

FREEDOM NETWORK USA

Trafficking Survivor's Access to Medical Care Shouldn't Be Restricted by Religious Beliefs

Jean Bruggeman, Executive Director, Freedom Network USA

Trafficking victims endure some of the most horrific conditions imaginable. Stripped of their freedom, they are often forced to live in the worst circumstances and routinely subjected to abuse. Once they escape their trafficking situation, we must ensure that they can access all the tools they need to rebuild their lives, including a full range of medical care to address the physical and sexual abuse that they may have suffered.

This past fall, the federal government struck a blow to survivors' empowerment when it awarded the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) one of four grants to provide services to foreign national trafficking victims in the United States. The terms of the grant require USCCB to provide comprehensive social, medical and legal services - either directly or through referrals - to trafficking victims throughout ten states and the District of Columbia. However, based solely on their religious beliefs, USCCB has historically refused to pay for - or even make referrals for - contraceptive and abortion services.

The Freedom Network USA is the largest network of service providers working with trafficking victims in the country. Day in and day out, we see survivors living with complex needs related to the trauma and abuse of trafficking. It is foundational to our work that we are able to provide our clients with a non-judgmental environment centered on rebuilding their lives, and not enforcing a religious ideology. Especially for survivors in emergency situations, having just escaped from a trafficking situation, we must be able to meet any and all of their needs without question, and without shame. Instead, USCCB's practices leave our hands tied, and prioritize ideology over service.

Awarding this contract to a group unwilling to provide the full range of critical services is alarming. We know that trafficking victims are in need of medical care that is provided without question and without delay. After all that they have endured, trafficking victims should not be abandoned by their case manager and forced to find care at distant locations. In fact, many would be unable to find free health care services. Others may be too fearful or ashamed to explain their needs. Instead, survivors will continue to suffer from untreated and potentially life threatening conditions.

Trafficking survivors also should not be asked to justify their need for comprehensive reproductive health care. USCCB's grant is, by design, only for foreign national trafficking victims who are ineligible for most indigent health care services. It was developed by Congress to address these gaps in the social safety net and ensure comprehensive care while trafficking victims work to achieve legal immigration status. It is inexcusable to deny any amount of care to trafficking victims who have already suffered so much.

Denying trafficking survivors access to care they seek also has ramifications for their long-term recovery. Trafficking victims have had their hand forced at every turn, and had their liberties taken away one by one. Traffickers cut off their victims' ability to communicate with family and

friends, attend the church of their choice, keep the income from their labors, use their own name and live where they choose. Truly escaping from that situation and rebuilding their autonomy involves understanding that they are the ones who control over their lives, decisions, and bodies. As service providers it is our duty to facilitate that process, not curtail their choices based on religious beliefs.

For all of these reasons, the Freedom Network USA applauds the ACLU's recent Freedom of Information Act lawsuit to demand answers from the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services about this grant award. We cannot allow federally-funded service providers to be the latest in a long line of people who control the choices and bodies of trafficking victims.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Slav Braggeman". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal flourish at the end.