

HOUSING SURVIVORS OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING DURING COVID-19

Although housing has always been an essential need for survivors of trafficking, communities throughout the United States are experiencing new challenges with the spread of COVID-19. Housing instability puts people at risk of trafficking when they are desperate to avoid homelessness and is often the primary need for survivors exiting a trafficking situation. Service providers are reporting increased barriers and challenges in accessing and providing housing for survivors in three general categories: (1) shelters and congregate housing programs, (2) housing insecurity, and (3) housing for underserved populations.

Shelters and Congregate Housing Programs

Access

Many shelters and housing programs across the country are not accepting new clients, or are significantly reducing new intakes in an effort to prevent the spread of the virus. Survivors facing homelessness or in unsafe housing situations are left with fewer options. Providers are needing to contact more housing providers to secure housing or collaborate with less ideal housing programs to meet emergency needs.

Utilizing Hotels

Anti-trafficking programs have been relying on hotels as an emergency housing solution. Hotels offer a higher degree of privacy and autonomy than most shelters. However, many hotels are currently operating at a reduced capacity and may be isolated or difficult to reach by public transportation. Hotel rooms, unless they are at extended stay hotels, also offer limited access to cooking facilities, requiring providers to identify support for cooked meals. Additionally, service providers have to be mindful of how to support the confidentiality of survivors during a hotel stay as well as providing case management.

Program Restrictions

Many shelters and housing programs are struggling with the tensions inherent in respecting survivor choice and autonomy while implementing recommended safety guidelines, such as limiting access to communal spaces or wearing personal protective equipment (PPE). These restrictions can be triggering for survivors as restricted movement, restrictions on clothing, and requirements regarding personal interactions are common forms of control used by traffickers.

Staff in shelters and communal housing programs are struggling with balancing trauma-informed practices, while trying to maintain the safety, health, and wellbeing of staff and other residents. Service providers have found that communicating why restrictions are in place (e.g.,

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access to communal areas), as well as information on health guidelines (e.g., social distancing, washing hands frequently, etc.) provide the survivor with insight and gives them the ability to make healthy choices for themselves.

Housing Insecurity

Evictions

Due to the economic fallout of the pandemic, many survivors are losing their jobs, which in turn impacts their ability to pay rent and could lead to a potential eviction. State and local governments, as well as the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), issued partial emergency eviction and foreclosure moratoriums to prevent families and individuals from losing their housing during the COVID-19 outbreak. The Cares Act moratorium expired on July 24th. States may offer additional protections. Connect with a local housing provider to learn more about what is currently available in your area. You can find localized information about evictions at evictionlab.org.

An eviction is a legal process that requires landlords to follow specific requirements established by the local court system. Landlords often claim that they can, and in fact do, physically remove tenant's belongings on their own. This is called 'self-help eviction' and it is illegal. Tenants have rights and should seek support from [local legal aid agencies](#) to understand tenant protections in their area.

Sexual Harassment in Housing

There have been reports of landlords demanding sex from tenants unable to pay their rent. This can be especially painful for survivors who were sexually harassed or assaulted during their trafficking experience. This is illegal and all tenants have rights. The Department of Justice's [Sexual Harassment in Housing Initiative](#) has multiple resources on combating sexual harassment in housing. Programs should share information on tenants' rights with the survivors they serve.

Increase in New Clients and Returning Clients

Due to the rise in housing insecurity, many programs are seeing an increase in new clients and/or clients returning to their programs. To meet the housing needs of new and returning clients, programs may need grant adjustments to redirect funds to housing purposes, develop new partnerships, or to shift staffing to accommodate changing client needs or remote service provision.

Housing Underserved Populations

While the pandemic has had detrimental impacts on communities at large, certain populations are at higher risk of being trafficked and are underserved.

Youth

Youth service providers, including runaway and homeless youth programs, have reported an increase in cases of runaway and homeless youth since the beginning of the pandemic. This may stem from the additional tensions facing households such as confined space and

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prolonged periods with family members who are not attending school, unemployed, or working from home. Service providers who are housing youth are finding it challenging to implement social distancing measures with this population. Some programs have improved access to technology (e.g., making laptops available, increasing phone minutes, etc.) to help meet the young person's desire to connect with family, friends, and loved ones and still keeping a physical distance. For youth who are living with family, some programs are providing support to the entire family in order to work with youth and minimize potential harm.

For additional information, watch the [recording of our peer support call](#) on housing youth survivors of trafficking during COVID-19.

Undocumented Survivors

Undocumented survivors have been drastically impacted by the pandemic. Many are working in industries such as agriculture and factories where they cannot work from home and do not have adequate safety protocols in place (e.g. PPE, physical distancing, limited staff, access to healthcare). Additionally, undocumented survivors do not qualify for financial assistance like the stimulus checks through the CARES Act. Even if survivors are eligible for services, they may be afraid to access them because of the fear of being reported to immigration authorities or negatively impacting their immigration case due to public charge.

Programs may consider prioritizing federal grant funds, such as OVC, TVAP or private grant funds, to support the housing needs of undocumented survivors for a longer period of time. Many service providers are working with their federal grant monitors to submit a grant adjustment in order to best meet the needs of the survivors they work with.

For additional information, watch the [recording of our peer support call](#) on housing undocumented survivors of trafficking during COVID-19.

Recommendations

There is a clear need for all individuals to have safe and stable housing. Programs may consider making immediate changes to quickly meet the housing needs of survivors, as well as planning for, and implementing, long-term solutions to increase access to housing for survivors.

Service Providers

- Provide [flexible funding](#) to survivors to eliminate barriers such as security deposits, utility bills, and moving costs.
- Connect with local housing and homelessness programs, such as the local [Continuum of Care](#), to access additional housing funding that is being disseminated through CoCs. Emergency Solutions Grant (ESG) funding was included in the CARES Act and provides additional funding address homelessness.
- Consult the Domestic Violence Housing Technical Assistance Consortium's [guidance on utilizing hotels](#) to address survivor's immediate safety and housing needs.
- Consult the [Safe Shelter Collaborative's SafeNight App](#) to arrange for and fund hotel stays. Collaboratives exist throughout the U.S. but are in limited locations. Connect with Safe Shelter Collaborative to learn more.

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- Provide information on current health guidelines (e.g., social distancing, washing hands frequently, etc.) to all survivors.
- Increase access to technology (e.g., making laptops available, increasing phone minutes, etc.) to help survivors maintain connections with family, friends, and loved ones from a physical distance.
- Provide information on [tenants' rights](#) and access to [local legal aid agencies](#) to all survivors.
- Revise program policies and procedures to support survivors for longer periods of time and to allow for survivors to return for additional services more often.

Shelters and Housing Programs

- Share information about health and safety guidelines with all participants.
- Share information with other shelter and housing programs in the community to ensure ongoing communication of capacity and coordination for referrals.
- Eliminate controlling practices such as taking away cell phones or restricting communication outside of the shelter, which can be triggering and further isolate survivors.
- Provide creative ways to support the safety and wellbeing of participants, such as having an outside space for survivors and making technology readily available for survivors to stay connected with loved ones.