



Freedom Network USA

May 1, 2023

Office on Trafficking in Persons
Department of Health and Human Services
EndTrafficking@acf.hhs.gov

Submitted via email

RE: Listening Session on the National Human Trafficking Hotline

Dear OTIP:

On behalf of Freedom Network USA (FNUSA), I am writing to pose questions for the Listening Session regarding the National Human Trafficking Hotline (NHTH), in response to the State Attorneys General letter. FNUSA thanks OTIP for hosting this listening session and investigating the Hotline's protocol for providing tips to law enforcement from third parties on behalf of adults who are at-risk of or experiencing human trafficking; and how to support the needs of victims and collaborate with law enforcement.

As FNUSA has previously shared with HHS¹, operating the NHTH with a dual purpose (both to connect survivors with services and support and to serve as a law enforcement tip line) is inherently a conflict of interest and unethical.

This combination of purposes is unique among hotlines. Most hotlines have only one purpose. The National Domestic Violence Hotline, RAINN's Sexual Assault Helpline, and the National Runaway Safeline, for example, focus only on providing the services and support requested by callers. They do not seek tips about domestic violence, sexual assault, or runaway youth to provide to law enforcement. They do not train their advocates to gather actionable intelligence for law enforcement. They do not advertise their number on law enforcement posters or ask members of the public to report possible victimization. They do not work to disrupt crime. They focus only on developing information and staff that are dedicated to meeting the needs of survivors. Their resources are dedicated solely to meeting the needs of survivors. Their call lines are not overburdened with calls from members of the general public.

FNUSA has received reports of concerning challenges with the NHTH. Providers have reported that they continue to receive referrals from client populations that they do not serve, even after contacting the NHTH multiple times over months to update the information in the referral

¹ Freedom Network USA, [FNUSA Submits Comments on Evaluation for the National Human Trafficking Hotline](https://freedomnetworkusa.org/app/uploads/2019/11/FNUSAHotlineEvaluationSurveyComment-1.pdf), October 2019, <https://freedomnetworkusa.org/app/uploads/2019/11/FNUSAHotlineEvaluationSurveyComment-1.pdf>

database. This causes survivors to be bounced among multiple providers before they find services to meet their needs, instead of being directly connected with the most appropriate provider. Other providers report that they never receive referrals from the NHTH, even though they have attempted to be included in their referral directory. The NHTH has failed to transparently share how and why they prioritize some providers over others, leaving survivors without the information they need to access the most appropriate services and support.

Survivors have reported that they were contacted by law enforcement about their exploitation, even though they did not give permission to the NHTH to share their information with law enforcement. This erodes trust for survivors, who share information with other survivors. When survivors do not trust that a call to the NHTH will be confidential, they are delayed in finding the services and support they want and need.

FNUSA believes that this dual purpose leads to harmful resource allocations, including:

- Diverting resources to building partnerships with law enforcement or vetting law enforcement partners instead of service providers;
- Diverting resources to data analysis for the purpose of supporting law enforcement actions instead of victim services; and
- Diverting resources away from building strong collaborations with state and local hotlines.

It also impacts how hotline advocates react to callers including:

- Responding less patiently or supportively to those who do not immediately identify as victims;
- Trying to get more information about the crime, instead of focusing solely on the service needs of the caller, which may increase victim's discomfort or distrust of services; and
- Pressuring victims (even inadvertently) into agreeing to share their information with law enforcement, rather than empowering the survivor by following their lead.

Finally, it impacts the experience of survivors including:

- Feeling pressured to share information about their trafficking experience, leaving victims feeling frustrated or fearful;
- Feeling uncomfortable and therefore deciding against seeking further assistance, leaving survivors in unsafe situations for longer periods of time; and
- Law enforcement responding in such a way that puts the survivor (or others) at risk of psychological, physical, or legal harm including deportation.

Additionally, NHTH cannot assume that all callers reporting trafficking are either well-intentioned or accurate. NHTH is not law enforcement. They are not, and should not be, trained to determine the intent or accuracy of what is reported. Survivors seeking services should always be provided with the services they seek, and the NHTH should play no role in verifying their statements. However, when connecting callers to law enforcement, callers who may be acting with malice against a person, caution is needed. A law enforcement response is not

always safe, especially for Black, Indigenous, Immigrants, and People of Color; and can be especially dangerous for BIPOC and immigrant trafficking victims.

My question for OTIP is: Where did this dual purpose come from and why does it persist? It is not required by statute. It is not reflective of best practices for victim services hotlines. It is not in the best interest of survivors. It is not ethical. It is not effective. What is the history and why has it been enshrined in the funding for the NHTH in such stark contrast to the Domestic Violence Hotline?

We thank you for your work to support human trafficking survivors through evidence-based services and programs and hope that you will immediately act to protect survivors by focusing the NHTH on solely connecting survivors to services and support. Leave the law enforcement tips to 911. For further information, please contact me at jean@freedomnetworkusa.org.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jean Bruggeman". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Jean Bruggeman
Executive Director
Freedom Network USA