



Trauma Informed Approach Works to Build Bridges and Increase Safety

Interview between Monty Woods, Park Operations Manager at Portland Metro and Hannah Buehler, BEF Watersheds

HANNAH: Can you give a brief overview of your role and work at Metro?

MONTY: I'm a park operations manager, I work with the operations team within parks and nature at Metro. I work with a team of park rangers and park workers, and we try to create welcoming places for people to connect to nature close to home.

HB: How do you and your team use trauma informed approaches in your day to day operations?

MW: Over the last six or seven years since I learned about trauma informed care, it has taken a central role within the operations at Metro. Trauma informed approaches come into play in a lot of different areas, whether you're talking about our recruitment materials, our interview process, staff interactions, or the way staff interact with the public and provide customer service. I think trauma

informed care plays a very important role in all those activities.

HB: Can you give a few examples of what that type of trauma informed communication looks like at those different levels?

MW: In terms of recruitment, we recently started providing copies of the questions that we're going to ask in an interview setting 24 hours in advance. It provides our interview subjects a much better opportunity to prepare themselves and understand what we're looking for. We've gotten great feedback that providing questions ahead of time lowered the anxiety of the interview process and gave people a better opportunity to demonstrate who they are. With staff interactions, we've embraced a peer to peer support process as we review or follow up on serious incidents that occur. When we interact with the public, we're

training staff to use a trauma informed approach to increase the value in those interactions and better understand people's experiences. This allows us to better anticipate the emotional response that may occur when we enter into those interactions. Hopefully, we can avoid retraumatization by making our intentions clear early in the interaction.

HB: What does park rules enforcement look like for your team when using trauma informed approaches, both with unhoused community members and other folks using parks and natural areas?

MW: For us it's about making sure that we're establishing trust early on in the communication. Having an opportunity to connect personally is really important. Typically, we've always introduced ourselves at the beginning of engagement, but with a trauma informed approach, we may



Monty Woods

Park Operations Manager at Portland Metro

Monty Woods is a Park Operations Manager for Metro Parks and Nature whose focus is protecting clean water, restoring fish and wildlife habitat and connecting people with nature close to home. Monty enjoys working with the operations team at Metro to provide safe and valuable opportunities for visitors to enjoy the incredible natural and historical resources the Portland-Metro region has to offer. With over 20 years of experience supporting operations and maintenance in a park setting, Monty has worked to improve existing park facilities, plan new access, and to improve staff training and development. When he's not managing popular park destinations, Monty enjoys trail running, good books and music, and spending time with family. He currently lives in Corbett, Oregon with his wife, two kids, and two dogs.

ask a few other questions to determine what that individual's past experience has been either with uniformed law enforcement staff or park workers or park professionals in general, again, just to avoid retraumatization and to be able to anticipate the emotional response. We may say 'have you worked with a Metro park ranger before?' Or 'is there anything that I can do to make this process easier for you?' Especially if it's not necessarily clear what factors are of concern for the individual. We want to empower individuals to have a better understanding of our work and intentions through transparency and creating a connection from the

Many land and water stewards have the complex job of managing and improving habitat in areas where people are sheltering outside. Our friends at Johnson Creek Watershed Council recently published a statement sharing their position on sheltering in riparian areas, which you can view on their [website](#).

beginning. This establishes trust. Then we move to getting a collaborative conversation going, that'll get our staff where they need to be and inform individuals as to what our rules are, so they can make the best decision to succeed in that interaction.

HB: How have trauma informed approaches shifted outcomes that you see from rules enforcement and engagement with community members?

MW: It has made a profound impact when you deploy this method of communication. You can see that people are very responsive and receptive to staff making an effort to make a connection. I think, once they see that demonstrated from our team, there is this immediate trust component that's established. They may still not quite be sure what we're after, or where this conversation is going, but they do notice that we're coming at it from an angle where we're concerned about them personally and that we want to make sure that the outcome that we get to is the best it can be for both them and us, and that we want to have a collaborative conversation to reach that outcome. I think that approach, as opposed to the one sided communication often used in law enforcement, it's produced a much better outcome. People are generally much more responsive to our requests if they realize that we're looking out for their best interests too.

HB: Why do you think trauma informed care training is important for people who steward lands and waters?

MW: I think a trauma informed approach is important for anybody that wants to make a human connection, especially in the limited amount of time that natural resource professionals may have. In each unique interaction, taking a trauma informed approach gives you the best possible chance to succeed and have a positive outcome despite whatever challenges you're working through. Also, we care for these places because we all value our natural resources and our natural environment. Taking a trauma informed approach connects our efforts as natural resource professionals with those of anybody else that is out in a natural area, for whatever reason. It allows us to find common ground, and then move forward with whatever work we have



Photo Credit: Hood Canal Salmon Enhancement Group

to do. I think from a personal level, it's profoundly important to have that connection piece and to demonstrate a willingness to collaborate to create a safe place for people to interact.

HB: What are some small shifts on the intrapersonal or interpersonal level that people can start to implement to shift towards more trauma informed engagement and rules enforcement?

MW: I think trauma informed care is a wonderful approach, but I think initially, one thing anybody can do is bring self awareness into any situation. Recognize that on a human level, you're there as a representative of an agency or a business and that people you'll be engaging with may be in crisis, and could be working through really traumatic experiences. First and foremost, and this is not a little step, just recognizing the humanity in others and the human role that we all play in helping people to work through these difficult circumstances is a great starting point. Being aware of body language and being self aware of how you're approaching the situation is also important. Think about who you would want to talk to when you're having a really bad day. Are you being that person in your role at that time? Are you putting them in a situation where they feel cornered? Are they comfortable?

Are you checking in to begin the conversation to make sure they're in a state where they can understand why you're there? Being completely transparent so you're not leaving people wondering about your motivations or why you've been brought into the conversation can go a long way.

HB: On the organizational level, you mentioned shifts that you are making to policies, practices and procedures around workplace wellness, like in the hiring process. Are there other things that you all are changing at the organizational level to promote more trauma informed engagement as well?

MW: Over the last couple years, I've worked with a consultant, Shilo George, to look through our operations manuals and our rule enforcement manual in an effort to integrate more trauma informed language. In terms of rule enforcement we want these shifts to avoid the kind of a law enforcement-centric behavior and language that's present in a lot of those manuals currently. Those manual updates are being prioritized for this offseason, along with some other updates that need to happen to support our operation. Our intent is to get more trauma informed language front and center in the main resources that we use to guide operations and enforcement.

HB: Is there anything else you would want to share with the community about trauma informed care?

MW: I'd say keep it up, just keep learning and growing. I think it's great to see that we have some resource groups going now for natural resource professionals and other opportunities for us to get together and exchange information. I look forward to growing with everybody in the region as we continue to embrace this approach to our work.

Are you interested in working together with other land and water stewards to workshop strategies for trauma informed engagement with unhoused neighbors?

The Intertwine Alliance and BEF have partnered to host monthly peer support sessions to provide a space for natural resource professionals to connect with one another and co-create solutions for trauma informed engagement with houseless individuals. Contact Hannah Buehler at hbuehler@b-e-f.org to sign up or learn more.



Photo Credit: Nisqually Land Trust