

TRAINING REPORT

RESTORE PROJECT

PITTSBURGH, PA
23–26 MARCH 2026



Violence Prevention
Network USA



RESTORE



On 23-26 March 2026, Violence Prevention Network USA (VPN USA) delivered a four-day training as part of its RESTORE Project in Pittsburgh, bringing together professionals from across Southwestern Pennsylvania who encounter early concerns related to grievance, polarization, and pathways to harm. The training strengthened practical, non-punitive responses to radicalization to violence, especially in the “gray zone” where something feels off, but there is no clear system trigger.



“It requires a level of intentionality, of really meeting people in their wounds. Those radicalized individuals sound like they’re hurting deeply, and it’s tough to really feel for them if you can’t see their humanity.”

Kristopher Samuel, Trauma Response Coordinator,
Neighborhood Resilience Project

Making sense of pathways into harm

A core through-line was building a common way to talk about radicalization and violent extremism without collapsing everything into one label. Participants explored how people can move toward harmful ideologies through a mix of individual, social, and structural pressures, and how online environments can accelerate that movement. Rather than treating extremism as something distant or easily profiled, the training emphasized understanding vulnerability and context: moments of loss, exclusion, humiliation, trauma, or identity threat can interact with narratives that promise belonging, certainty, and status.



“It’s hard to figure out how to change people’s mindsets, if it’s a mindset that’s just been going on and on and on.”

Kevin Williams, Trauma Response Team Manager,
Neighborhood Resilience Project



Participants also mapped the distinction between pressures that push someone away from their current life and factors that pull them toward a group or worldview. This helped them move from “something feels off” to more specific questions like what changed recently, what need is being met, who is influencing them, and what supportive step could be taken right now.

Recognize early concerns without overreacting

Participants practiced distinguishing between ordinary life turbulence (especially in adolescence) and patterns that suggest increasing risk. The training emphasized that single behaviors rarely “prove” anything; what matters is clustering, escalation, and context. Using applied scenarios, participants looked for changes across four practical buckets—behavior, social relationships, content, and context—and considered how the same surface indicator could reflect depression, grief, trauma, or radicalization depending on what else is present.

A central takeaway was that early prevention work depends on strengthening protective factors, not only identifying risk. Participants explored protective factors at the individual level (coping, future orientation, tolerating uncertainty), relational level (stable prosocial connection), and community/system level (credible support structures). This lens helped shift the conversation from “how do we spot the extremist” to “what helps someone stay connected to prosocial life when they are vulnerable”.



“Something I really liked was the model of engaging someone in a way that goes beyond active listening. It’s about helping them see the choices they have, without telling them what to do, and supporting them to recognize alternatives they might not have seen.”

Rebecca Cataldi, Senior Director of Programs,
International Center for Religion & Diplomacy



Respond in ways that reduce harm

Participants practiced how to stay in a conversation when beliefs are difficult, heated, or harmful, without brushing it off and without turning it into a fight. The training shared a responsibility-oriented way of engaging that keeps empathy and accountability together by naming choices, using elicitive questions that help someone think things through, and offering options without telling them what to do. The goal of the practice was to build confidence in having these conversations in real life, staying steady and respectful while still getting clearer about what someone believes and where things might be headed.

“What I took from this training is the need to better prepare my staff by connecting them with resources like VPN USA and trainings so they’re more aware and more equipped to handle situations like this. And I also focus a lot on connecting with families and parents, because we can’t do this work by ourselves.”

Danielle King, Director of Safe Passage,
Operation Better Block



Change is rarely linear

The training reinforced that leaving harmful ideologies is often slow and uneven. Participants explored stages of change to help calibrate expectations and meet people where they are—whether someone is dismissive, ambivalent, experimenting with new choices, or trying to maintain distance from a harmful group. This helped participants reflect on the boundaries of their own roles: what is possible in a brief interaction versus sustained engagement, and when to refer.

Nobody does this alone

Participants consistently connected skill-building to the realities of safety and institutional constraints. The training foregrounded personal safety as both emotional and physical: staying steady under stress, noticing fear responses, and planning for boundaries that protect practitioners and keeping conversations possible. Participants also strengthened awareness of referral options and the role of a coordinated ecosystem so early concerns can be held by the right supports instead of bouncing between systems or defaulting to punitive responses.



“If the young people I work with don’t know what to do and they’re coming to me, I’m a trusted resource, but I didn’t always know what to do. This training helped me understand where I can point them and what resources I can share with them.”

Christina Murzynski, Senior Research Associate, UPMC
Western Psychiatric Hospital



Why this matters

This training strengthened the region's ability to respond earlier—before harm escalates—by giving frontline professionals shared language, calibrated risk sense-making, and practical engagement tools. Just as importantly, it supported relationship-building across sectors in Southwestern Pennsylvania, reinforcing that effective prevention depends on coordination: knowing who to consult, how to refer safely, and how to hold complex situations with both care and accountability.

Participants described applying the training in three practical ways: (1) making sense of early concerns—especially online exposure and escalations in rhetoric—without jumping straight to crisis framing; (2) responding with more confidence in conversation, documentation, and calibrated referral; and (3) strengthening cross-sector connections so prevention does not sit with any single person or agency.

Contact Information

For more information about the RESTORE training program please contact us at:
contact@violence-prevention-network.org.

The [**RESTORE Helpline**](#) is a free and confidential support service for individuals showing early signs of violent extremist behavior, and for families or professionals concerned about someone at risk. The helpline offers anonymous guidance, practical strategies, and connections to trained intervention specialists:

Phone: 412-756-3643

Email: help@restore-project.org

