



OneAID Community Programming Toolkit

Introduction

While USAID's dismantling has impacted each of us within the broader U.S. foreign assistance community differently, the collective trauma we have experienced is real. Coming together in community can help us reconnect in the face of isolation, fear, grief, and loss. Community offers space for mutual understanding, shared stories, and the important reminder that healing does not have to happen alone.

In late May 2025, OneAID launched a recurring series of community events in the Washington, DC, area designed to create opportunities for connection. This toolkit is intended to offer strategies for developing trauma-informed programming in your communities to create connection, build trust and social cohesion, and support collective healing.

Why do we need community building?

Building community helps people get to know each other, listen, and work together with more trust. When people come together to talk about what matters to them, they begin to form social bonds that lead to stronger social cohesion. Although we have all been impacted by USAID's dismantling, each of us is experiencing this moment in our own way. Having a shared understanding of our collective experience makes it easier to build a strong community.

Community connections also give people the confidence and support they need to get involved—and that kind of involvement is what keeps democracy strong and inclusive for everyone. Civic and community engagement are essential for cultivating a thriving democracy. Together, we are building the foundation for OneAID Community members to actively participate in shaping our collective future.

Community Event Ideas

Meeting people where they are is an important aspect of community building and social cohesion. Here is a non-exhaustive list of ideas for community events. What each community needs may be different – be creative. And remember, even an event attended by just one or two people is a success!

Community Coffee Chat – Plan a meet-up at a local coffee or tea shop. The conversation could be structured around a topic, or just an open invitation for community members to gather.

Happy Hour – Plan a happy hour at a local bar or restaurant. Early evening events can be welcoming for those who have returned to work.

Cultural or Sporting Events – Find free or low-cost activities in your community that anyone can attend. This could include museums, festivals, ball games, or other events where people can come together.

Outdoor Activities – Meet for a walk around the neighborhood, a hike in a local park, or a visit to a local garden.

Picnic/Barbecue – Host a pot luck or meet at a local park.



Book Group – Organize a book group that meets regularly. Fiction, nonfiction, graphic novels... Collectively curate a list of interest to the group. Consider making more than one group based on topics of interest.

Podcast Group – For some, listening to a podcast is more enjoyable or accessible than reading a book. Collectively curate a list of interest to the group. Consider making more than one group based on topics of interest.

Open Mic Night – In collaboration with a local coffee shop, bookstore, or other venue, host an open mic night for people to share their stories, poems, music, etc.

“Ask Me Anything” at a Local Library – Help educate your local community at the local library. Set up a table where community members can ask questions about USAID and the work of the broader community.

Letter Writing Sessions – Host sessions for community members to draft letters to representatives. These could include letters signed jointly, individual letters, or postcards to Congressional representatives, governors, mayors, city council members, and other officials.

What is trauma-informed community organizing?

A trauma-informed community organizing approach focuses on bringing people together to create change in a way that understands how past hurt, stress, and injustice can affect individuals and groups. A trauma-informed approach emphasizes building safe, accountable, respectful spaces where everyone feels heard, valued, and empowered.

Community programming that builds social cohesion depends on building trust, which encourages people to show up, share openly, and work together. Without trust, even well-designed programs struggle, as people may feel unsafe, excluded, or disconnected. This approach centers trust and collaboration and helps communities work together more effectively, with care and compassion at the core of our actions.

See [Annex A](#) for a detailed guide on how to create safe, accountable, inclusive, and empowering community spaces.

Why does it matter?

Trauma-informed community organizing matters because people are empowered to participate when they feel safe and respected. By organizing in a way that recognizes individual experiences within the context of this shared moment, we build trust and create a community in which people feel stronger, more connected, and ready to take action together. It helps build social cohesion, support movements that last longer and reach more people, and create lasting change that does not harm but heals.

What should we do if harm occurs?

It is important to remember that trauma can impact our behavior. As a community experiencing a difficult and unprecedented time, many of us may be struggling in ways that can be difficult to manage. Further, people sometimes react from fear, hurt, or past experiences that they may not



have fully processed. Understanding how trauma can impact us doesn't excuse harm – but it helps explain why someone might act in ways that are defensive, dismissive, or unaware.

“Calling people in” means choosing to engage someone in a respectful, compassionate conversation when they have said or done something hurtful or harmful. Instead of shaming or pushing them away (or “calling out”), calling in invites dialogue, growth, and accountability.

When we stay in the conversation, even when it is uncomfortable, we make space for understanding and transformation. Calling someone in doesn't mean staying silent, avoiding accountability, or minimizing harm. Instead, it is a “commitment to meaningful change that involves seeing people's complexities so that we don't reduce them to their worst actions.”¹

Training and Resources

These resources are available to equip you with information that may be useful as you develop community programming. OneAID does not specifically endorse these organizations or their tools and support.

Suicide Awareness and Prevention

- [988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline](#)
- [LGBTQIA2S+ Crisis Hotlines](#)
- [Preventing Suicide During a Time of Crisis](#)

[OneAID Community Wellness Resources](#)

National Council for Mental Wellbeing

- [Mental Health First Aid Training](#)
- [Mental Health First Aid One-pager](#)

American Red Cross

- [Training and Certifications](#)

Annex A: Principles of Trauma-Informed Community Organizing

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) offers these foundational principles² for creating safe, inclusive, and empowering organizing spaces.

Safety

Create spaces—physical, emotional, and cultural—where community members feel safe, respected, and free from harm or judgment.

- Prioritize meeting locations that are accessible and comfortable.
- Allow time for building trust before diving into sensitive conversations.
- Recognize and respond to signs of distress or retraumatization.

¹ <https://politicalresearch.org/2025/02/04/calling>

² Source: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2014). [SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach](#).



Trustworthiness and Transparency

Build and sustain trust through honesty, consistency, and clear communication.

- Set expectations early and revisit them often.
- Be transparent about decision-making processes and funding.
- Acknowledge mistakes and model accountability.

Peer Support

Foster shared healing, learning, and solidarity through peer connection and mutual aid.

- Elevate lived experience as expertise.
- Create space for peer storytelling, reflection, and co-mentorship.
- Support community-led initiatives over top-down interventions.

Collaboration and Mutuality

Break down power hierarchies; emphasize co-creation and shared leadership.

- Co-design campaigns, meetings, and agendas with community members.
- Use facilitation methods that encourage equitable participation.
- Honor community knowledge alongside institutional or academic expertise.

Empowerment, Voice, and Choice

Center individual and collective agency. Resist re-creating systems of control.

- Support self-determination in advocacy, organizing, and mobilization.
- Validate diverse experiences and expressions of resistance or healing.
- Invite feedback and adjust your approach when needed.

Cultural, Historical, and Gender Responsiveness

Acknowledge and honor how identity, oppression, and generational trauma shape people's realities.

- Embed anti-racism, decolonization, and intersectionality in organizing strategies.
- Recognize historical harms (e.g., surveillance, medical violence, displacement).
- Adapt language and methods to reflect community values and traditions.

Resilience and Strengths-Based Approach

Focus on assets, survival strategies, and community wisdom.

- Celebrate community victories and leaders.
- Recognize organizing itself as a form of resilience and resistance.
- Use framing that uplifts rather than pathologizes.

Understanding the Impact of Trauma

Ensure your organizing efforts reflect a deep awareness of how trauma impacts behavior, relationships, and participation.

- Avoid punitive responses to disengagement, conflict, or mistrust.
- Offer multiple ways to engage (not just in-person or verbal).
- Normalize rest, healing, and boundary-setting within activist culture.