

Debrief of Critical Incidents to Create Ongoing Quality Improvement

(This strategy is shared by programmatic leadership at Covenant House Texas)

Whether an incident involves agency staff or youth, a structured, trauma-sensitive follow-up process is initiated to ensure safety, healing, accountability, and program improvement. Even if an external factor, or person from outside of our agency, impacted on youth well-being, we debrief to consider how our agency could more effectively support our youth.

1. Immediate Response and Documentation

In alignment with trauma-sensitive principles, the initial response prioritizes emotional regulation and safety for everyone involved. Youth and staff are provided with immediate emotional support and offered space to process the event in a calm, non-threatening environment. The focus remains on restoring a sense of physical and mental safety before moving into any investigative or procedural steps.

As staff explore the incident, they gather statements with sensitivity, recognizing the potential for re-traumatization. Staff are expected to complete an incident report within 24 hours, ensuring the documentation is clear, objective, and non-judgmental. Reports are, when possible, to include the statements of those involved. Often, their viewpoints will be gathered later after their safety is reinforced (see below).

2. Debrief

Within 48 hours of the incident, a program leader meets separately with the affected youth and staff. These debrief sessions are approached with empathy, curiosity, and compassion. The focus is on emotional regulation, validating experiences, and creating a safe space for reflection. Conversations are non-punitive and strength-based, aimed at understanding the impact of the incident rather than assigning blame.

3. Safety and Support Planning

Based on the debrief, the mental health professional collaborates with youth and staff to create individualized, trauma-sensitive, short-term safety or support plans. These plans are rooted in the youth's voice and needs, designed to enhance stability, reduce triggers, and reinforce a sense of safety, connection, and control.

4. Team Review and Reflective Supervision

Teams explore contributing stressors and emotional regulation strategies used. The goal is to strengthen staff self-awareness and team cohesion moving from "What's wrong?" to "What happened?" and "What can we learn?"

5. Youth Voice and Empowerment

Youth are invited, when appropriate and safe, to provide feedback or participate in restorative conversations. Their voices are essential to rebuilding trust, repairing relationships, and shaping next steps. This process honors youth autonomy, promotes healing, and reinforces their role as active partners in their own care.

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6. Program Enhancements

When patterns emerge or critical incidents occur, leadership initiates program review. This process is trauma-sensitive and future-focused, and may include:

- Updating policies and protocols to ensure safety, dignity, and equity.
- Providing targeted staff training in trauma-sensitive care, de-escalation, and emotional regulation.
- Expanding youth leadership opportunities through peer mentorship or youth advisory council.
- Modifying environments to be more calming to reduce triggers and responsive to sensory needs.

7. Monitoring and Healing

Post-incident, both youth and staff receive ongoing support, which may include individual check-ins, facilitated conversations, and access to counseling or peer support services.

This approach transforms incidents from moments of crisis into opportunities for growth, healing, and systemic improvement anchored in compassion, safety, and youth empowerment.