



The Brain Builders Lab was a joint initiative of the Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction and the Alberta Family Wellness Initiative. Its aim was to move Brain Story science, which links childhood trauma to later health outcomes, into action. Between 2019 and 2021, participants in the Brain Builders Lab undertook projects to spread and embed Brain Story science in their communities. This case study along with the others in the series provides practical advice on how to develop and implement projects, along with project impacts and lessons learned.

Thunder Bay Drug Strategy and Community Safety and Well-Being Thunder Bay

Brain Builders Lab Case Study

Project Team

- Cynthia Olsen, Manager, Community Strategies and Drug Strategy Lead, Community Strategies Division, Development and Emergency Services, City of Thunder Bay
- Lee-Ann Chevrette, Community Safety and Well-Being Specialist, Community Strategies Division, Development and Emergency Services, City of Thunder Bay

Location

- Thunder Bay, Ontario, and surrounding region

Introduction and Project Goals

The Thunder Bay Drug Strategy and Community Safety and Well-Being Thunder Bay are multi-sectoral collaborative committees that have been in existence for over 10 years. Each committee implements a strategic plan co-developed with community partners. Both committees are evidence-based and increasingly focused on upstream approaches to reduce harms related to substance use, and to increase community safety and well-being in Thunder Bay.

The team member's goals in joining the Brain Builders Lab were:

- To embed Brain Story science within the work of each committee and the roughly 50 partner agencies represented on each;
- To advocate for improved upstream prevention efforts common to each committee's issue areas;

Membership on each committee represents diverse sectors including:

- City councillors
- Health
- Public health
- Addiction and mental health
- Policing
- Housing and homelessness
- Indigenous communities
- Education
- Youth justice
- Child welfare
- Poverty
- Enforcement
- Community justice
- Peer support
- Business sector



- To lay the groundwork for moving toward a trauma- and violence-informed approach across organizations and systems of care; and
- To reduce the stigma around addiction and mental health issues in the community.

Knowledge Mobilization Activities

Targeted awareness raising: Both team members started with the lowest-hanging fruit: presenting Brain Story science to each of their committees. Many of the committee members are leaders and key influencers in the community so presenting brain science to them was a perfect opportunity to gain broad leadership buy-in and support for this approach. The team encouraged committee members to share the knowledge and resources within their own organizations, sectors and networks.

Broad awareness raising: Due to the significant interest of committee members in brain science knowledge, Cynthia and Lee-Ann arranged for a guest speaker on child and brain development to deliver a keynote presentation at Thunder Bay's annual Harm Reduction Conference. They followed this with a Brain Architecture Game session to help deepen participants' understanding and tie in learnings from the keynote. The response from attendees was overwhelmingly positive and spawned many requests for more information, so much so that they decided to host a follow-up event with this same speaker for an additional group of people who had not attended the conference.

Outcomes and Impact

Policy change: City council has expressed their interest in supporting upstream prevention efforts including addressing homelessness and poverty. In June 2021, Thunder Bay City Council approved the provincially mandated Community Safety and Well-Being Plan for Thunder Bay, which will guide the Community Safety and Well-Being Advisory Committee's work over the next four years. This work will include community education about adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), which was identified as a key action for two of the local priorities: Mental Health and Substance Misuse, and Supports for Children, Youth and Families. The Thunder Bay Drug Strategy is renewing in 2022 and the committee has already endorsed the inclusion of Brain Story concepts and more emphasis on upstream work in the prevention pillar. These new plans for Thunder Bay are an opportunity to formally embed Brain Story science into key municipal and community policy frameworks.

New initiatives: Local stakeholders from public health, Thunder Bay Drug Strategy and Community Safety and Well-Being Thunder Bay have established a group to review evidence-based ACEs projects and seek funding to implement ACEs initiatives in Thunder Bay. This group has asked the Canadian Municipal Network on Crime Prevention to help identify municipal ACEs initiatives happening across the country.

New partnerships and coordination: Through their connection with the Waterloo Crime Prevention Council, Lee-Ann and Cynthia had the opportunity to learn how they are approaching upstream prevention, and have started to bring ideas and examples back to their respective committees. Now that the committees have been oriented to Brain Story science, these ideas are generating interest and discussion. As the work unfolds, Thunder Bay and Waterloo will remain connected on their learning journey to share what is working well, what is not, and how to approach and solve common problems in their respective communities.

Common language and understanding: Brain Story concepts and language are percolating into cross-sectoral discussions. There is now a better community-wide understanding of the root causes of addiction, crime, poverty and social disorder that is guiding conversations about these issues in new



directions. There is also a strong desire from community agencies to take a more compassionate approach in their work and explore what it means to be trauma- and violence-informed.

Lessons Learned and Next Steps

There is magic in the messaging. The team was surprised by how many people were starting with virtually no understanding of ACEs or Brain Story science. Using the Brain Story metaphors has helped explain the science in ways that are resonating across sectors.

Engage leaders early. The early buy-in and subsequent support the team received from city council and other community leaders was one of the key drivers in successfully incorporating this work into strategic planning efforts. Council has a clear desire to provide a response to the complex issues in Thunder Bay and is now asking what the City can do to assist with this.

Timing matters. Although the team was able to capitalize on previous community interest, there were no sustainable resources to support further progress. However, the project coincided with a provincially mandated strategy renewal and development, creating a key opportunity to align policies with Brain Story science.

Change takes time and requires dedicated time. Even though both team members were allowed staff time to do the work, both juggle multiple priorities and were not always able to dedicate as much time as they would have liked. In hindsight, they reflected that it would have been helpful to block off regular dedicated time in their calendars so that the project would remain a priority.

The team members plan to continue sharing Brain Story science and raising awareness wherever they can. Both are in this work for the long haul and plan to continue building the necessary momentum, engagement and support for turning Thunder Bay into a community that takes a trauma- and violence-informed approach across organizations and systems of care.

