



Freedom Network USA

Supporting Human Trafficking Survivors During the Coronavirus Pandemic: Challenges and Solutions

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Human trafficking is, by definition, a financial crime. Survivors are unlikely to exit the trafficking situation with any financial resources, but are likely to have debt. They may also have experienced interrupted education, little documented employment history, little or negative credit history, and criminal records as a result of their victimization. Survivors often work at the margins, off the books, in the gig economy, or in low wage industries. These leave many survivors in a precarious situation in the best economy, and at higher risk currently.

Freedom Network USA's members report critical and ongoing challenges that the coronavirus pandemic is presenting in their work, and are also developing solutions that can help mitigate the impact on survivors. FNUSA is sharing these reflections with our partners to assist in their response. This information is not based on a formal study or investigation, but rather from real time reports.

Housing

Challenges: One of the most significant challenges for social service providers both before and during the coronavirus pandemic is housing. FNUSA members report unique challenges on top of the existing barriers to safe and affordable housing for survivors.

1. Reduced capacity. Shelters and housing programs across the country are not accepting new clients, or are radically reducing intake.
2. Housing with restrictions. Many housing programs are restricting the independence of residents to prevent the spread of the virus. They restrict client access to communal spaces or their ability to leave the property. This can be triggering for clients; as restricted movement is a common form of control used by human traffickers. Service providers who run housing programs are struggling to abide by public health guidelines, be trauma-informed in regards to choice and movement, and protect the safety and health of those who are worried about outside exposure from people coming in and out of the shelter. Additionally, staff are finding it difficult to advocate for extra protection for immunocompromised clients.
3. Maintaining independence is a challenge for survivors who have lost their income and have limited or no savings. Despite moratoriums on evictions in many jurisdictions, some landlords are threatening clients with evictions. Survivors do not have access to clear, local know your rights information, and support in negotiating with landlords or responding to eviction proceedings.

Potential Solutions: Providers are working to respond to these challenges in many ways.

1. Hotels. Due to shelter challenges, many programs are turning to hotels as short-term housing solutions. However, due to a reduction in staff because of the drop in

demand for hotel rooms, many hotels have reduced capacity. Hotels may offer limited access to cooking facilities, requiring providers to identify support for cooked meals. Hotels are also challenging for families providing limited privacy and space.

2. Expanded services for previously independent clients. Providers report an increase in 'graduated' clients returning for assistance to address challenges with landlords, loss of income, and other new challenges. Providers are working to respond to these expanded needs, but need increased funding to meet these increased needs.

Food Security

Challenges: Clients report significant challenges related to food security. Many clients are afraid to go out to get food. Some are in short-term or emergency housing programs that are not allowing residents to leave and return, which makes it impossible for them to visit a grocery store. Others do not have the funds to purchase food, due to loss of income and limited or no savings.

Potential Solutions: Program staff are working to find ways to get food to clients, but it is challenging and must be individualized depending on the client needs.

1. Delivery. Program staff are using grocery delivery services like Instacart and Whole Foods/Amazon delivery in regions where it is available, but this option is not financially sustainable and may have long wait times.
2. Food Banks. While advocates are utilizing food banks and other temporary food suppliers like school districts, some clients have food allergies that are not being met. Many localities have developed resources that map out food banks and drives, but some clients may not have access to technology to use those tools.

Safety

Challenges: Protecting the safety of survivors is always a challenging task, which must be done on a very individualized basis, and must be routinely revised and updated to meet the changing circumstances of each person. The current situation has created new challenges.

1. Remote safety planning. Members report it is difficult to do safety planning remotely. As been reported by our partners in the domestic violence field, some survivors are unsafe because they reside with their abusers. It is almost impossible to address the safety concerns of clients who are within earshot of their perpetrator.
2. Hate crimes. Additionally, Asian survivors are reporting acts of discrimination and hate crimes because of the origination of the virus. Survivors are being harassed by their employers and by strangers on the street. Some are afraid to leave their house for any reason because of their experience. This type of harassment, abuse, and targeting builds upon the community fears that have been building due to anti-immigrant sentiment generally, making survivors more likely to experience harm and less likely to seek out services and protection.

Potential Solutions:

1. Service providers continue to respond to clients, as quickly as possible, to provide safety planning support at the best time for each individual. This is challenging with reduced schedules and remote work arrangements, but providers are providing the most effective support they can.

2. Messages from government and community leaders expressing support for Asian community members is critical to counter the bias that is being expressed.

Transportation

Challenges: Public transportation systems are stretched thin. In some regions, these systems are partially or fully shut down. In areas that still operational, capacity is reduced with longer wait times between trains or buses. Members also report clients fear taking public transit because they are unable to practice social distancing. Additionally, social distancing makes it difficult or impossible to carpool. These restrictions leave survivors with limited access to transportation for essential trips like getting to work, grocery shopping, or trips to a pharmacy or doctor.

Potential Solutions: Members are providing funding and support for survivors to use taxi and ride sharing services, but some report delays. These services are also more expensive than public transportation, straining the resources of service providers.

Public Benefits

Challenges: Members are having difficulty accessing public benefits for some clients. In addition to general issues around eligibility, most benefits granting offices are closed. Clients and service providers may not be able to get someone on the phone to answer questions or complete applications. Some immigrant survivors are ineligible for benefits. Providers in some states have specialized programs for immigrant survivors of human trafficking, however survivors may experience gaps in services when they are transferred from these specialized programs into traditional benefit programs (ie: Illinois).

1. **Unemployment.** Survivors who have lost their jobs or had reductions in hours or pay are experiencing long wait times to apply for and receive unemployment benefits. Some may not be eligible or may not understand eligibility due to language barriers. New changes in unemployment have been implemented unevenly in the states, creating confusion and extended waits. Immigrant survivors may fear to apply for unemployment, even if they are eligible, due to the recent changes in the 'Public Charge' rule, even if the rule does not apply to them (as is the case for those with T Visas).
2. **Food Stamps.** Even if clients have freedom of movement and access to transportation, some are experiencing delays in food stamp benefits because of office closures or recent changes to eligibility (ie: restrictions for single individuals). Immigrant survivors may fear to apply for food stamps, even if they are eligible, due to the recent changes in the 'Public Charge' rule, even if the rule does not apply to them (as is the case for those with T Visas).
3. **Cash Assistance.** Clients are suffering because of gaps in access to cash assistance due to office closures and delayed approvals. Undocumented clients still face long-standing issues with ineligibility. Specifically, cash assistance has been an issue for immigrant clients who have been enrolled in the Trafficking Victims Assistance Program (TVAP) funded by HHS OTIP, but exited the program when they either achieved self-sufficiency or reached the maximum benefits under the program. These clients may have lost their jobs, or otherwise have lost income and independence due to the pandemic. These clients in particular have few places to access cash assistance or other benefits to meet basic needs.

Potential Solutions: Members are assisting clients in completing online applications and in contacting benefits offices. These additional tasks are straining the capacity of service provider staff, however. Staff are also providing additional funding, where able, to survivors to meet their immediate needs for food, transportation, housing, and medical and mental health care while working to connect eligible clients to public benefits.

Population-Specific Issues

1. **Immigration Remedies.** Despite travel restrictions, stay at home orders, and business closures, some immigration enforcement and adjudications continue. Immigration courts, immigrant detention centers and USCIS Service Centers and offices are changing their operational status almost daily, and are all different. Immigration advocates struggle to understand the status of relevant offices and balance the safety needs of themselves, their families, and the clients. Survivors are also facing competing needs for expeditious processing of their applications and cases with concerns for their health.
 - a. **Detained survivors.** Immigrant survivors remain detained in immigration detention centers that lacked adequate medical care before the pandemic and are now reporting rapid spread of coronavirus. Many have halted visitation with attorneys and family members, leaving immigrant survivors lonely and lacking adequate medical care without any ability to protect themselves. This also presents challenges to their representatives who are unable to have adequate, confidential communication with their clients.
 - b. **Non-detained survivors.** USCIS Offices and Service Centers are reporting interruptions in processing due to coronavirus infections among their staff. Most offices are closed for in-person services including interviews, fingerprinting, and other required processing. Immigration Courts are also individually changing their schedules. When courts are open, advocates report insufficient safety protocols for immigrants and representatives. Survivors and their representatives are, therefore, forced to put their health at risk in order to pursue their immigration remedies.
2. **Youth Specific Challenges.** With the closure of schools, providers report difficulty finding safe places to meet youth clients in crisis. Many youth clients live with, or close to, their abusers, so safe havens outside the home are critical to provide services. It is particularly difficult to coordinate services for youth in foster care as providers report problems reaching staff at foster care placements and agencies. Undocumented immigrant youth are especially vulnerable if their parent/sponsor becomes abusive, and without interactions with schools and other trusted adults providers anticipate increased abuse and exploitation of these young people.

Investigations, Prosecutions and Law Enforcement Partnerships

Members report that most investigations and prosecutions are temporarily on hold given the crisis. Law enforcement partners are being reassigned or working remotely which has reduced capacity for investigations. Some clients who were scheduled to testify or attend sentencing hearings are having difficulty with the delay in justice due to court closures and delays. Survivors have spent months or sometimes years emotionally preparing for these encounters with their perpetrators. The delay can be triggering for many, increasing the

need for comprehensive social and mental health support for survivors, including survivors who had stopped receiving services. Providers are responding with services where allowed by funders, but these services were generally not projected or included in program designs.

Recommendations to Funders

1. **Immediately provide supplemental funds for current grantees.** Supplemental funding will allow providers to increase services to clients at this critical moment. Ideally, supplemental funding can be provided to all grantees in good standing who submit a simple request for a budget modification and request to expand the scope of their services that describes the increase in demand. This can address both the increased needs of current clients, and increases in new or returning clients.
2. **Invite more non-competitive continuation award applications.** Rather than requiring grantees who are at the end of their grant to complete a full, competitive proposal, invite them to submit a more streamlined request. This allows them to spend less time on the administrative tasks related to preparing a proposal and also allows them to confidently plan (financially and staffing) for continuous services for clients. The uncertainty of the grant process, and delay in receipt of funds that are inherent in the competitive grant process undermine the ability of providers to support their staff and clients in this time of uncertainty.
3. **Remove or revise restrictions on funding.** Restrictions in the service provision length, maximum amount of services, types of services, client qualifications, and service area, for example, should be removed or relaxed wherever legally permissible. If survivors already have a relationship with a provider, that provider should continue providing services or reestablish services for as long as the client is in need. It is difficult or impossible to refer clients to new providers at this time, and the delay can have catastrophic consequences.
4. **Remind grantees of all allowable uses for funds.** Grantees may have proposed a specific approach to service provision (partnership with a shelter, for example) which is no longer working well. Funders should remind grantees of all allowable service options and allow maximum flexibility in revising strategies for service provision within those allowable uses.
5. **Seek exemption from match requirements.** Many grants, especially federal grants, require providers to provide matching funds. Many providers rely on volunteers as a significant source of in-kind match. The coronavirus, and related restrictions, have made it impossible for most nonprofits to continue to work with volunteers safely. Fundraising has also been upended, as nonprofits must cancel fundraising events and programs. At this time organizations need to focus on redesigning their programs to meet these new challenges, therefore, they should be excused from also redesigning their volunteer and fundraising efforts so that all of their resources can be focused on the clients in need.
6. **Eliminate letter of support and MOU requirements from grant applications.** Direct service providers should be wholly focused on revising their programs to meet client needs. Gathering MOUs and letters of support is a time-consuming process for both the grantees and the partners. It should not be prioritized at this time of crisis. Limit required letters and MOUs to those required for federal procurement requirements. Partnerships can be documented in other ways, once this crisis has passed.