

Communication Best Practices

Applying trauma-informed principles to conversations
and writing about the Highland Park shooting



REFLECTION AND REMEMBRANCE
ROSE GARDEN TEMPORARY MEMORIAL

The Rose Garden is a peaceful place to reflect on the lives of those who were affected by the Highland Park shooting on July 4, 2022.

The Rose Garden is a place to share your thoughts and feelings about the lives of those who were affected by the Highland Park shooting on July 4, 2022.

g2 ANDINAS ROCK GARDEN

The Andinas Rock Garden is a peaceful place to reflect on the lives of those who were affected by the Highland Park shooting on July 4, 2022.

REFLEXION Y RECUERDO
MEMORIAL TEMPORAL DEL JARDÍN DE LAS ROSAS

El Jardín de las Rosas está destinado a ser un lugar tranquilo para reflexionar y recordar a quienes murieron el 4 de Julio del 2022 y a todos cuya vidas fueron cambiadas por siempre.

El Jardín de las Rosas es un espacio compartido por todos, particularmente por los que están de luto por la pérdida de un ser querido. Por favor, sea respetuoso con aquellos que están de duelo así como con este espacio.

JARDÍN DE ROCAS DE LA BONDAD g2

El Jardín de las Rocas de la Bondad de la Generación de la Gratitude (g2) está ubicado al este del memorial temporal y es el hogar de rocas decoradas con mensajes sinceros. Se anima a los visitantes a tomar una piedra, compartir una o dejar una en un gesto de bondad y gratitud.

Introduction

The City of Highland Park (the City) has compiled these recommendations to help community members share information about the Highland Park shooting in a compassionate, trauma-informed manner. The information in this guide is based on guidance provided by the Department of Justice Office of Victims of Crime (OVC). These guidelines are shared for the consideration of community members interested in understanding best practices that support the long-term resiliency of communities impacted by gun violence, as it is important to be cognizant of language, design, or other items that may inadvertently cause harm to others. If you have any questions, please let us know.

GHIDA S. NEUKIRCH

City Manager
gneukirch@cityhpil.com

AMANDA M. BENNETT

Communications Manager
abennett@cityhpil.com

CYNTHIA VARGAS

Resiliency Manager
cvargas@cityhpil.com

CITY OF HIGHLAND PARK

1707 St. Johns Avenue
Highland Park, IL
60035

cityhpil.com/resiliency

847.926.1000

Guiding Principles

DO NO HARM

This maxim was immediately shared with the City by the OVC and proved to be a north star. “Do no harm” challenges us as a community to think beyond our own comfort levels, to consider as carefully and as thoroughly as possible the potential and inadvertent consequences of the words and images we use to talk about the impacts of this tragedy and memorialize those who were killed.

OPT-IN

Not everyone is in a position to discuss their experience of the shooting as individuals experience trauma and resiliency in different ways. What is helpful to one person may be harmful to another. Giving individuals the opportunity to “opt-in” to content regarding the shooting, such as social media posts or events, is respectful of their individual process.

TRAUMA-INFORMED

Trauma-informed communication makes every effort to avoid inadvertently retraumatizing individuals impacted by violence by using victim-centered verbal and body language, being cognizant of details, descriptions, or “trigger” words, and practicing transparency and open communication with individuals directly impacted.

INDIVIDUALIZED

When speaking with victims or trauma survivors, it’s always a good idea to mirror their language. This demonstrates respect and empathy. For example, if a victim uses the term “anniversary,” it’s OK to use that term when speaking with that person. However, when speaking to a broader audience (such as on social media), where you do not have that personal connection, using best practice recommendations is recommended.

Using This Guide

The recommendations in this guide are provided for informational purposes and are best on best practices as shared by the Department of Justice Office of Victims of Crime, feedback from local service providers, and research into trauma-informed communications. These recommendations are provided as part of ongoing efforts to balance diverse needs within the community. Providing this information is intended to help individuals who may or may not have been directly impacted by the Highland Park shooting to navigate the complexities and nuances of talking about this traumatizing violent incident. In sharing these best practice recommendations, the City hopes to encourage individuals and organizations to consider the ways in which the words or images we use to discuss a violent incident may inadvertently prove to retraumatize others.

Keep an open mind.

Not everyone will agree with every best practice recommendation - and that's OK.

Practice victim-first communication.

Follow the lead of others when discussing traumatizing topics, and be ready to set your own boundaries, too.

Recognize that recommended terminology and approaches to communication may change over time.

Trauma is an individual experience, and a person's triggers or responses may change as they process their trauma.

Ask questions and share feedback.

Your perspective is valuable. Contact the Resiliency Division with questions or for support by calling 847.926.1042 or emailing remembrance@cityhpil.com.

Best Practices

The following chart includes recommended approaches to common topics, each paired with related approaches that are not recommended, along with a rationale for each item. For some common items, a detailed rationale follows.

Recommended	Not Recommended	Rationale
Use “Together Highland Park Unidos.”	Avoid using “Fuerza Highland Park Strong.”	Words like “strong” can set unrealistic expectations for the resiliency of victims and their family members.
Use “Highland Park shooting.”	Avoid “July 4 shooting” or “parade shooting.”	Separating the violent incident from the annual holiday supports long-term resiliency.
Refer to the passage of time without emotional language.	Avoid creating “anniversaries” by unduly investing emotional time and effort into dates.	Creating emotional attachments to dates can make it challenging for victims to move forward.
Recognize that individuals have unique experiences of the same event, which they will process in different ways.	Avoid words or phrases that set expectations for how someone is doing or how they “should be” doing.	It’s important to support individuals where they’re at.
Check in with friends or family to see if they have the bandwidth to discuss the shooting or any emotional, weighty, or traumatizing topic.	Avoid jumping into conversations about the shooting without giving others a heads up. Avoid discussing these topics with casual acquaintances or captive audiences (such as hair stylists.)	Giving others the choice to “opt-in” empowers them to self-advocate and set supportive boundaries. Not everyone is in a position to discuss complex topics, especially individuals in service professions who may frequently hear from multiple people about traumatic experiences.
Manage media consumption and take breaks if needed.	Don’t feel compelled to share or engage with these topics even if your friend group is doing so.	The response to news or information and whether (and how) to engage is up to each individual person.

Common Phrases

The words we choose can have inadvertent and unintentional consequences. As with other instances, the principle of “impact” vs. “intent” applies here. Good intent doesn’t excuse negative impact, and we can prevent negative impact by avoiding certain common phrases that are known to re-traumatize or otherwise harm victims’ families or survivors of similar incidents.

INSTEAD OF THIS...

healing
recovery
strong
normal
move on
trigger
lives lost
I understand
you’ll be OK
time heals everything
how can I help?
I know how you feel
anniversary
it was God’s will

TRY THIS...

resiliency
journey
resilient
familiar
move forward
re-traumatize
lives taken / people killed
I hear you
you’ve got this
you’re on your own timeline
here’s how I can help when you’re ready
you’re not alone
remembrance
your spiritual director might be able to help

Learn more: Intent vs. Impact

“Intent” is what a person meant by what they said or did - but “impact” is how it was understood or experienced by another person. This principle is not limited to verbal exchanges. For example, if a braking driver skids on a slick road and unintentionally collides with the car ahead, they will still need to work with the other driver to repair the damage, even though they didn’t mean to bump into them - and even if they were trying their best to avoid the accident altogether.

Prioritizing impact over intent means recognizing that something said was inadvertently hurtful and taking steps to address the hurt by acknowledging it and making changes moving forward.

Visit [adl.org/tools-and-strategies](https://www.adl.org/tools-and-strategies) to learn more about how to prioritize impact over intent.

Recommendations

REFERENCING THE SHOOTING

Isn't it a best practice to refer to incidents by date?

Because the Highland Park shooting occurred on an annual, national holiday, during a beloved community tradition, it is important to begin distancing the tragic events of 2022 from future Independence Day events. The holiday will continue to be celebrated by many, and we anticipate that as time passes, individuals who may not feel comfortable celebrating now will reclaim the holiday and its traditions in the future.

Why is it recommended to use just “shooting” instead of “mass shooting”?

In evaluating options to refer to the incident in the long-term, the City conducted research into the associations and attributes people connect with the naming of any incident. This research indicated that articles and commentary tagged with “mass shooting” frequently focus on the shooter. It is important to center victims and minimize focus on the perpetrator.

Isn't it harsh to say “lives taken” or “people killed”?

Using language that accurately conveys the severity of the situation is important in communicating the gravity of what has occurred. Shying away from the truth of their deaths doesn't honor the memory of those who were killed or the grief of their family members; it just makes conversations more comfortable for those who are talking about them. For some survivors and next-of-kin, softening the language diminishes their story. To balance this perspective with that of others who feel it is harsh, the City recommends using “lives taken.” It is important to avoid the phrase “lives lost.”

Why should the term “anniversary” be avoided?

This recommendation is in line with best practices suggesting that it's important to choose words that lack emotional weight where appropriate and possible. Neutral language, such as “one-year mark,” helps individuals dealing with trauma to create emotional distance, which in turn is helpful for long-term resilience. In addition, “anniversary” carries a connotation of celebration, which is inappropriate in the context of a tragic event. Using the term “year mark” acknowledges the passage of time since the shooting while still conveying a sense of solemnity and respect for the victims and their families.

Recommendations

SUPPORTING SURVIVORS & FAMILIES

What are some ways to be empathetic to friends and family in need?

- Listen without interruption.
- Don't equate your experience with theirs, even if you were together at the shooting.
- Be vulnerable! But confirm the other person has the bandwidth to discuss before you share your own feelings.
- Validate the way they're feeling.
- Avoid saying "I feel the same way." Everyone feels things differently – even the same emotions. A good way to share your feelings in response to someone else's story is to say, "I'm feeling [emotion] about this, too."

What should I do if a victim expresses a preference for a term that this guide suggests may be troubling or problematic?

When speaking with victims, it's always a good idea to mirror their language. This demonstrates respect and empathy. For example, if a victim uses the term "anniversary," it's OK to use that term when speaking with that person. However, when speaking to a broader audience (such as on social media), where you do not have that personal connection, these best practices are recommended.

Can I create a fundraiser for victims? Can the City help me give a card, gift, or donation directly to victims?

At present, the City is not able to assist in coordinating fundraising events.

The City is not able to connect individuals with victims' family members.

For more information, please reach out to the Resiliency Division by emailing remembrance@cityhpil.com or calling 847.926.1042.

Recommendations

PLANNING FOR A PLACE OF REMEMBRANCE

What is the City's approach to the planning for a permanent place of remembrance?

The City of Highland Park remains committed to implementing a trauma-informed approach to the planning process for a permanent place of remembrance, incorporating expert feedback and best practices.

The Place of Remembrance will have three primary objectives:

- Create a place(s) for reflection, remembrance, and solace
- Pay tribute to the memory of the seven victims
- Honor the community's resiliency, especially those who were injured

These objectives are based on research into the purpose of memorial sites and their role in long-term individual and community resilience. Studies show that memorial sites should be understood from an individual and collective perspective, and that they must also be conceptualized with a view towards the present and future post-traumatic needs of all who were directly impacted – and those who were not. The term “place of remembrance” is thus recommended because it emphasizes that this space will continue to be one of active remembrance, not just for today, but for future community members and the greater public.

Planning for a permanent place of remembrance is anticipated to be a multi-year, transparent process, undertaken by a working group of the Mayor, a designated City Council member, the City Manager, the City's Resiliency Manager, and the Executive Director of the Park District of Highland Park. The group will follow the City's existing public meeting structure and will be tasked with providing for multiple avenues of public input and feedback that will be communicated throughout the process.

The City will continue to inform the community as these discussions progress with updates via the City's website at cityhpil.com/permanentmemorial, the twice-weekly City eNews (cityhpil.com/enews) and social media (facebook.com/HighlandParkIL and twitter.com/CityHPIL.)

Recommendations

PLANNING FOR A PLACE OF REMEMBRANCE

Where can I find information about the permanent memorial process?

The City has established a dedicated section on its website with information pertaining to the working group tasked with planning for a permanent place of remembrance.

- [Access meeting agendas and summaries for the working group.](#)
- [View a summary of key aspects of the planning framework.](#)
- [Read frequently asked questions regarding the planning framework.](#)
- [Lea esta información en español.](#)

How can I make a financial contribution to a future, permanent place of remembrance?

The City greatly appreciates the generosity of our community. The following options are available to individuals who would like to make a donation to a permanent place of remembrance:

Donate by Card

[Click here to donate online.](#)

Donate by Cash or Check

Please contact the Resiliency Division for information regarding making a cash or check donation by emailing remembrance@cityhpil.com or calling 847.926.1042.

I would like to host a fundraiser. Whom should I contact?

At present, the City is not able to assist in coordinating fundraising events. For more information, please reach out to the Resiliency Division by emailing remembrance@cityhpil.com or calling 847.926.1042.

Recommendations

MEMORIAL ARTWORK & SUPPORT

I am interested in creating artwork honoring the victims of the Highland Park shooting. Are there any special considerations to keep in mind? Can the City give my piece to one of the victims' family members?

The City recognizes that the arts are beneficial for many in navigating traumatic situations. Artists are encouraged to consider the guidelines above carefully, and in particular the notes regarding use of victims' names or likenesses. Victims' family members have expressed that seeing names or images (photographic or illustrated) of their loved ones can be re-traumatizing.

The City is not able to connect individuals with victims' family members.

The OVC advises that for any memorial activity, including artwork and memorials, it is important to ensure that community members have the ability to "opt-in." This is because individuals experience trauma and resiliency in different ways: what is helpful to one person may be harmful to another. It is the City's responsibility to manage the differing needs in our community by sharing information to empower others to plan their own activities, such as art projects or programming, with a view towards the heightened sensitivity such an incident requires.

Some commonly reported concerns to consider include:

- Victims' family members have shared that photography and videography of the incident are very disturbing. This media, or artistic interpretations of it, has been used in artwork shared with the City.
- Survivors have noted that photos and footage of personal belongings lining the parade route are uncomfortable to look at.
- Some victims' family members have shared that they are uncomfortable with the usage of their loved one's name or likeness.
- Community members have found bright orange (derived from #WearOrange anti-gun violence efforts) to be re-traumatizing because it is so widely associated with the impacts of gun violence.

Recommendations

MEMORIAL ARTWORK & SUPPORT

I would like to create a mural, social media graphics, yard signs, posters, or other items to honor the memory of those who were killed. Will the City support this? Can I use victims' names or pictures?

Community members are strongly discouraged from creating these types of public memorial artwork. Although we recognize that this comes from a desire to honor the memory of the victims, each family is grieving in their own unique way. Stumbling across highly visible artwork referencing the shooting or using victims' names or likenesses can be traumatizing. Additionally, victims of the shooting represent different religious and cultural traditions. What is respectful or meaningful for the person creating the item might not be perceived the same way in the family's traditions.

Additionally, certain high-visibility items such as murals and yard signs do not allow community members the chance to opt-out.

We recognize that creating art can be helpful to the creator by supporting their own process of working through this traumatic experience. Those individuals who would like to share these creative works as part of this resiliency journey are encouraged to share their work with the Highland Park Public Library, to be considered for inclusion in the Library's July 4 Collection.

Recommendations

TOGETHER HIGHLAND PARK UNIDOS

In the immediate aftermath of the incident, the community rallied around the phrase “Highland Park Strong.” However, the City understands from community feedback, staff analysis, and expert input from the Department of Justice – Office of Victims of Crime that phrasing incorporating “strong” or similar terms is counter-productive for many victims of tragedies.

Using language that includes “strong” can create a hierarchy and reinforce power imbalances within a community over time. This type of language can make some members feel superior or more important than others, and it can lead to division and lack of cohesion.

Using language that includes “together” and emphasizes collaboration and cooperation can promote unity and a sense of belonging among community members. This language can help clarify that the community is working towards common goals while creating a more inclusive and equitable community where everyone’s contributions are valued and respected.



What if “Highland Park Strong” still resonates with me?

Each person has a unique experience of trauma. We encourage everyone to use the terminology that works for them. Based on our guiding principle of “do no harm,” the City has made the decision to embrace Together Highland Park Unidos given feedback from victims that “Highland Park Strong” was hurtful.

Can I use the Together Highland Park Unidos logo?

Yes. Community members who are interested in creating items to honor the memory of those who were killed and the resiliency of our community may use the logo. Please see the “Logo Usage” section.

References

MANAGING TRAUMA & TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE

Many resources are available to assist interested community members in learning more about the impact of trauma, trauma triggers, and trauma-informed support and care for loved ones. The below articles reference many of the key principles and concepts included throughout this guide and may be helpful to readers interested in understanding the rationale behind these recommendations.

Bank Lees, A. (n.d.). 7 tools for managing traumatic stress. NAMI.
<https://www.nami.org/Blogs/NAMI-Blog/October-2020/7-Tools-for-Managing-Traumatic-Stress>

Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (US). Trauma-Informed Care in Behavioral Health Services. Rockville (MD): Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (US); 2014. (Treatment Improvement Protocol (TIP) Series, No. 57.) Chapter 3, Understanding the Impact of Trauma. Available from:
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK207191/>.

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach (2014).
<https://store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/sma14-4884.pdf>

References

TRAUMA-INFORMED LANGUAGE

Trauma-informed language is one aspect of survivor-centered, trauma-informed care. The following articles provide an overview of the importance of trauma-informed language and principles underpinning this guide.

Cullen, J., Stein, E., & Vlam, R. (2023). The Continuum of Victim to Survivor: Trauma-Informed Principles and the Impact of Language. Trauma Monthly, 28(5), 922-926. doi: 10.30491/tm.2023.394380.1586

Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (US). Trauma-Informed Care in Behavioral Health Services. Rockville (MD): Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (US); 2014. (Treatment Improvement Protocol (TIP) Series, No. 57.) Chapter 3, Understanding the Impact of Trauma. Available from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK207191/>.

References

TRAUMA TRIGGERS, CONTENT WARNINGS, AND TRAUMA DUMPING

Research on the benefits of content warnings (which include everything from written trigger warnings to the MPAA film rating system), is inconclusive, and in some cases, indicates that content warnings may actually be counterproductive to building resiliency. An article providing an overview of the debate concerning content warnings is included below.

However, this guide addresses recommendations for discussing the Highland Park shooting with those directly impacted by the event. The City has heard from survivors and victims' family members that it is harmful to inadvertently encounter content (especially images) of the shooting. Additionally, there is a lack of research regarding the impact (or not) of content warnings concerning exposure to the specific cause of the trauma (e.g., the Highland Park shooting in particular, not gun violence in general.) Thus, clinicians working with victims have advised the City to recommend the inclusion of content warnings relative to the Highland Park shooting specifically.

“Trauma dumping” refers to situations in which individuals over-share potentially traumatizing sensitive and personal information with individuals who are not necessarily able to engage in that conversation. This was identified as a specific concern relative to the Highland Park shooting by victims and survivors as well as community members at large.

Cleveland Clinic. (2022, July 26). What is trauma dumping?
<https://health.clevelandclinic.org/what-is-trauma-dumping>.

Jones, P. J., Bellet, B. W., & McNally, R. J. (2020). Helping or Harming? The Effect of Trigger Warnings on Individuals With Trauma Histories. *Clinical Psychological Science*, 8(5), 905-917. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2167702620921341>

References

TRAUMA & POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER

Traumatic events may trigger the body's fight-or-flight response, and result in a range of symptoms such as anxiety, sadness, anger, and increased stress that impacts individuals' daily lives.

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach (2014).
<https://store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/sma14-4884.pdf>

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2023, May). Coping with traumatic events. National Institute of Mental Health.
<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/coping-with-traumatic-events>

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2023). Post-traumatic Stress Disorder. National Institute of Mental Health.
<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/coping-with-traumatic-events>

References

TRAUMA & FAITH

The guide includes recommended phrasing that may or may not resonate with individuals based on their unique faith traditions. For example, on p. 6, it's recommended to avoid saying that a particular experience was God's will. This is because faith is an intensely personal experience, and trauma can intensify, decrease, or altogether change a person's individual faith. Studies indicate that overall, faith can help individuals cope with trauma, but that is not always the case. The following articles address the intersection of faith and post-traumatic stress:

Leo, D., Izadikhah, Z., Fein, E. C., & Forooshani, S. A. (2021). The Effect of Trauma on Religious Beliefs: A Structured Literature Review and Meta-Analysis. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 22(1), 161-175. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838019834076>

Park, C.L., Silverman, E.J., Sacco, S.J. et al. When suffering contradicts belief: measuring theodical struggling. *Curr Psychol* (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-023-04642-w>.

Wortmann JH, Park CL, Edmondson D. Trauma and PTSD Symptoms: Does Spiritual Struggle Mediate the Link? *Psychol Trauma*. 2011;3(4):442-452. doi: 10.1037/a0021413. PMID: 22308201; PMCID: PMC3269830.