cohesion
- Shift culture to trust, partnership, and mutual respect

Tools for Our Tool Box

- Cultural Humility
- Commit to self-reflection & lifelong learning
- Challenge power imbalances & tailor services to community needs
- Continuously seek feedback for inclusivity
- Policy Alignment
- Advocate for supportive legislative changes in oppressive laws.
- Align funding streams with preventive services
- Remove policy barriers to collaboration and innovation
- Scaling the Model
- Document successful practices
- Build partnerships and secure diverse funding
- Invest in local leadership development
- Sustainability
- Ensure long-term funding & community ownership
- Protect and uphold core principles
- Foster a culture of continuous improvement

Rehumanize the Workforce – Caring for the Ones Who Care

- Reduce Administrative Burdens
- Streamline documentation requirements:
Fear Vs Effectiveness
- Eliminate redundant reporting to free time
for relational healing
- Build Relational Capacity
- Train in active listening, cultural humility,
and trauma-informed practice
- Prioritize consistent and meaningful
engagement with families
- Support Emotional Well-being
- Offer reflective supervision & peer support
groups

Rehumanize the Workforce – Caring for the Ones Who Care

- Destigmatize help seeking behavior for helpers
- Encourage self-care through supportive policies
- Integrating Paulo Freire's Educational Model
- Use education as a tool for liberation, not assimilation
- Engage in authentic dialogue between staff and leadership
- Apply the problem-posing model: co-create solutions based on lived realities
- Center training content in the actual challenges and strengths of the workforce
- Foster critical reflection (praxis) to challenge systemic inequities



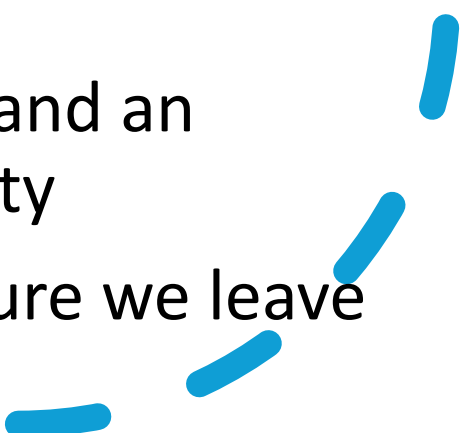


Healing = seeing
the whole
person +
supporting
caregiver
humanity

- Recognize SDOH in every patient encounter
 - Dismantle and Renew Referral systems: housing, food, rent support
 - Support workforce: reflective practice, debriefing, incentives
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Be the Change: Mindful Communities Start with You

- Act now—our communities can't wait
 - Unite as policymakers, practitioners, community leaders, and advocates
 - Stand with those whose voices have been silenced
 - Turn listening into action—make policy and funding reflect real needs
 - Break down silos and build bridges rooted in trust
 - Lead with courage, compassion, and an unwavering commitment to equity
 - Your action today shapes the future we leave for the next generation
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Mindful Communities Need You at Your Best

- In Mindful Communities, YOU are the most precious resource
 - Your energy, presence, and resilience shape the trust and hope we build
 - Self-care is essential to sustain the vision of prevention, healing, and equity
 - When you are rested and supported, you amplify the community's strength
 - Give yourself the same compassion and care you extend to families and youth
 - Protect your well-being—it's the foundation for meaningful, lasting change
 - Investing in yourself ensures you can keep investing in the community
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Self-Care: A Requirement Not a Luxury

High Emotional Labor: Carrying stories of trauma and injustice daily takes a toll.

Burnout is Real: Without recovery, chronic stress leads to compassion fatigue.

Your Well-Being = Client Outcomes: A regulated provider is a more present and effective one.

Ethical Duty: Code of Ethics highlights responsibility for self-care.

Workforce Sustainability: Self-care ensures you stay in this work long-term

Self-Care is Not Selfish



- You cannot pour from an empty cup—caring for yourself is foundational to caring for others



- Self-care is an ethical responsibility in professions rooted in emotional labor



- Guilt around rest, boundaries, or saying 'no' stems from unrealistic expectations



- The culture of burnout does not define your worth



- Reframe self-care as resilience-building and justice-preserving

Incorporate Mindfulness: Engage the Senses



The limbic system (emotional brain) responds before logic

- Sensory input regulates the nervous system faster than thought
- Self-care as bottom-up regulation: moving from survival → safety



Limbic system processes sensory data rapidly

- Sensory care lowers cortisol, calms the body
- Creates space for empathy, reflection, resilience
- A regulated caregiver = a present, compassionate healer

Mindful Leadership

Practices of Mindful Leaders



Self-reflection before action



Notice bias, positional power, systemic inequities



Listen to community voices, especially silenced ones



Lead with courage, humility, accountability

Cost of Unmindful Leadership

- Ignoring history → perpetuates harm
 - Ignoring environment → failed implementation
 - Ignoring workforce → burnout, turnover
 - Mindless leadership = systemic dehumanization



Mindful Leadership: Awareness & Accountability

- Lead with awareness of impact.
- Practice intentional decisions and authentic dialogue.
- Address inequities and uphold dignity.
- Make mindfulness a competency in hiring, training, and accountability.
- Leadership cannot be done in oblivion
- Must be aware of environment, history, present realities
- Healing-centered leadership = attentive, present, responsive

Let us Move..

- From Surveillance → To Support
- From Punishment → To Partnership
- Together → We Build Communities
Where Every Human Thrives



Call to Action



FROM SURVEILLANCE
TO SUPPORT.



FROM PUNISHMENT TO
PARTNERSHIP.



TOGETHER, WE HEAL.

Reflect.Refr
esh.Renew :
Be Mindful
With Each
Other!

नमस्ते
n a m a s t e

[nah-mas-tay]

my soul honors your soul.
i honor the place in you where
the entire universe resides.
i honor the light, love, truth,
beauty & peace within you,
because it is also within me.
in sharing these things
we are united

Reach Out...



NEERJASINGHPHD@GMAIL.COM



NEERJA.SINGH@HENNEPIN.US