

A Trauma-Informed Atmospheric Assessment for Downtown Evening Soup Kitchen: A Qualitative Approach

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Background

In the Greater New Haven, Connecticut (CT) area, 26% of residents live under the federal poverty line and experience severe living expense cost burdens¹. In addition to high costs of living, many of these individuals face food insecurity and comorbidities such as substance use and mental illness². Food insecurity combined with poverty and comorbidities can contribute to trauma-related experiences. To address these issues, many New Haven residents seek assistance in spaces such as Downtown Evening Soup Kitchen (DESK). DESK is housed in the basement of a local church's parish house, just off the New Haven Green, and provides daily suppers to all guests, particularly those experiencing food insecurity and/or homelessness. While DESK is well known for providing meals, DESK's mission includes the promotion of health, community, and equity through its services. Many of the DESK guests have experienced trauma, which can influence how an individual perceives and interacts with other people and environments.

Growing awareness of trauma's pervasive role in how individuals interact with environments led to the creation of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA) six key principles of a Trauma-Informed Care (TIC) approach (*see below*), intended for substance abuse and mental health providers to better serve their patients³. However, there is little work on how this TIC model can be implemented in social service settings, such as DESK, where experiences of

trauma may also be quite prevalent among guests. Within DESK's current operations, guests experiencing trauma may have unmet needs that DESK could better support through TIC such as changes to the physical space.



Objectives

1. Conduct qualitative and quantitative analysis using SAMHSA's TIC principles to assess DESK's current physical space.
2. Gain insight into DESK's current space and guest preferences on what environments would elicit comfort and safety.
3. Offer recommendations for redesigning the space based on interviews and focus groups with DESK guests and staff.

Methods

Qualitative Data

- 3 semi-structured key-informant interviews with DESK staff (20-30 minutes/interview)
 - Questions: experiences at DESK, space/atmosphere/community, suggested space improvements
- 7 focus groups (7-15 minutes/group) with DESK guests (6-7 clients/group) using convenience sampling
 - Recruitment: during DESK's evening meal, lottery for groups 1-4, first-come first-serve for groups 5-7
 - Questions: DESK interior and exterior spaces and atmosphere, feelings about DESK, suggested space/atmosphere improvements, notable features about other soup kitchen spaces

Quantitative Data

- Survey (10 questions, Likert scale "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree") given to guests after focus groups
 - Questions: based on SAMHSA's 6 principles of TIC, client comfort/safety in the DESK space/atmosphere

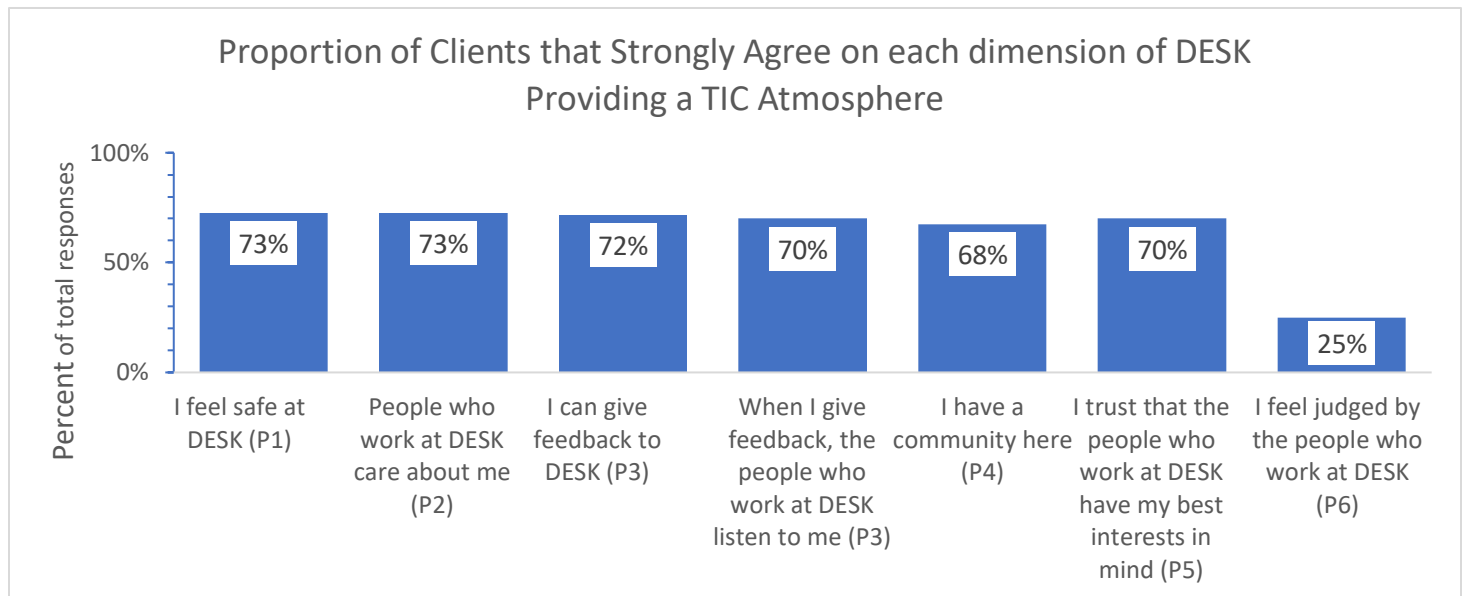
Results: DESK Staff Views

- **DESK has a vision to be guests' home base:** Serving as a food assistance program and necessary social services resource to meet all guest needs.
- **Barriers to change:** DESK is in a space provided by a church, so administratively, key organizational stakeholders must trust in DESK's stability before approving changes to the space. Financially, DESK is limited by its budget. Logistically, disrupting guests' expectations and routines may be challenging.

- **Services and spaces can be more compassionate:** Increase dinner’s service component (e.g. Sunday sit-down dinners), use a blackboard to provide key information while freeing staff to build relationships with guests, and provide Wi-Fi and artwork to create a sense of home and belonging for guests.

Results: DESK Guest Views

- **Guests were grateful for DESK services, and hesitant to complain:** Complaints were mostly on inconsistency in food quality.
- **“It’s easy to feel like we don’t belong”:** Guests noted that in many parts of their lives they feel like they don’t belong. They want to feel welcomed and valued in the space, and connect with fellow community members.
- **DESK could be more like a home:** Guests liked the wall color and desired more artwork, seating was uncomfortable and could be replaced, and involving the Yale community could make the space livelier.



Recommendations

To address the needs and suggestions of guests, we recommend DESK make changes in the following four areas to create a more welcoming, TIC experience. This includes changes to both the services provided and the physical space.

1. **Decorate the walls:** add artwork, choose paint colors guests enjoy
2. **Engage the Yale community and/or other academic communities in the Greater New Haven area:** acappella performances, volunteer groups
3. **Create more opportunities to make guests feel special:** Sunday dinner where guests are served at their seats
4. **Update the resource board to a larger blackboard:** list menus, updates, importance announcements

Limitations

- **Compensation & recruitment:** recruitment was limited by funding; not all guests could participate in focus groups/surveys, and some guest perspectives may not have been captured
- **Perception of FG participants that researchers are DESK employees:** may have limited guest responses/critiques about DESK

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