

State Government, Philanthropy, and Research Partnership Results in Trauma-Informed Training for North Carolina District Court Judges

December 2023



Liz Star

HopeStar Foundation



Mike Silver

NC Administrative Office of the Courts



Amelia Thorn

Bolch Judicial Institute

The North Carolina Office of Strategic Partnerships (OSP) develops, launches, and enhances partnerships between state government and North Carolina’s research and philanthropic sectors. This includes elevating the State’s internal capacity to use and generate evidence in its policy and programmatic functions.

Among numerous examples of cross-sector partnerships, the collaboration among the HopeStar Foundation, the North Carolina Administrative Office of the Courts (NCAOC), and the Bolch Judicial Institute at the Duke University School of Law presents a “textbook” example of a cross-sector partnership that leverages each partner’s assets for enhanced impact.

This philanthropy-government-research partnership led to a new evidence-based training for district court judges on trauma-informed courtroom practices. The training is equipping courts to improve their responses to the impacts of trauma on children and families. OSP Philanthropy Liaison Juli Kim interviewed Liz Star, President and CEO of the HopeStar Foundation; Mike Silver, Director of Training and Services for the NC Administrative Office of the Courts (NCAOC); and Amelia Thorn, Assistant Director at the Duke University School of Law’s Bolch Judicial Institute (Bolch Judicial Institute) to learn more about their partnership to develop and implement the training. Following is an abridged version of those interviews edited for brevity and clarity.

Juli Kim, OSP: The trauma-informed courts training reflects a multi-sector partnership. What was your role in initiating it?

Liz Star, HopeStar Foundation: My foundation, HopeStar, focuses on facilitating systems-level strategies and solutions to address health and social inequities for families with children prenatal to three years old. From my professional work in the healthcare system, I've learned to recognize the impact of intergenerational adversity and trauma, particularly within communities of color. Being court-involved can be traumatic for a family and can compound existing challenges and add to a system of inequity. I wanted to understand how the court system can better recognize and reduce the trauma that children and families in crisis are experiencing, so I connected with Amelia Thorn at the Duke University School of Law's Bolch Judicial Institute for answers. Since there wasn't training specifically focused on using trauma-informed practices in the courtroom for North Carolina judges, Amelia and I began talking about developing a curriculum funded by a grant from my foundation. Around the same time, I connected with Ben David, District Attorney for New Hanover and Pender counties, who connected me to NCAOC's work on addressing Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) in the courtroom. I introduced Amelia to NCAOC because I believed the agency would benefit from her expertise and could ensure that the training was integrated into NCAOC's existing judicial education.

“The curriculum covers the brain science of trauma, trauma’s impact and correlation with negative life outcomes, and trauma-informed courtroom practices, as well as the trauma-informed movement in North Carolina more broadly.”

– Amelia Thorn, Bolch Judicial Institute

Amelia Thorn, Bolch Judicial Institute: The Bolch Judicial Institute focuses on judicial education and programming, as well as promoting the rule of law in the United States and abroad. We immediately welcomed the opportunity to work with the HopeStar Foundation and NCAOC, because we saw the project to educate judges about trauma as consistent with our mission—indeed, a trauma-informed judiciary is likely to improve the judicial system itself. For this project, we used grant funding from HopeStar to draw from existing research to develop a learning agenda for judges on trauma-informed courts. The Bolch Judicial Institute partnered with NCAOC to administer that pilot in 2021. Based on feedback from that session, we developed a five-hour course that is now included in NCAOC required training for new district court judges. The curriculum covers the brain science of trauma, trauma's impact and correlation with negative life outcomes, and trauma-informed courtroom practices, as well as the trauma-informed movement in North Carolina more broadly. The training will help judges understand the nature of juvenile trauma and its effects on behavior and other long-term impacts. The course also offers specific practices that judges can use in court to improve interactions with children and families, including communication techniques, procedural approaches, and the use of trauma-related information (like assessments) to inform court orders. Now we are conducting research to better understand the use of trauma-informed judicial practices in the courtroom as well as outcomes for children.

Mike Silver, NCAOC: While Liz was talking with the Bolch Institute, NCAOC was launching the Chief Justice’s Task Force on ACEs-Informed Courts, which is focused on enabling judges, court officers, and court administrators to understand the impact that exposure to ACEs (adverse childhood experiences or adverse community environments) can have on children, and to develop strategies for addressing them within the court system.

The Chief Justice learned about HopeStar’s work and invited Liz to be an advisory member of the Task Force. Liz connected us to Amelia, and we invited Amelia to join the Task Force as well. The Bolch Judicial Institute had developed a learning agenda on trauma for judges but wanted to test it. In 2021, NCAOC convened a small group of judges and court administrators to pilot the educational program and provide detailed feedback. It was the Task Force’s recommendation that new district court judges receive training on trauma-informed courtroom practices. The NCAOC education subcommittee reviewed and approved the training as part of the required orientation curriculum for new district court judges. It was presented to judges for the first time at the NC District Court Judges’ annual conference in August 2023.

Juli Kim, OSP: What tips would you offer to colleagues in state government, research, and philanthropy on cross-sector partnerships?

Liz Star, HopeStar Foundation and Amelia Thorn, Bolch Judicial Institute: We have a close working relationship. As a result, Liz has learned more about the impact of trauma that has informed her other work related to maternal and child health. Through Liz, Amelia has made connections with state agency leaders, early childhood experts, medical doctors, and others with knowledge or expertise that informs her work.

Mike Silver, NCAOC: First, state agency leadership must be committed to the partnership’s cause and have a foundational belief that the partnership project will lead to results. Second, state agency leaders must designate the “influencers” within the agency who have the autonomy to lead dedicated staff to implement and advance the work. Third, philanthropic partners must be committed to the agency’s mission and willing to learn and work within the rules that dictate how government agencies operate. Finally, getting something done may mean taking baby steps and building momentum over time, so it may take longer than expected to appreciate what you’ve accomplished.

“[G]etting something done may mean taking baby steps and building momentum over time...”

- Mike Silver, NCAOC

Juli Kim, OSP: What do you want people to know about the power and impact of this cross-sector partnership?

Liz Star, HopeStar Foundation: I am deeply committed to this work, but I know I cannot do it alone. By partnering with practitioners who are working directly with families, and with researchers who are evaluating best practices, we can build out systems that lead to better outcomes for children and families across North Carolina.

“By partnering with practitioners who are working directly with families, and with researchers who are evaluating best practices, we can build out systems that lead to better outcomes for children and families across North Carolina.”

- Liz Star, HopeStar Foundation

Amelia Thorn, Bolch Judicial Institute: Until Liz introduced us to the need for this work, as well as to great folks at NCAOC, we did not anticipate involvement in this space. Now we have a program focused on the very important work of educating judges on these topics. Our partnership with NCAOC is critical because we need to engage judges to develop the training and learn about their courtroom practices. Philanthropy—Liz Star specifically—was the catalyst that set us on this path. She provided the connection to NCAOC and the financial resources that first made this program possible.

Mike Silver, NCAOC: The beauty of this partnership is evident in how much we have been able to accomplish. By combining resources, institutional knowledge, and expertise, we created the trauma-informed training for judges and are examining its impact at no cost to the state. NCAOC is interested in working with external partners on projects that will benefit court users, but since the vast majority of our agency budget goes to salaries, we would not have been able to support this work. NCAOC benefited immensely from the resources that Bolch—with support from the HopeStar Foundation—provided, including helping to create the training curriculum, the ACEs-Informed Benchcard for judges, and the other supports that have come out of this partnership. At the same time, NCAOC was able to help “green tape” this project and facilitate the Bolch team’s access to judges’ time and feedback to move the project forward. This would not have happened without the commitment of government, philanthropy, and research partners in this collaboration.

Juli Kim, OSP: Thanks to all of the collaborators, this partnership highlights the positive impact that state government, philanthropy, and research partners can have when they work together and use their collective expertise and resources. OSP is pleased to highlight this cross-sector collaboration and many others described in resources across the OSP website.



NORTH CAROLINA
JUDICIAL BRANCH

