

Founder leaves pioneering St. Louis ‘bullet’ clinic to focus on tornado recovery

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Dr. LJ Punch likens the 23-mile path of the May 16 tornado to the trajectory of a bullet. But instead of leaving behind layers of trauma in one person, it hit thousands.

In the tornado’s aftermath, Punch, a trauma surgeon known for founding the pioneering Bullet Related Injury Clinic (BRIC) to help families cope with gun violence, quickly set up respite services in Fountain Park amid the hardest hit and poorest neighborhoods in the city.

“I felt really, really, really compelled to do the work of community health that I’ve done year after year when there’s crisis after crisis,” Punch said.

Residents could relax in zero-gravity chairs as instrumental music played and aromatherapy filled the air. Staff with the BRIC provided counseling, acupuncture, and art activities for children along with free food, health supplements, hygiene items, and charging stations.

The work was so impactful, Punch said, that he has resigned as medical director of the BRIC and formed a new organization with plans to continue providing the services.

The new group, dubbed **314Oasis**, also provides hot lunches five days a week and dinners three times a week in the parking lot of Centennial Church at 4950 Fountain Ave., plus hot lunches in other north city neighborhoods on the weekend.

Punch has, over the years, responded to opioid overdoses with NARCAN supplies, to gun injuries with tourniquet lessons, and to the COVID-19 pandemic with masks. But the tornado “just really showed me something I’ve quite honestly never seen before,” he said.

How Punch moved on

Punch’s outreach efforts date back to 2018, when his work as a surgeon inspired him to create *Stop the Bleed*, an initiative to teach people how to respond to a traumatic injury. That led to the opening of **The T**, a walk-in health education space on Delmar Boulevard that also provides overdose prevention classes and outreach.

In 2020, Punch opened the **Bullet Related Injury Clinic (BRIC)** inside the Delmar DivINe community center to help those discharged from the hospital after a bullet injury. BRIC provides bullet removal, wound care, pain management, and support for emotional stress, sleep difficulties, nutrition, hygiene, and spiritual guidance. Funded through government and charitable grants, services are free and open to anyone who has been shot or threatened by a gun, as well as their families.

Together, The T and the BRIC—known collectively as **Power4STL**—have served thousands: BRIC offering nearly 5,000 visits for 900 patients in its first four years, and The T logging about 40,000 visits between 2020 and 2024.

Punch began transitioning from executive director of Power4STL to medical director at the beginning of this year, wanting to focus on his clinical and academic work teaching others about responding to trauma.

Jamila Owens-Todd, BRIC's director of clinical education, had already taken over as executive director by the time Punch resigned in August.

"Punch looked at me and the leadership team and said, 'This is my new mission,'" Owens-Todd said. "He's a visionary."

Despite the loss of its founder and \$1 million in federal violence-prevention funding this year, Owens-Todd said BRIC will continue providing the same services, and demand is increasing among struggling families. Last weekend, the clinic hosted its second annual two-day institute with 55 practitioners registered from across the country to learn about its model.

Owens-Todd is also leading an effort to build partnerships among health providers and nonprofits, including a monthly event beginning Jan. 24 at the BRIC offering free health and social services.

'This wound in north city must be cared for'

At 314Oasis, Punch said he is relying on a network of faith-based organizations for meals and volunteers, as well as a short-term contract with the city's new **St. Louis Recovery Office**, which leads recovery efforts after disasters.

314Oasis is not a nonprofit, but the St. Louis health equity charity **Build Missouri Health** has offered to serve as fiscal sponsor so Oasis can receive grants and donations.

The **St. Louis Integrated Health Network (IHN)** donated an ambulance-style vehicle—now called **FLO (Food and Love Outreach) on the Go**—which Punch is using to bring food and other essentials to neighborhoods across north St. Louis.

When temperatures recently dropped below freezing, 314Oasis set up a warming space in a mobile storage unit in the church parking lot, provided rides to overnight shelters, and distributed sleeping bags and hand warmers to those without utilities or living in damaged homes.

Punch said it's important to help people heal from the "collective trauma" caused by the tornado. Residents are surrounded by destroyed trees and demolished homes, which creates constant feelings of unsafety. Many flinch at the sound of rain or thunder.

"We need resources that are going to address that day-to-day toll," he said.

Without a consistent place to rest and feel safe, Punch explained, weariness can manifest as mental health challenges, substance use, violent behavior, or self-harm.

Punch said he is using what he has learned from treating bullet wounds to guide his approach to climate-related trauma at the community level.

"You might have a wound in your arm, but if that wound isn't cared for it can make your entire body sick," he said. "And that's what I'm really worried about right now for St. Louis—that this wound in north city must be cared for, or else the entire region will suffer."