




# Trauma Survivors Network: history and evolution of a program empowering survivors and families impacted by traumatic injury

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## SUMMARY

The Trauma Survivors Network (TSN), a program of the American Trauma Society (ATS), has a unique history spanning decades with a vision to continue expanding and strengthening services to support survivors and families impacted by traumatic injury. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the ATS has adapted TSN services to provide both virtual and in-person services for trauma survivors, increasing equity and inclusion for many survivors to access TSN services for the first time. The recent policy changes in the American College of Surgeons Committee on Trauma *New Standards for Care of the Injured Patient* provide an impetus for the TSN to grow and expand services in support of a diverse group of trauma survivors and their loved ones. This paper highlights the collateral impact of traumatic injury, the history and ongoing growth of the TSN and its services to date, the challenges encountered in establishing and maintaining the TSN program, and the equity and inclusion that the TSN offers internationally to support a diverse range of survivors with various forms of trauma and polytrauma.

## INTRODUCTION

The Trauma Survivors Network (TSN),<sup>1</sup> a program of the American Trauma Society (ATS),<sup>2</sup> has a unique history, beginning within one trauma center and gradually evolving into an international network of centers focused on building and maintaining resources to empower trauma survivors and their loved ones in navigating their own recovery journeys. With recent policy changes in the American College of Surgeons Committee on Trauma (ACS COT) *New Standards for Care of the Injured Patient*,<sup>3</sup> the ATS and TSN continue to expand TSN services with psychosocial supports for a large population of trauma survivors and their loved ones.<sup>4</sup> This paper highlights the collateral impact of traumatic injury, the history and evolution of the TSN program, its ongoing growth and services to date, the challenges and supports to establishing and maintaining the TSN program, and the equity and inclusion that the TSN offers internationally to support a diverse range of survivors with trauma and polytrauma.

## IMPACT OF TRAUMATIC INJURY

Survivors of injury and their loved ones frequently experience significant mental and psychological

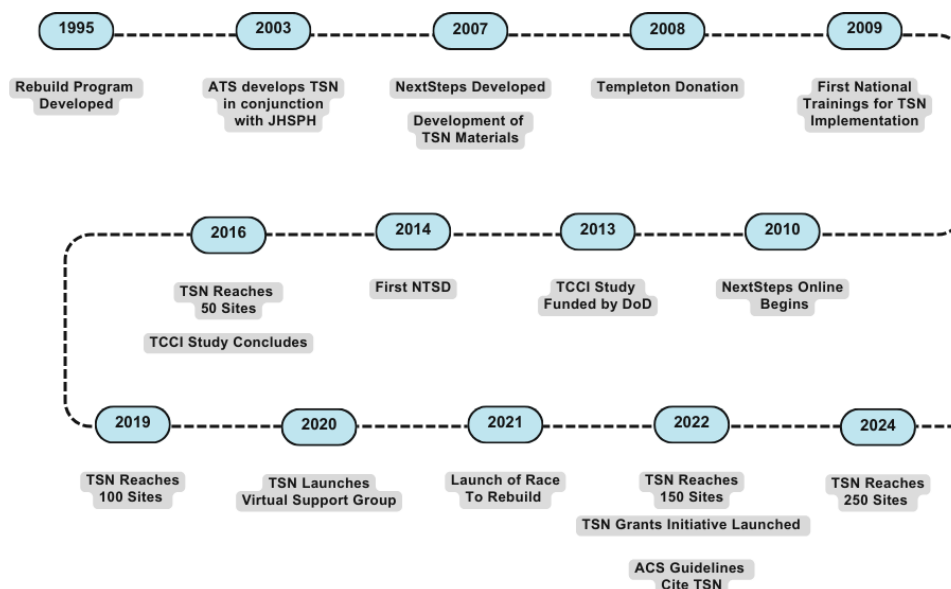
challenges during and after the episode of injury and acute care.<sup>5 6</sup> Survivors are at risk for an increased prevalence of certain mental health concerns, including depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), resulting in worsened patient outcomes following their acute treatment<sup>6 7</sup> and decreased long-term quality of life.<sup>8–10</sup>

Additionally, the significant cost of medical treatment for survivors<sup>11 12</sup> compounds the recovery process for survivors and their families, with potentially severe and unexpected consequences.

## HISTORY AND TIMELINE OF TSN PROGRAM

The TSN<sup>1</sup> was developed as a program of the ATS<sup>2</sup> from an existing trauma support program called 'Rebuild,' (figure 1) which was started by a trauma social worker at Inova Fairfax Hospital (IFH) in 1995.<sup>2 13–16</sup> The Rebuild program began by offering a bi-monthly peer support group for trauma survivors after hospital discharge to address feelings of isolation and increase positive coping throughout recovery.<sup>14 16</sup> Trauma medical professionals joining the groups offered education and new perspectives on treatment and recovery. Both the trauma professionals and trauma survivors experienced mutual benefits as they connected within the safe environment of a support group to exchange their stories and perspectives. Soon, peer visitation was launched from these support groups to offer encouragement to newly injured trauma patients within the trauma center.<sup>14 16</sup> In 2000, the Rebuild program began securing grant funding to support full-time staffing to manage the program.

By 2003, with the successful growth of the Rebuild program, increasing research highlighting the importance of psychosocial support services for survivors, and clear alignment with the ATS mission, the ATS engaged a team of multidisciplinary researchers, trauma professionals, and trauma survivors to expand Rebuild into a comprehensive national hospital program.<sup>13 15</sup> Patients and families participated in focus groups to provide both feedback and direction in developing the new TSN program.<sup>15</sup> Through ongoing research and collaboration between IFH, ATS, and Johns Hopkins School of Public Health (JHSPH), the self-management group for trauma survivors, later known as NextSteps, was developed.<sup>17 18</sup> In 2007, JHSPH was awarded a national Department of Defense (DoD) grant to create the Major Extremity Trauma



**Figure 1** Trauma Survivors Network (TSN) history timeline—1995–2024. ACS, American College of Surgeons; ATS, American Trauma Society; DoD, Department of Defense; JHSPH, Johns Hopkins School of Public Health; NTSD, National Trauma Survivors Day; TCCI, Trauma Collaborative Care Intervention.



**Figure 2** Trauma Survivors Network survivor celebration at Inova Fairfax Hospital, Falls Church, Virginia, USA, May 2019. ATS, American Trauma Society.

Research Consortium (METRC), which propelled ongoing research and development of the TSN program.<sup>18–23</sup>

The TSN was officially launched at the ATS Annual Meeting in 2008 as a program of the ATS with the tagline ‘Survive. Connect. Rebuild.’ Program materials were developed for the TSN in collaboration with IFH. The ATS convened a TSN Committee for oversight, and funding for this effort was generously supplied through a grant from the Templeton Foundation.<sup>2 13</sup>

The TSN Committee continues as an integral part of the contemporary ATS structure. Through its multidisciplinary membership, including survivors and their families, it advises the ATS on TSN programming and implementation.

## EVOLUTION OF TSN PROGRAM GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT

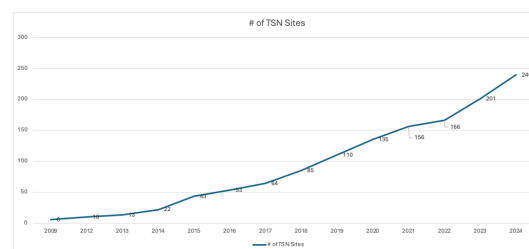
The TSN program was initially launched at two trauma centers: IFH and the University of Maryland Medical Center (UMMC) R Adams Cowley Shock Trauma Center. In 2009, national

training for TSN program implementation began as the program was expanded to additional trauma centers. By 2010, the ATS hired the original IFH Rebuild coordinator/trauma social worker to become the first National TSN Coordinator, continuing the expansion of program services across new sites. These TSN services included peer visitation, peer support groups, a patient and family handbook, and NextSteps self-management groups.<sup>1 2 15</sup>

In 2013, the METRC Coordinator Center at JHSPH incorporated a federal grant from the DoD to launch the Trauma Collaborative Care Intervention (TCCI), advancing TSN at six sites with at least one full-time TSN Coordinator at each site. To support this research collaboration, the ATS hired a new National TSN Coordinator with previous TSN implementation experience at UMMC. Under the TCCI, expanded TSN services included a family class, recovery assessment, recovery coaching, and a NextSteps class available both in person and online.<sup>13 18–23</sup>

In 2014, the ATS and TSN launched their first National Trauma Survivors Day (NTSD) celebration during Trauma Awareness Month in May, (figure 2) with both in-person and online events.<sup>24</sup> By 2016, as the TCCI study concluded, over 50 TSN programs continued to launch and expand across trauma centers

## TSN GROWTH OVER TIME



**Figure 3** Trauma Survivors Network (TSN) growth over time—2009–July 2024.

in the USA, with each program seeking independent funding (figure 3).

Over the ensuing years, the TSN program continued to expand trauma support services to pediatric and rehabilitation hospitals in the USA and Australia, supporting pediatric trauma survivors, their families, as well as children of adult survivors.<sup>25</sup> By 2018, the ACS COT recognized the ATS position statement on comprehensive trauma survivor support and considered incorporating more language promoting trauma survivor support in new policy guidelines. In 2018, the ATS celebrated its 50-year anniversary<sup>13</sup> and the TSN program celebrated 92 TSN programs internationally. In 2020, to better support trauma survivors and their loved ones during the COVID-19 pandemic, the ATS adapted to provide both virtual and in-person TSN services for trauma survivors, increasing equity and inclusion for many survivors to access TSN services for the first time (Fig 5). The following year, the ATS and TSN launched their first Race to Rebuild event (Fig 6), a virtual walk/run/cycle/roll race including trauma survivors, their loved ones, and trauma professionals to support survivors in their recovery process, during Trauma Awareness Month.<sup>24</sup>

### BARRIERS TO TSN IMPLEMENTATION

In 2008, the ATS began annual national TSN program implementation trainings for interdisciplinary trauma professionals from trauma centers across the USA. At that time, only three trauma centers included full-time TSN staffing in their budgets. Other hospitals, striving to expand their TSN programs, experienced 'overextended staff, reliance on volunteers, and start-up costs' as barriers to implementation.<sup>15</sup> TSN programs struggled with the 'significant start-up time and the efforts of committed champions' needed.<sup>15</sup> Research into the challenges and barriers that interdisciplinary trauma professionals face in building and implementing a new TSN program revealed consistent barriers. Without an institutional mandate to conduct activities, TSN programs lacked financial support and received little commitment by the institutions' leadership.<sup>26 27</sup> Researchers concluded that hospitals needed a strong business case to present to leadership, as well as financial resources to dedicate staff to focus on TSN program implementation.<sup>26</sup> Trauma centers, confronted with numerous concurrent initiatives, were not able to prioritize TSN program implementation and enable the TSN Coordinator to focus on TSN development above other duties. The lack of external policy mandating psychosocial support program services for trauma survivors was cited as the primary barrier to programmatic growth.<sup>27</sup>

### FACILITATORS IN TSN IMPLEMENTATION

Despite known barriers to implementation of services,<sup>15 26 27</sup> the TSN continued to grow.<sup>4</sup> In 2022, the ACS COT released the *New Standards for Care of the Injured Patient*<sup>3</sup> and included specific language highlighting the ATS and TSN,<sup>1 2</sup> requiring all level 1 and 2 trauma centers to incorporate peer support services as a qualification for ACS trauma center verification. This change stimulated significant interest in TSN among trauma centers and correlated with the rapid growth of TSN centers nationally. In response, the ATS has increased its TSN-focused staffing to provide support for TSN Coordinators implementing in-person and virtual services.

By July 2024, the TSN included 240 programs at military and civilian hospitals for adult and pediatric trauma patients across the USA and Australia (figure 4). TSN services also continue to expand as TSN programs engage in trauma screening for acute stress disorder and PTSD, and provide psychoeducation along

### Current TSN Site Details – July 2024

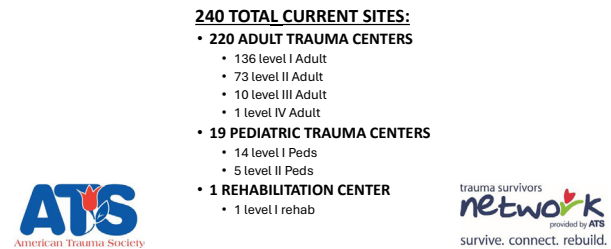


Figure 4 Trauma Survivors Network (TSN) site details—July 2024.

with mental health resources.<sup>4 28 29</sup> TSN sites now include adult and pediatric trauma centers, as well as rehabilitation centers.<sup>25</sup>

### INCREASING EQUITY AND INCLUSION FOR TRAUMA SURVIVORS

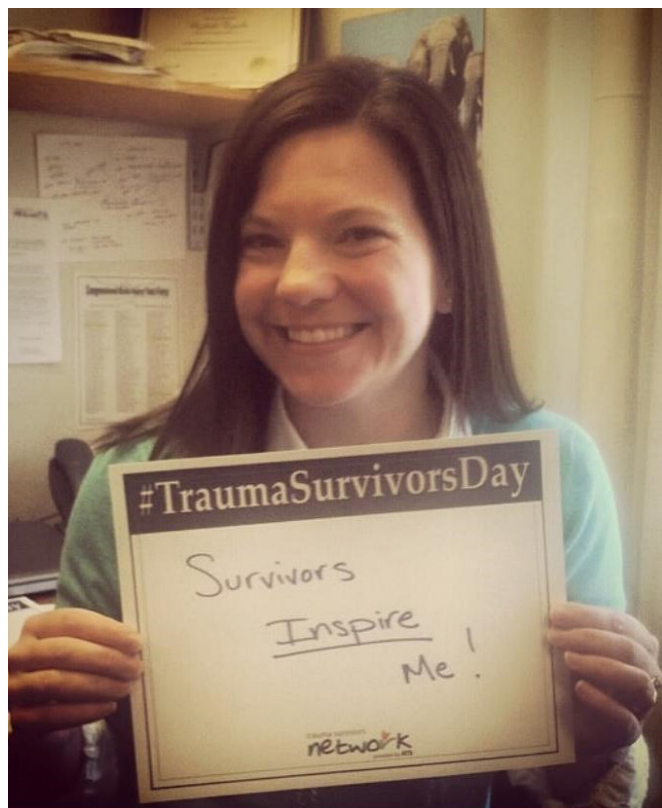
The ATS and TSN program recognize and value the diverse backgrounds, intersectional identities, and different types of injuries of trauma survivors. TSN services are implemented in a variety of ways to ensure equity for survivors, increasing inclusion and access. While some leading national programs focus their resources on survivors of one specific injury type, the TSN is uniquely designed to include survivors whose injuries and recovery needs may represent several different injury types and support needs throughout their healing process. TSN focuses on recruiting and training TSN peers from a diverse range of survivors who have experienced trauma through various mechanisms of injury, injury types, and cultural backgrounds. The TSN provides inclusive services for survivors of orthopedic injuries, including limb salvage, amputation, traumatic brain injury, spinal cord injury, violence-related injuries, and other traumatic injuries.<sup>1 2 30 31</sup>

Before transitioning to virtual peer visitation and virtual support groups, local in-person TSN support groups could only be accessed by survivors after discharge if their location, transportation, and financial situation allowed, which limited access for many survivors. During the COVID-19 pandemic, nearly all in-person TSN services were paused. In Spring 2020, the ATS and TSN launched virtual peer support groups nationally for trauma survivors while training TSN Coordinators on how to implement TSN services through a virtual platform. Since then, virtual TSN groups have continued to be offered twice a month, with engagement from survivors across the USA and Australia. For many survivors, these virtual TSN groups provide more equity and access to peer support and psychoeducation that were previously inaccessible. Currently, TSN support groups are available in both in-person and virtual formats, offering increased access for survivors locally and internationally, with added support and accommodations.<sup>1 2 30 31</sup>

### CONCLUSION

Trauma survivors and their loved ones experience the physical consequences of their injuries and must also contend with other serious, and sometimes debilitating, mental health challenges and psychosocial needs as part of their recovery.<sup>5-7 9</sup> Beginning with a single trauma support group at one hospital, which laid the foundation for a unique approach





**Figure 5** First National Trauma Survivors Day—online event—May 2014.

to recovery and healing,<sup>14 16</sup> the TSN has grown into an international network of collaborating centers working together to support survivors and their loved ones.<sup>4 13</sup> An integral part of the ATS, the TSN provides trauma centers with a unique



**Figure 6** First Race to Rebuild, Trauma Survivors Network at Riverside Community Hospital, Riverside, California, USA—May 2021.

framework, as well as ongoing trainings, collaboration, and resources that complement the acute care activities of trauma care and extend the reach of trauma professionals beyond the walls of the hospital to support survivors' long-term healing journeys.

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