

REPORTERS CAN HONOR VICTIMS BY PRACTICING TRAUMA-INFORMED JOURNALISM

By Legacy Health Employees

As healthcare professionals, it is our mission to care compassionately for others in the face of traumatic moments. We put aside our personal worries and feelings so we can be completely present to support our patients.

But on July 22, 2023, we faced trauma in its most tragic form alongside our patients.

At Legacy Good Samaritan Medical Center, our colleague and friend, safety and security officer Bobby Smallwood, was shot and killed while another caregiver was injured on the same unit where we welcome babies into the world.

We appreciate and respect the essential role local newsrooms provide in keeping communities informed about current and important civic affairs. However, it is necessary to acknowledge that trauma often is at the center of how some of these stories are reported and written.

The Oregonian's detailed and graphic story on Jan. 7 about the shooting at Legacy Good Samaritan did not live up to the newspaper's mission to strengthen and empower local communities.

Instead, the story caused harm and trauma for many of us, in some cases erasing progress that has been made over the past seven months to begin healing from this tragedy.

We have experienced many emotions in response to the article — from anxiety to disgust to sadness and even anger. We have been left wondering about the journalistic values of newsroom leaders as they published Officer Smallwood's final words, including photographs showing his blood on the hospital floor and the names and faces of Legacy employees who worked courageously that day.

While we understand that traumatic events are often at the center of vital reporting, the publication of these graphic details and images came without the courtesy or respect of a phone call or email from The Oregonian before they were shared with the public.

We recognize that these details are part of public records obtained from the district attorney and are at The Oregonian's discretion to share. However, because you can publish these details, doesn't mean it's the responsible choice.

For us, The Oregonian's story felt insensitive, intrusive and exploitative. It needlessly dishonored Officer Smallwood and harmed our caregivers still grieving seven months later. In the days following the story's online publication on Jan. 7, some of us were left shaken, others unable to sleep. Then as we tried to move past the story, it was on the front page of the print edition four days later.

There's a more compassionate way to tell complex, difficult stories about trauma and violence — a way that respects the impact on the people most harmed by the events.

As [the paper has written](#), journalists should do everything within their power to minimize violence.

Experts and journalists at [Harvard University](#) and [Columbia University](#) say that trauma-informed journalism leads to better, more accurate stories while also protecting survivors from further harm.

Trauma-informed practices originated in healthcare settings and have begun to expand to other fields, including education and journalism. In journalism, trauma-informed practices require a different perspective than a typical news story.

"It's about forgetting all the rules that we usually abide by when we're interviewing school board officials and politicians and recognizing that when it comes to trauma, we need to be treating our interview subjects differently," former crime reporter Tamara Cherry told Harvard University's The Journalist's Resource. Cherry is the author of "[The Trauma Beat: A Case for Re-Thinking the Business of Bad News.](#)"

The Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma at Columbia University writes that reporting on trauma can "reflect, reinforce, and calm — or exacerbate — the grief and distress that ripples out from death and injury."

Research has shown that trauma can also have lasting impact on reporters who cover crime, war and natural disasters. Knowing the warning signs is essential to maintaining your well-being, too.

As healthcare professionals, we call on newsrooms in our communities to consider adopting trauma-informed reporting practices.

We also encourage newsrooms to continue to produce in-depth, meaningful reporting into the complex and linked issues that are leading to rising violence against frontline workers everywhere, particularly in healthcare. [As the paper has covered](#), workplace violence in healthcare is five to six times more prevalent than any other private workplace in America.

We encourage reporters to pursue these stories with empathy, dignity and respect for the people suffering the harm.

For journalists interested in learning more about trauma-informed practices, they have partners in the community, including Legacy, who are here to work with them and anyone else.

Slowing down to gain greater perspective and reconsider how newspapers cover violence is one small action The Oregonian can take to honor Officer Smallwood's memory and further its mission to strengthen and empower communities.

Legacy Health employees concerned about The Oregonian's Jan. 7 story provided input into this op-ed.

