



# Freedom Network USA

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VIA EMAIL

## **RE: Disruptions to TVAP Funding for Human Trafficking Survivors**

Dear Director Chon and Deputy Director Hightower:

On behalf of the 87 Freedom Network USA (FNUSA) members, I am writing to express our concerns about the Office on Trafficking in Persons' (OTIP) failure to transition the Trafficking Victim Assistance Program (TVAP) grants without a lapse in funding for the survivors served. As you know, TVAP is a critical program that helps foreign national survivors and their families meet critical needs, including food, housing, clothing, transportation, and medical and mental health care. The failure to provide extensions to previous sub-recipients while the new program prepares to launch leaves hundreds of survivors in limbo, and indicates a concerning lack of preparedness and indifference to the destabilizing impact on survivors.

Successful, survivor-centered, trauma-informed referrals take time and intentional effort. The referring provider needs to identify a provider that is a good match in many ways, including: language capacity, location, eligibility criteria, caseload capacity, and culture. There must be time to sign an appropriate release so that the referring organization can share appropriate information. The survivor needs time to assess the new provider and ensure that the referral is appropriate for them before ending the relationship with the referring provider. USCRI did not communicate in advance a timeline for the ending of TVAP funds, instead, they continued to enroll clients and send NEW referrals to sub-recipients. USCRI did not coordinate with alternative providers, or ensure continuing access to support during the transition period. USCRI has yet to clearly identify which sub-recipients will be partners under the new funding structure, has no capacity to provide their own case management, and has no temporary support in place for survivors who were enrolled before 9/30/2022.

The timeline of the transition, as reported by our members, is as follows:

#### June

- USCRI communicates to some, but not all, sub-recipients that no further extensions will be approved for survivors in Regions 5-10. USCRI does not state that all services will end on September 30.

#### July/August

- USCRI provides no communication to sub-recipients about the looming end of the TVAP grant.
- USCRI continues to refer NEW survivors to sub-recipients.
- USCRI continues to enroll NEW survivors.
- USCRI provides no end date or plans for ending services for survivors.

#### September

- 9/8/22- USCRI notifies sub-recipients that enrollment will end on September 30 (note USCRI continues to refer NEW survivors to these same agencies without any information regarding service provision after September 30).
- USCRI recommends that sub-recipients transfer survivors to another source of funding or contact the National Human Trafficking Hotline to find another service provider.
- OVC funded providers report a dramatic and rapid increase in referrals, without notification from USCRI, OVC, or OTIP to expect a transition or to assist with this surge; many of their grants are also ending on 9/30 and new award notifications are not made until the end of the month.

#### October

- Select sub-recipients are notified that they can begin re-enrolling survivors in TVAP using new forms on 10/19/22.
- The new enrollment criteria indicates that survivors will be eligible for far less financial support and some will not be eligible for any support; no warning was given to the sub-recipients that the support would change for survivors. They are being told to discharge survivors who are not eligible under the new criteria with no transition support or planning.
- OVC funded providers continue to report a dramatic and rapid increase in referrals; some are forced to implement waitlists leaving survivors unserved at this time.

Survivors experiencing this financial instability are at risk of being forced into unsafe working and living conditions and relying on strangers for financial assistance, putting them at greater risk of re-victimization. Some organizations rely on TVAP funding as their sole funding source, and have discharged the survivors without a referral or financial support. In areas without other service providers, survivors are in limbo, without any certainty regarding if or when they may find a new case manager or a way to pay their rent, buy food or medicine, or be connected to other needed services.

FNUSA members have shared examples of survivors who have lost access to TVAP funding, including:

- One survivor who enrolled in August 2022 depended on the \$300 a month to cover food and other expenses. She is a witness in a criminal case against her trafficker and is dealing with significant trauma. She received a message on October 20, 2022 from the service provider informing her the funding was canceled, leaving her without the cash assistance she was using to make ends meet.
- Another member shared that some newly arrived Unaccompanied Children who enrolled over the summer are now in even more precarious situations because their sponsors relied on TVAP funds to provide for the children's basic needs.
- One member worked for months to earn the trust of a child who came to the US unaccompanied after experiencing human trafficking in her home country. By the time the survivor felt comfortable enough with her case manager to agree to enroll in TVAP, the provider was notified the funding had become limited and the survivor was no longer able to access it. As a minor, she is very vulnerable to further exploitation and has to safety plan daily. The trust she built with her service provider is limited and will take even longer to rebuild.
- One member is providing legal services to siblings who are survivors of trafficking. They have children with them in the US for whom they are the sole providers. They were trafficked into the US after suffering discrimination and abuse at the US/Mexico border. Their immigration case was delayed by changing US policies for the past few years, and have finally been granted T Visas only to be denied services under TVAP due to the lapsed funding. The TVAP provider has no answers for the survivor about when or if they will ever get any help. The survivor explained: "We have been struggling to get enough food, due to the language barrier I couldn't get a job with better pay, we have been struggling to pay rent and bills. I feel bad because I don't want to abuse the grace of this beautiful country, but I just need some help until we get stable. It's hard to start all over again and the prices of everything is going up."

We understand USCRI is in the process of establishing a program under the new TVAP model and hiring key staff to coordinate and provide services. However, we are gravely concerned about survivors who were enrolled in the program who are falling through the cracks. We demand that HHS and USCRI immediately release a plan to serve these survivors until the new TVAP structure is functional and ready to enroll new clients.

Specifically, we recommend that OTIP:

- Immediately introduce an extension of services to former sub-recipients to serve previously enrolled survivors until the new TVAP structure is at capacity to take on all enrolled survivors.
- Allow sub-recipients to continue to enroll new survivors until the new program is able to take referrals.
- Ensure all necessary staff, referral procedures, and guidelines are in place before transitioning survivors to the new TVAP structure.
- Provide 30-days notice to sub-recipients prior to the transition with clear guidelines on how their clients' cases will be transferred to USCRI or a new sub-recipient.

TVAP funding acts as a critical safety net for foreign-born survivors. Abruptly dropping survivors from the program is unethical and puts them at greater risk of being trafficked again. Because TVAP serves such a vulnerable population, all decisions about the program need to be trauma-informed, and administrators need to consider the negative impacts of funding changes. The needs of the survivors served by TVAP should be prioritized by OTIP, and funding should be restored to prevent further harm.

I look forward to working with you to continue to improve services for survivors of human trafficking.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jean Bruggeman". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline.

Jean Bruggeman  
Executive Director  
Freedom Network USA