

Re-Centering Sex Worker Safety in Anti-Trafficking Work: Perspectives from the Field.



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Introduction

Service providers provide direct care and resources to thousands of human trafficking survivors across the US every day.¹ These professionals might focus on identification, safety planning, aftercare services, systems navigation, immigration relief, or support the survivor to achieve sustainability for themselves and their families. Many survivors have suffered significant trauma before, during, and after their trafficking experience.² This trauma may result from physical, emotional, and/or life-threatening harms and may have lasting negative impacts on a survivor's mental, physical, and emotional health or well-being. It is widely accepted that to do this work most effectively, providers must frame their services around the tenets of trauma-informed care.³ These tenets include safety, trustworthiness and transparency, peer support, collaboration, empowerment, and cultural humility and responsiveness.⁴

In addition to direct services, some organizations do anti-trafficking work focusing on prevention. Runaway and homeless youth advocates work to build responsive housing infrastructure and to dismantle discrimination, particularly against the LGBTQIA+ community. Workers' rights advocates organize with workers in sectors that have high rates of trafficking, including domestic workers⁵ and agricultural workers. Other organizations work to prevent harm through anti-violence education, social media safety, or classes on building healthy relationships. Essentially, these prevention measures provide tools and resources to individuals and communities who are put at risk of violence and exploitation. All these initiatives have one very important thing in common: the work requires proximity to, and understanding of, the communities that are made vulnerable to human trafficking.

Despite best practices for service provision and human trafficking prevention requiring strong relationships with impacted communities, the anti-trafficking field has not prioritized close, collaborative relationships with the sex workers' rights movement. In fact, the anti-trafficking field has, whether purposefully or unintentionally, caused significant harm to sex worker safety advocates.⁶ Instead of viewing sex worker safety advocates as allies in preventing and responding to exploitation, many anti-trafficking initiatives have framed sex worker safety organizers as obstacles to addressing trafficking. Instead of collaborating to find effective solutions, anti-trafficking policymakers have often advocated for solutions that further marginalize sex workers and reduce their options for safety and stability. This leaves people in the sex trades at **increased risk for exploitation**, including those who have experienced human trafficking.

Freedom Network USA (FNUSA) and the National Survivor Network (NSN) have developed the following guidelines to help anti-trafficking organizations work more collaboratively with sex worker safety advocates, some of whom experienced human trafficking, and to reduce harm that anti-trafficking efforts cause to those in the sex trades.

Understanding Harm and the Current Context

Before drafting these guidelines, FNUSA invited a small group of sex worker safety advocates to share their experiences interacting with anti-trafficking organizations. Most disclosed negative interactions personally and sweeping negative impacts on their community. **We concluded it is undeniable that the anti-trafficking movement has hurt individuals in the sex trades, some of whom are human trafficking survivors.**

Decreased Safety

The most common responses received were related to safety. Many mentioned they experienced violence, including sexual harassment, as well as physical and sexual assault, at the hands of police conducting anti-trafficking operations. Increased policing to curb sex trafficking has also decimated sex workers' ability to use safety measures due to fear of police or arrest, or reduction in their effectiveness due to policing. This might mean they do not have the time to negotiate terms like condom use and other safety measures with customers. Some advocates mentioned this has been even more difficult after the passage of Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act (FOSTA)⁷. Members expressed that they fear sharing negative experiences or violence because it could reinforce the narrative that "all sex work is sex trafficking," which was universally recognized as a driver of harm. This has made it difficult to improve safety in the sex trades.



Harassment and Personal Attacks

Individuals shared stories of being verbally abused online and in person by anti-trafficking professionals. This included racial, homophobic, and transphobic slurs; being referred to as "that stripper," "pimps" or the "pimp lobby"; having their personal information, like their home address, shared publicly; being



accused of soliciting if actively working in anti-trafficking and having conversations with men; and instances of stalking and defamation.

Erasure or Dismissed Experiences

Several people reported they had been forced out of spaces that directly impact their own well-being or the well-being of others. For example, anti-trafficking advocates dismissed their experiences or told them their experiences did not matter. Individuals also reported a phenomenon where the anti-trafficking field has defined their experiences for them by calling them victims, even when they have expressed that their involvement in commercial sex was consensual. The fact that some survivors do not recognize that they are victims until well after the victimization has ended has been leveraged to dismiss workers' experiences and right to self-understanding and self-definition.



Denied Access to Basic Services

Advocates shared they do not have the financial resources to serve their community even though anti-trafficking funding continues to rise. Anti-violence funders have divested from community-based models to fund anti-trafficking organizations that do not use, or recognize the value of, community-based safety interventions. Furthermore, anti-trafficking programs routinely limit access to their services to those who identify as trafficking victims. Some shared instances where they could not access healthcare or other basic services because they did not identify as a trafficking survivor - despite experiencing other forms of violence or theft.



Scapegoated and Criminalized

Advocates and sex worker community members shared the experience of being blamed for sex trafficking and noted an increased police presence



in marginalized communities. Many have been arrested and carry a criminal record because of anti-trafficking operations conducted by police and supported by anti-trafficking organizations that allegedly seek to identify victims of sex trafficking. These criminal records can create or exacerbate precarious living situations. Many also spoke of the trauma they experienced interacting with the criminal legal system, including during arrest and incarceration.

Continued harm caused by anti-trafficking initiatives decreases the safety and stability of those in the sex trades, including human trafficking survivors. This approach is not consistent with the values and tenets of any human rights movement. The anti-trafficking community must recognize the harm it has caused and immediately begin working to repair it and commit to a new path forward. These guidelines will give practical and theoretical suggestions so that organizations can adopt a less harmful approach.⁸

Process

These guidelines began with the launch of FNUSA's Sex Worker Rights Working group in 2021. The goal was to break down barriers between anti-trafficking and sex worker rights movements, learn from sex worker safety advocates, and find new opportunities for collaboration. The working group includes a wide range of perspectives from anti-trafficking advocates, as many brought other identities to the space. Several members identify as sex trafficking survivors, others as sex workers, and some are or have been both at different points in their lives. Many members provide direct legal and social services to sex trafficking survivors as attorneys or social workers, while others primarily do advocacy work or research.

Sex workers and safety advocates directly informed these recommendations. FNUSA hosted a convening of sex worker safety advocates to inform the development of these guidelines in June 2022. These individuals were asked about their experiences engaging with anti-trafficking services and structures and to define solutions that were less harmful to their communities. A neutral facilitator helped develop the agenda and create a safe collaborative space. This feedback served as the backbone of these recommendations. Additionally, the National Survivor Network (NSN) brought in two member consultants who identify as both human trafficking survivors and sex workers to work alongside the group during the drafting stage. The final draft was reviewed by two sex worker safety advocates who informed the document before it was finalized.

Development Timeline

2021

- FNUSA's Sex Worker Rights **Working Group launched**

2022

- **Convening of sex worker safety advocates** held to inform guidelines and define effective solutions
- **Development of guidelines begins** in conversation with consultants who identify as human trafficking survivors and sex workers
- **Content reviewed** by sex worker safety advocates and finalized

2023

- Guidelines released

Intended Audience

These guidelines were developed for existing and emerging anti-trafficking organizations.

However, some content might be helpful for any organization that provides services to individuals who trade sex including rape crisis centers, substance use service providers, intimate partner violence programs, community healthcare facilities, and more.

Primary Audience



Existing Anti Trafficking Organizations



Emerging Anti Trafficking Organizations

Additional Audiences



Rape Crisis Centers



Substance Use Service Providers



Intimate Partner Violence Programs



Community Healthcare Facilities

Glossary

These definitions are not universal and should only be used for this document's purposes.

People in the sex trades

Individuals engaged in commercial sex across the spectrum of agency. This includes both sex workers and trafficking victims alike, and is plural to recognize the diversity of experiences that fall under the umbrella of commercial sex.⁹

Sex worker

An individual engaged in consensual labor in the sex trades. Many trafficking survivors, particularly those exploited as minors, may not want this language used to describe their experiences; however, it is the widely preferred, respectful term for adult consensual labor.

Sex workers

The community of people performing consensual labor in the sex trades. Some people who have done consensual sexual labor may have also experienced trafficking in commercial sex at other times. Be

aware that while sex work is not the same as sex trafficking, many sex workers have also survived trafficking. Avoid assuming that sex worker-led work is not survivor-led.

Sex work*

The exchange of sexual services for something of value. This broad definition includes, but is not limited to prostitution, escorting, domination/submission, sugar babying, adult film performance, exotic dancing, web-camera performance, phone sex operation, and erotic massage.¹⁰ *For many trafficking survivors who were forced into commercial sex, this term may not be preferred in describing their trafficked experiences.

Sex worker safety advocates

A group of people who work to increase the emotional, financial, physical, and spiritual well-being of people in the sex trades. These advocates may work in sex worker

or substance use harm reduction, HIV prevention, sexual health and liberation spaces, homelessness programs, or the anti-trafficking sector.

Harm reduction

Harm reduction is a philosophy that guides policies, programs, and practices that aim to minimize the negative health, social, and legal impacts of a particular action. The application is most often associated with drug use, drug policies, and drug laws. However, harm reduction focuses on (any) positive change and on working with people without judgment, coercion, discrimination, or requiring that people stop engaging in certain behaviors (*using drugs, self-harming, eating disordered behavior, engaging in sex work) as a precondition of support.¹¹

(Human trafficking) survivors

Individual adults or minors forced into any form of labor for financial gain that involves the use of force, fraud, or coercion; and individual minors (under 18) who receive anything in exchange

for sexual services (force, fraud, or coercion do not need to be present).

Sex trades

The labor sector that involves the exchange of sexual services. Work in the sex trades occurs in many different forms and settings, including street-based or web-based settings, escort services, massage businesses, and video camera work (or "camming"), among others. As in any other labor sector, workers participate in the sex trades for various reasons along the spectrum of choice, circumstance, and coercion.¹² Therefore, this term includes both criminal and legal services and those who are working by choice and those who are experiencing exploitation.

Demand reduction or ending demand

A philosophy and/or practice in the anti-trafficking field that sex trafficking can be reduced or eliminated by reducing or eliminating the demand for sexual services through criminalization and/or shame-based strategies.

6 Guiding Principles to a Trauma-Informed Approach

The CDC's **Center for Preparedness and Response (CPR)**, in collaboration with SAMHSA's **National Center for Trauma-Informed Care (NCTIC)**, developed and led a new training for CPR employees about the role of trauma-informed care during public health emergencies. The training aimed to increase responder awareness of the impact that trauma can have in the communities where they work.

Participants learned SAMHSA's six principles that guide a trauma-informed approach, including:



Adopting a trauma-informed approach is not accomplished through any single particular technique or checklist. It requires constant attention, caring awareness, sensitivity, and possibly a cultural change at an organizational level. On-going internal organizational assessment and quality improvement, as well as engagement with community stakeholders, will help to embed this approach which can be augmented with organizational development and practice improvement. The training provided by **CPR** and **NCTIC** was the first step for CDC to view emergency preparedness and response through a trauma-informed lens.

Content from https://www.cdc.gov/orr/infographics/6_principles_trauma_info.htm#print

Guidelines

Services

Anti-trafficking service providers can play a key role in securing resources for and supporting the goals of human trafficking survivors, including housing, employment, food, clothing, mental health and substance use support, public benefits, and much more. Social workers and case managers also help survivors navigate systems that may hinder achieving their goals. Attorneys may assist with legal issues including: immigration, criminal law, family law, criminal record relief, civil litigation, and more. Depending on the organizational mission, program design, or funding source, some of these services may be limited to specific populations or individuals who meet certain criteria. For example, some agencies only provide services to those who identify as trafficking victims or are “confirmed victims” by an outside entity like law enforcement or government agency staff. Other programs may be permitted to work preventatively and offer their services to populations at risk of experiencing human trafficking. This is common in youth-specific programs and those focused on labor rights.

No matter the population providers are working with, it is certain that they are serving sex workers and/or their program is impacting this population in some capacity.

The anti-trafficking field widely accepts that services must be grounded in trauma-informed care. Service providers who use this approach realize the prevalence of trauma and respond based on their understanding of how it impacts the individuals or communities they serve. The six tenets of trauma-informed care include:

- | | |
|---------------------------------|------------------------------------------|
| 1. Safety | 2. Trustworthiness & Transparency |
| 3. Peer Support | 4. Collaboration & Mutuality |
| 5. Empowerment, Voice, & Choice | 6. Cultural, Historical, & Gender Issues |

Because of anti-trafficking advocates' impact and proximity to those working in the sex trades, it is critical to examine how to apply these tenets in service provision. Even if a program only works with individuals who identify as trafficking survivors, anti-trafficking interventions and policies still impact these communities (See, Understanding Harm and the Current Context above).

This is especially important because many of those working in the sex trades are also part of

communities that are disproportionately impacted by systemic poverty, discrimination, state violence,¹³ and stigma. This includes black, indigenous, people of color (BIPOC), immigrants, LGBTQIA+ and differently-abled communities. These experiences have resulted in both individual and generational trauma, therefore, integrating trauma-informed care in anti-trafficking services is critical. Despite this, a disconnect remains between anti-trafficking service provision, trauma-informed care, and those working in the sex trades. Below, we explore some of that disconnect and provide recommendations to integrate trauma-informed care with these communities.

SAFETY

Human trafficking interventions should not make those in the sex trades, including sex trafficking survivors, less safe. This statement might seem obvious, but despite our good intentions, there are plenty of examples of dangerous policies and practices in anti-trafficking work. Survivors may be forced to testify or collaborate with investigations that put them in danger to access basic services or avoid criminalization themselves. Survivors may be forced into services inconsistent with their values or that isolate them from their communities. Many people in the sex trades are subject to increased policing, leaving some with criminal records and new traumatic experiences that can negatively impact their health and well-being.

These examples highlight why we must use an approach that prioritizes the individual well-being of all the people anti-trafficking organizations serve.

Harm reduction should be integrated as part of this approach. Public health systems adopted harm reduction approaches to reduce potential negative health outcomes for those who use certain substances and increasingly are incorporating services for people who trade sex. Many sex worker safety advocates are experts in harm reduction.

Despite our good intentions, there are plenty of examples of **dangerous policies and practices** in anti-trafficking work

Common services these organizations offer include:

1. Distributing condoms, finger cots, and other sexual health supplies.
2. Substance use support like syringe exchanges and safe injection sites, Narcan (for self, clients, or colleagues), drug testing strips, and overdose prevention education.
3. Circulating current safety information, such as “bad date lists.” These identify customers who might be violent or cause harm to the individual.

4. Referrals for services to address food insecurity, housing, medical care, and intimate/family violence crisis intervention and safety planning.
5. Drop-in centers, learning opportunities, social connection, use of computers or phone-charging, support and educational events, food and snacks, or even showers and laundry for sex workers without stable housing.

Harm reduction also prioritizes structural change to reduce harm at the source.¹⁴ Anti-trafficking organizations do not have to replicate the exact practices above but should interrogate how they promote health and safety at both the individual and community levels.

In the chart below, we review some ways organizations can incorporate harm reduction and prioritize safety.

PRINCIPLE	ACTION
Sex worker-centered harm reduction views trading sex for money and resources as neither inherently harmful or degrading, or inherently stabilizing or empowering	Mandate routine training for staff on cultural humility and implicit bias. Make this a regular part of practice and discussion amongst staff, including in case conferences and supervision.
Focuses on who people are rather than what they do and sees people as whole people.	Staff should use the same language that the client they are working with uses. Pay special attention to pronouns, how they describe their communities, and other details unrelated to their trafficking situation. Organizations should strive for a diverse staff that reflects different identities to foster genuine connections with clients.

PRINCIPLE	ACTION
Recognizes the myriad reasons why people engage in the sex trade and seeks to help people meet goals defined for themselves in non-judgmental and compassionate manners and atmospheres.	If an individual continues to work in the sex trades to meet their needs while receiving services, connect them to sex worker safety advocates who are best situated to help them be safe.
Recognizes the potential infectious disease and physical safety consequences associated with sex work and seeks to help people mitigate these factors.	Build strong connections to sexual and reproductive health providers regardless of your personal or organization's political views. Be educated on the work of local sex worker safety advocates and refer to them.
Seeks to provide holistic support rather than isolated interventions.	Anti-trafficking programs should strive to offer expansive services and have a robust list of trusted partners. This ensures that clients have access to the full range of services, including support from sex worker safety organizations with connections to mutual aid networks (and don't just take from these networks for client needs, but give when you can). Ask clients about their needs during intakes and through surveys instead of just offering a list of services.

PRINCIPLE	ACTION
Highlights the impact that the criminal legal response to sex work has on people in the sex trade, and seeks to eliminate sociopolitical barriers to care, safety, and general wellbeing. Understand stigma and its byproducts to be at the root of harm experienced by individuals involved in the sex trade, and that intersecting oppressions compound the harm.	Limit law enforcement requirements/ involvement in the services offered. If an individual is not threatened with arrest and a conviction, they are more likely to get help when they experience physical or sexual assault, human trafficking, or other violence. Instead, focus on other options for healing, including transformative justice and community-based approaches.
Believes that incorporating a diverse range of sex workers into public health policies and discussions can be a gateway into community health. Understands that one individual's experience does not equal that of all individuals in the sex trade.	No matter what survivor-inclusion approach an organization uses, diversity is key. For example, if an organization has an advisory council, ensure that it includes individuals with different trafficking experiences, of different races, genders, ethnicities, immigration status, and yes, those with experience in the sex trades consensually.

TRUSTWORTHINESS AND TRANSPARENCY

Organizations must be transparent about their services, including who qualifies for their services and what is required to get them. This seems obvious and most organizations strive to do this for every person who walks through the door. However, because appropriate services and rights education for those in the sex trades is very scarce, organizations must intentionally prevent harm caused by high-barrier services or inequitable determinations of eligibility.

Many sex workers would benefit from the same services anti-trafficking organizations offer, like transportation assistance, childcare support, navigating public benefits, and safety planning, but they are often ineligible due to funding restrictions or organizational policy. If this is the case, it is critical to communicate this information immediately. Often, consensual sex workers are forced into interactions with anti-trafficking organizations through police operations and human trafficking intervention courts. Organizations should be careful not to seek referral sources that routinely exclude people from services. This may foster distrust if they reject or exclude sex workers for services repeatedly. This can also perpetuate or exacerbate the notion that these communities are different when they often have similar experiences or needs, or that sex workers do not deserve the same dignity and support as other people.

In anti-trafficking services, a voluntary service model must be in place. Voluntary means no one is forced or coerced into “services” they do not want or need. This means that program participants do not need to meet additional criteria to receive services. Common requirements that may create barriers to services include attending therapy, religious services, or leaving “the life.” These rules and restrictions are detrimental because they mimic the power and control relationship of an abuser/trafficker, and they are not consistent with harm reduction models that prioritize safety or healing models that prioritize self-determination. **If someone chooses to continue in the sex trades for any reason, we must honor that choice and support them in meeting their goals.** We will explore this more below in empowerment, voice, and choice.

Lastly, anti-trafficking programs should be mindful when discussing what services are available and the potential positive and negative impacts of accessing them. Overpromising or misrepresenting what is possible can erode trust and have unintended consequences for people in the sex trades, including survivors. Alternatively, providers should be transparent about all risks or consequences of obtaining certain benefits. For example, if a childcare program or public benefit worker believes a client is engaged in sex work, they could risk their custody or lose financial assistance because of the stigma associated with the sex trades. It is critical that advocates understand and clearly explain these costs to protect those they serve. Providers should always explain their confidentiality and ethical requirements and allow clients to make their own choices around risk.

In anti-trafficking services, a **voluntary service model** must be in place.

PEER SUPPORT

We must offer peer support models that reflect diverse experiences to meet the needs of every person a program may encounter. Anti-trafficking providers can partner with one of the national survivor-led organizations that use peer support models. Organizations like the National Survivor Network (NSN) and Survivor Alliance are communities of survivors that focus on survivor leadership development in the anti-trafficking movement. Additionally, they offer more general training and education for those not necessarily interested in anti-trafficking work. Survivors may have access to additional opportunities at the local level. Lastly, individual programs may incorporate informal elements of peer support like therapeutic and nontherapeutic groups or have more formal peer support structures to support clients in meeting their goals.

While these human trafficking-focused options may meet the needs of some clients or community members, others may benefit from the support of sex worker safety advocates. **Meeting individuals where they are requires us to affirm the complexity of each person’s experience.** Many survivors have other experiences in the sex trades besides human trafficking. They may move in and out of situations that involve force, fraud, or coercion. We must support individuals as whole people. Therefore, we must have peer support models that reflect diverse experiences and self-definitions to meet their needs.

COLLABORATION AND MUTUALITY

This tenet is about leveling power between a provider and a client. This power imbalance is something all advocates must reconcile in almost every direct service interaction. Service providers must also apply this tenet at a community level. Anti-trafficking organizations have substantially more institutional and economic power than sex worker safety organizations. They have more resources, are welcomed to more tables, and affect everyday conditions for those in the sex trades. There are many ways to begin leveling these power imbalances, some of which will be covered later in this document. Here, providers can consider how an assumption of moral superiority may appear in their work. It is not our job to pass judgment about the type of work people do and their choices to survive financially. Instead, we must explore our own discomfort around sex and sexuality and how it may impact the ways we interact with this population, given that all forms of work in the United States exist along a

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spectrum from choice to circumstance to coercion.

Savior narratives have been integrated into every corner of anti-trafficking work, from rescue operations to human trafficking intervention courts. These narratives position the provider or law enforcement officers as the protagonist and treat the survivor as secondary. This diminishes self-determination and is inconsistent with how human trafficking is addressed in other labor sectors. The most promising anti-trafficking models bring together resources and empower impacted communities to fight exploitation structurally. Redistributing resources and shifting power to sex worker safety advocates is one way to combat this phenomenon. Anti-trafficking organizations should engage sex worker safety advocates in collaborative discussions about addressing violence and work with individual clients to better understand what they believe is in their best interests. Like workers in any form of labor, sex workers are best positioned to notice when someone is being exploited, and to connect them with support or referrals.

Anti-trafficking organizations must also explore the power dynamics at play when asking survivors and sex workers to show up in our work. It is common for advocates to tokenize and exploit survivors' and sex workers' experiences for personal or organizational gain. When storytelling is necessary, people in the sex trades must have control over their own narrative. Their stories must only be shared with their full consent. Advocates should explore these power dynamics when having discussions about consent to protect the client and support a healthy working relationship.¹⁵

EMPOWERMENT, VOICE, AND CHOICE

Under both this tenet and Collaboration and Mutuality, programs must apply a voluntary-service model. This means that clients are not forced to engage in any service or are required to meet outside conditions to receive help. For example, survivors and/or sex workers should not be forced into religious teachings, mental health or substance use treatment, or forced to act in any way (including being required to stop engaging in sex work) to receive services. This is inconsistent with the tenets of trauma-informed care.

This tenet recognizes that individuals are the experts of their own experiences. Some anti-trafficking advocates insist that clients do not understand their experience and will not exit the sex trades because of their trauma. This is not a legitimate application of trauma-informed care. Clients have the right to define their own experiences in the sex trades, whether they are

Individuals are **the experts** of their own experiences

consistent with the service providers' interpretation or not. It is common for advocates to claim that traumatized clients may not fully understand or be able to define their own experience, but this is a denial of survivor voice and choice, and is disempowering. Some individuals have experienced both human trafficking and consensual sex work. Others have experienced sexual violence while doing consensual sex work, but the experience does not meet the definition of human trafficking. It is quite appropriate for someone's description of their experience to change over time, whether or not they have experienced significant trauma. **Given this, programs designed around the assumption that all commercial sex interactions are sex trafficking are not compliant with this critical tenet of trauma-informed practice.** These experiences can be complicated, and programs should structure their services with this complexity in mind. They should also seek out partnerships that give these individuals choices of services, including those provided by sex worker safety advocates.

Some individuals who do not identify their experiences as human trafficking are, in fact, not being trafficked. Others in the sex trades may not define their experience as human trafficking, even if their experience does meet the federal definition of human trafficking. There are many reasons why an individual may not self-identify as a victim or survivor. **Advocates should, however, focus on increasing the availability of services and not convincing individuals of their victimhood to fit into their service delivery model.** For example, in the intimate partner violence field, the goal is not to convince someone that they are experiencing abuse – it's helping them access safety and self-determination. Likewise, organizations that serve those in the sex trade should work to ensure access to safety no matter how the individual seeking services defines or understands their sex trade involvement.

CULTURAL, HISTORICAL, AND GENDER ISSUES

Human trafficking can happen to someone of any age, race, sexual orientation, gender, or country of origin. But it is no coincidence that we see a high prevalence in communities that already experience high rates of discrimination, racism, and other forms of oppression in this country. Immigrants, BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ communities, people with disabilities, women and girls are especially vulnerable to human trafficking. They are more likely to work in areas of the sex trades that are inherently more dangerous, like street-based work. In our discussions with people in the sex trades, including survivors, it is clear that the criminal legal system has

Human trafficking survivors are **not a monolith**, and their preferences and needs vary.

negatively impacted their communities. It is also well documented that some of these groups are disproportionately involved in (or punished by) the criminal legal system.¹⁶ These are the communities our programs should strive to reach. Program design must incorporate systems and services that are culturally and linguistically appropriate.

Who should be serving those in the sex trades? There is debate in both anti-trafficking and sex worker rights spaces about who should be serving sex trafficking survivors. Some groups believe that anti-trafficking organizations should expand their services and make them available to those trading sex regardless of whether they identify as/are trafficking survivors. Consensual sex workers may desperately need resources that anti-trafficking organizations are funded to provide. Others believe that only sex worker safety advocates should deliver these services because they are most familiar with the community. They advocate for drastic shifts in funding and a complete overhaul of the infrastructure. Our goal is not to advocate for one approach or the other. Human trafficking survivors are not a monolith, and their preferences and needs vary. It is our job to build these partnerships so that when someone comes through our doors, we can offer the best options to support them, even if that means referring them to another organization.

Partnerships

Collaboration is an essential component of service provision. Most anti-trafficking organizations depend on various partnerships to meet the complex needs of human trafficking survivors. Community-based partners may provide specialized services to survivors like housing, mental health and substance use treatment, healthcare, or many others. Law enforcement agencies and the courts are common partners through task forces, intervention courts, or community coalitions. But some of these partnerships can negatively impact an organization's ability to build trust with those in the sex trades or engage with sex worker safety advocates. Furthermore, sex worker safety communities are largely missing from human trafficking coalitions. Organizations must look closely at who they partner with, how they engage their partners in their work, and how they hold their partners accountable to the communities they serve.

Organizations must examine the values and practices of a partner organization and how their external partnerships impact those in the sex trades, including survivors. They must seek to mitigate existing harm and prevent further harm. Sex worker safety advocates should be part of these discussions.

1. Assess their willingness to engage

When evaluating a new or existing partner, organizations should understand the potential partner's proximity to the sex worker community. Questions like, "Does this organization serve consensual sex workers?" or "Do they have relationships with this community?" are a good place to start. If they do, they should be willing to hear the perspectives of the community. If they are not willing, this might be a red flag that they are not a safe partner.

2. Dig a little bit

Organizations should make a reasonable effort to understand whether a partner has been involved in direct action or advocacy efforts that conflict with local sex worker rights efforts or the safety of the community. Staff can do a quick Google search for local news reports and review their social media posts. They should also look out for problematic organizations, including those that invalidate the survivorship or leadership of human trafficking survivors or those that support demand reduction for example.

3. Interrogate partnerships, specifically with law enforcement

This partnership is the most influential on trust-building with sex worker communities. Because so many have had severe negative encounters with police and the criminalization of sex worker organizing, sex worker safety advocates may feel unsafe working with organizations with close ties to law enforcement or other public institutions. First and foremost, anti-trafficking organizations must not try to convince advocates that they are the exception by making statements like, “Oh, we work with good cops”. These are systemic-level issues that cannot be erased by knowing individual law enforcement to be “good” people.

Anti-trafficking agencies should outline their partnerships with these systems. They can spend some time defining what parts of it are necessary to serve the best interests of their clients. For example, they may need law enforcement to support immigration applications for survivors. If they work with a survivor who wants to report an instance of violence to law enforcement, it can be helpful to have contacts with specific officers who they know to be compassionate, avoid victim-blaming, support and facilitate victim rights, and engage in more victim-centered investigative practices. There are other examples where either the law or a client’s pursuit of certain forms of justice might require these relationships. While some organizations may not be able to cut ties with these partners, defining the places where the relationships are required is an important exercise in self-awareness. However, there are undoubtedly parts of the relationship that are unnecessary and outright harmful to anti-trafficking work. Staff should make efforts to untangle those pieces of their work.

Organizations should also develop protocols for how they show up publicly with law enforcement. This should address press releases, photo opportunities, media coverage, guidelines for participating in law enforcement operations, and more. Public engagement should align with how interactions are held privately for transparency and trust-building. Organizations should also demonstrate a willingness to hold law enforcement accountable for any abuses caused to community members. These decisions can influence community members’ perceptions of the relationship and indicate how safe it might be to engage.

4. Make Safety a Priority

In cases where anti-trafficking organizations may be forced into a problematic partnership because of funding or legal requirements, organizations should develop a strategy to protect the safety of the sex workers they engage with. Special care should be taken to prepare for physical and emotional safety during meetings, public events, interactions with media, and any other environment where someone might experience discrimination or other forms of harm.

5. Be Transparent

Organizations should be intentional about sharing the nature of their collaborations. They can let their partners know about their intentions to create a less harmful environment for those in the sex trades. They should be transparent with their contacts in the community about entering new partnerships that might be problematic and be accountable for those.

While many providers may feel forced to collaborate with harmful actors, anti-trafficking advocates should attempt to untangle forced collaboration in public policy and funding relationships. Government laws and policies about human trafficking are intertwined with the criminal legal system, which has disproportionate negative impacts on communities of color and other historically marginalized groups. Service providers should seize opportunities to dismantle systemic harm to these communities by coordinating meetings with elected officials, joining advocacy letters that change funding practices, and talking with their funders. Changing the requirements on how people receive support can significantly alter how our partnerships impact those in the sex trades, including sex trafficking survivors. It is possible. There have even been recent changes to federal funding guidelines that do this after years of advocacy.¹⁷ Organizations can build on this momentum in their own funding communities, including state and local funders and private foundation funding.

In the introduction, we talked about why cultivating partnerships **with** sex worker safety groups is a critical step in any anti-trafficking effort. Sex worker safety organizations have the most context about the systems, environment, how violence might happen, or who might be most vulnerable to it. Service organizations can be more confident in their decision-making by bringing in directly impacted people. Consider the following steps to ensure thoughtful and effective outreach.

1. Self-Reflection

Anti-trafficking leadership and staff should not immediately reach out to sex worker advocates. First organizations should clarify their intentions and ensure they have enough information to be responsible and meaningful partners. Start by setting aside time for leadership and front-line staff to articulate why they want to connect with sex worker safety organizations and community members. Have a meaningful conversation about whether these reasons are self-serving or might include any benefit for the sex worker rights community. Next, organizations should define a short list of values that will guide outreach. This can serve as a guide that staff can refer to if needed.

If organizations have difficulty coming up with values, we have provided this short list:

Humility

Introspection

Accountability

Equity

Transparency

2. Educate Staff

Leadership and staff must learn about the history of the sex worker rights movement and identify current issues that might be relevant. We suggest hiring sex worker safety advocates to develop and conduct this training. If anti-trafficking organizations have difficulty identifying a trainer, Freedom Network USA may be able to provide them with a recommendation. These trainers must be paid for their time and expertise. If providers do not have the financial resources to pay them, consider reading articles or essays written by self-identified sex workers and/or survivors who support these communities.

3. Develop a Plan

Organizations should now identify a specific sex worker advocate, organization, or coalition to connect with. Considerations may include:

- Do you have a shared interest with anyone in the community?
- Do you have a mutually trusted ally who could facilitate an introduction?
- Is there a specific neighborhood or community of people from which you receive a lot of referrals?

Once anti-trafficking organizations identify potential partners, providers should define their goals. Consider coming to sex worker safety organizations with an offer instead of an ask. What resources or opportunities could both parties share? Then it is time for the outreach. When possible, do not cold call an organization! Do the hard work of finding a way to get an introduction or share space.

Remember, despite best intentions, community members may choose not to engage with you. This should be respected. The sex worker rights community is not a monolith, and other organizations or advocates may be interested. Providers must be persistent with their efforts to find an organization or advocate who is willing and able to partner.

4. Follow-Through

Be sure to follow through with the next steps or commitments made in the initial or early days of the partnerships. If a community member shares their experience, work, or perspective, give credit to that work. Ask them how they want to be credited to prioritize their safety. Do not claim credit for the work of others.

Outreach and Identification

Outreach and education to reach vulnerable communities is a critical component of anti-trafficking work. These efforts help identify survivors and link them to needed services, such as: know your rights education with workers so they can identify human trafficking when it happens, educating other agencies or systems that can provide referrals to their services, and community (ie: farmworkers) outreach. No matter the type or level of outreach, most organizations develop some mechanism to reach survivors.

Unfortunately, current anti-trafficking identification efforts can be dangerous for those in the sex trades. Police-led operations often result in arrests, and many describe these experiences as traumatizing. Advocates have reported other safety concerns, including physical retaliation from customers who are angry they were arrested. Some organizations even use misleading practices to reach sex trafficking survivors, like responding to sexual services ads in order to offer services. This erodes any opportunity for building trust with the community and does not support self-determination. Given this harm, organizations must be intentional about how they show up in communities to link survivors to services.

DIRECT COMMUNITY OUTREACH

When possible, we recommend organizations partner with sex worker safety advocates to assist in identifying survivors that need additional support or services due to exploitation. These individuals have the best context and are probably already providing services to this community. Some of the services they might already provide include condoms and other sexual health supplies, food, housing, and medical care; syringe exchanges and Narcan/overdose prevention education; and circulating safety information like bad date lists that help consensual sex workers share information about abusive clients. Organizations should identify what services they can offer to complement those services and how to support existing, community-led outreach. If agencies work in a less-populated area that does not have formal sex worker safety organizations, consider reaching out to organizations that focus on other forms of harm reduction. Because of existing relationships within the drug user health community and the nature of their work, these professionals may be better positioned to reach survivors than anti-trafficking providers and may even have informal sex worker harm reduction resources that are not publicly available.

If an anti-trafficking organization still leads sex trafficking identification efforts, transparency should guide that work. Organizations should share their goals and limitations with those in the

sex trades and their partners. This includes providing answers to questions such as:

- What restrictions does our organization face in serving sex workers? Are we willing to find workarounds to provide services?
- What supplies/services/resources can we offer?
- Do we have other goals or motivations that these individuals should know about? Do we expect that they are no longer in the sex trades? Or that they should sever ties with whomever the organization considers their abuser? That they are ready to disclose their victimization?

Providing this context helps build trust and rapport. Equally important, organizations must prioritize the safety of those in the sex trades. This means not engaging them under false pretenses, like pretending to be a potential client and responding to a sex worker's ads or collaborating with law enforcement operations enacted without prior evidence of human trafficking. Staff should also take great care when conducting street outreach, as their presence might draw negative attention and put the sex workers in danger.

After identifying an individual who might need services, providers must be sure to ground the initial conversation in principles of trauma-informed care and harm reduction. Like everyone, this person is the expert of their own experience and advocates should not define their experiences or a "successful" outcome for them. Service providers should be clear about their limitations for those who do not identify as trafficking survivor. If individuals are eligible and interested in an anti-trafficking organization's services, they should be offered choices and not forced into shifting behaviors that are inconsistent with their goals. We will dive more into these initial interactions in the Services section.

INDIRECT COMMUNITY EDUCATION

Anti-trafficking advocates who lean on education to identify survivors can still apply harm reduction principles in their efforts. Often, "awareness" presentations are typically built to help other agencies identify red flags of human trafficking. While this information can be helpful for providers who are newer to this phenomenon, we must be careful not to present sweeping

Organizations must **prioritize the safety** of those in the sex trades

generalizations that lead to harmful outcomes. For example, just because an individual trades sexual services for something of value does not mean they are being trafficked. There must be an element of force, fraud, or coercion for financial gain - except in the case of a minor. Red flag training has also resulted in families and/or individuals being targets of racism in public places like airports.¹⁸ Sex worker safety advocates repeatedly made this distinction between trafficked and consensual sex and cited the harmful safety ramifications of being misidentified, and yet many anti-trafficking advocates often conflate consensual and trafficked commercial sex in their

We must be careful not to present **sweeping generalizations** that lead to harmful outcomes

education, awareness, and outreach efforts. Human trafficking outreach must not conflate these two, and instead, must be intentional in this distinction. Other red flag indicators have been widely circulated that are problematic because of the risk of criminalization.¹⁹ A great way to potentially avoid these errors is to have anti-trafficking organizations' education materials reviewed by survivors or sex worker safety advocates.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR ORGANIZATIONS INVOLVED IN HUMAN TRAFFICKING INTERVENTION COURTS

Many organizations have partnered with local court systems through human trafficking intervention courts (HTICs) to identify survivors. Modeled after other "diversion" courts, these specialized courts work with people arrested for prostitution-related offenses. These individuals are sometimes screened for human trafficking and, if eligible, offered mandated services to complete. If the survivor does not agree to engage or complete these services, they are referred back to the traditional criminal legal system to be charged and sentenced for the original offense.²⁰

HTICs expanded rapidly in the US and were praised by many in the field as an effective model to prevent survivors from entering the court system. HTICs refer individuals to services and have provided modest funding to organizations providing those services in the past. In some cases, this may be the only stable financial support sex worker safety organizations receive. However, these courts have increasingly faced scrutiny. Advocates are troubled that survivors are being threatened with criminal convictions at all, given the documented barriers to safety and stability that criminal records create. Forcing an

Choice should be integrated into the process wherever it is possible.

individual to engage in a particular service or with a specific provider recreates the power and control tactics used by traffickers. Traffickers may threaten to have survivors arrested or might withhold basic necessities like food and shelter. Additionally, trauma-informed principles have led the field away from mandating or requiring services and toward a voluntary services model. In addition to stripping away survivors' autonomy, required services may not be relevant to their needs and in some cases, may cause more harm or require religious participation. For these reasons, some service providers choose not to partner with HTICs.

Organizations weighing whether to partner with an HTIC must understand these realities. Staff must advocate for comprehensive training for court professionals that is grounded in trauma-informed care, with an emphasis on autonomy and choice. Choice should be integrated into the process wherever it is possible. Providers must also review the court procedures, including those with legal ramifications, and push for changes that mitigate harm. When providers are not clear on the legal ramifications of participation in these courts, they should confer with criminal defense experts. This process might also include reviewing what types of services are being mandated, for how long, and with what providers.

Some questions to consider:

- Is the individual able to choose services that are necessary and helpful to them from a range of options?
- Are the services readily accessible and achievable or unnecessarily cumbersome?
- Is the timeline reasonable, or does it create a significant barrier?
- How are individuals treated if they do not complete the program? What if they are arrested again?

The answers to these questions will identify places for advocacy within the system to reduce the likelihood of harm.

Funding and Resources

Funding is scarce in all social justice movements, including anti-trafficking. We need more resources to support communities in sustainable ways that have the desired impact. Right now, anti-trafficking services are closely tied to the criminal legal system, and prevention funding is often wasted on criminalization initiatives. This reality has led to negative outcomes for survivors and other impacted communities while restricting our efforts to curb violence and human trafficking.

However, funding continues to increase for human trafficking services, rising exponentially over the last decade.²¹ In the United States, the Federal government funds a significant amount of anti-trafficking services. The Office for Victims of Crime has almost **doubled its funding since 2016**, which does not include local and state funding increases. While it is still insufficient to meet the need, conversely, resources have become increasingly scarce for sex worker safety organizations that support the broader community. Sex worker safety advocates have very few financial resources to deliver services. Some of the services provided by sex worker safety advocates meet the very same needs that anti-trafficking organizations hope to address. Many must rely on donations through mutual aid networks to get basic necessities for their peers.



Funding services that focus on a specific experience is not particularly helpful. Instead of meeting people where they are and providing them with the individualized services they need, the current system silos different types of harm into “the deserving” and “the undeserving.”

In conclusion, despite sharing the same physical space, facing many of the same challenges, and having the same needs, a person who identifies as a trafficking survivor has a much better opportunity to find help than a person who identifies as a consensual sex worker. Anti-trafficking organizations must not put individuals in situations where they feel obligated to identify as

trafficking survivors to access services, reducing their autonomy and distorting our understanding of prevalence. At a minimum, anti-trafficking organizations should recognize this reality and do their part to reduce harm. The next section should help organizations begin conversations on identifying the impact they are having through funding and give some practical solutions to share resources.

DO A FUNDING AUDIT

Anti-trafficking organizations should start with a funding audit. This should include a careful look at all funding sources, not just streams that support anti-trafficking work. **The following worksheet can guide a conversation about each funder, begin a dialog about challenges, and start a discussion on solutions.**

Restricts funding from those actively working the sex trades.	Yes	No
Requires or mandates cooperation with the criminal legal system, including law enforcement.	Yes	No
Requires the organization to report unnecessary information for services that could cause safety concerns.	Yes	No
Conflates human trafficking and consensual work in the sex trades.	Yes	No
Supports “End Demand” (increased policing on the purchasers of sexual services or partial criminalization) as a response to human trafficking.	Yes	No
Requires or mandates other activities to receive services (religious practices, therapy, etc.)	Yes	No
Requires certification or verification of human trafficking to qualify for services.	Yes	No

SHARE POWER AND RESOURCES

Collaboration between the anti-trafficking and sex worker rights movements is required to build a cohesive approach to human trafficking and exploitation in the sex trades. But we must work to overcome the fundamental power difference between these two fields. Anti-trafficking advocates hold privileges that they should use to secure resources for sex worker safety advocates.

1. Carve out funding in your budget for sex worker safety organizations

While this may not be possible for all funding streams, it is certainly possible for some. Organizations can start with a small step, including a training budget to bring in sex worker safety advocates or micro-grants to community-based organizations for education and outreach. Agencies should also consider sub-contracts to organizations already delivering services to those in the sex trades or doing prevention work.

Anti-trafficking organizations can also share non-monetary resources, like professional or leadership development opportunities, or office space. These can increase the capacity to develop programs and hone new leadership within their movement. Organizations can offer in-kind services like grant application review or support for a fundraiser. Lending this type of organizational support can make a huge impact, has a small cost, and builds trust and rapport.

2. Advocate with your funders

Sex worker safety advocates do anti-trafficking prevention daily. Service providers must commit to educating their funders about the importance of this work. If an anti-trafficking organization faces grant restrictions that limit services to trafficking survivors only, partnering with a sex worker safety organization is a practical path to a more holistic approach to meeting the needs of all individuals in the sex trades. Work collaboratively with sex worker safety advocates to do a presentation or host a listening session with funders to demonstrate a shared vision of serving the entire community. Providers should use their position to invite sex worker safety advocates into spaces and discussions they may not have access to.

3. Push for policy change

Unfortunately, some grant restrictions are codified into law and require policy change. Staff must be sure they understand the laws that govern funding. If they are unsure how these laws impact their funding streams, they should consult a pro bono attorney or public policy expert to analyze the policies instead of making over-broad

assumptions. For example, many organizations that receive federal funding believe they are not permitted to provide services to those who continue to do sex work under the “Prostitution Pledge.” This section of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act does not bar services to survivors who are still engaged in commercial sex or prevent them from working in collaboration with sex worker safety organizations and advocates. For more information about the pledge and its restrictions, advocates can contact Freedom Network USA for more information. The restrictions may be less strict than the organization believes. Once the organization has a good understanding, staff should advocate for changes where necessary. This type of advocacy can be very time-consuming, sometimes taking years to overturn overly restrictive or harmful funding practices. Some organizations may need more capacity to invest in these efforts. In this case, consider partnering with organizations that are already doing this type of advocacy.

Ideally, anti-trafficking organizations would not take financial support from funders that cause harm to the communities they serve. Given how anti-trafficking services are funded, this may not feel possible for most organizations. However, as helpers, service providers are ethically obligated to call out and fight systemic oppression. Anti-trafficking leaders must do everything they can to move away from harmful funders and be critical of future funding opportunities. In the meantime, organizations should be transparent with their partners and clients about where their funding comes from and how that might impact their work.

Public Policy

Most anti-trafficking organizations engage in some advocacy work including advocating for increased funding or better grant policies. Other organizations have a full policy agenda, including legislation they hope to introduce or change. Anti-trafficking organizations sometimes hold contradictory policy positions on the sex trade compared to other industries where human trafficking occurs. The stigma against sex workers has led to moral judgment about the sex trade that don't impact other industries. When advocates aren't morally opposed to an industry, like agriculture, they work to make the industry and all workers safer and listen to those working in that industry. Anti-trafficking organizations must apply the same human rights values to public policy in the sex trades as in other sectors: listen to sex workers and advocate for a safer workplace for all.

When advocates aren't morally opposed to an industry... **they work to make the industry and all workers safer** and listen to those working in that industry.

Much of the harm documented at the beginning

of this document can be linked directly to public policy efforts. Several sex worker safety advocates mentioned the Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act, better known as FOSTA/SESTA. This law has negative consequences that have rippled throughout the community. Anti-trafficking policy has led to increased policing of individuals in the sex trades, halted their ability to use harm reduction methods, reduced their ability to financially support themselves or loved ones, and contributed to the stigma and shame they experience.

Below is another example of the harms caused by increased policing of those in the sex trades, that is a direct result of current anti-trafficking public policy advocacy. This graphic appeared at the top of a local news story in Polk County, Florida, entitled, "Human trafficking sting results in 160 arrests, including high school teacher, Disney employee."

These anti-trafficking efforts are driven by policy advocacy focused on reducing demand for commercial sex through increased policing, penalties and public shaming of potential clients of sex workers. The individuals on the right were allegedly in the sex trades and were arrested, including the human trafficking survivors they identified. Being arrested creates new barriers for each one of these people, many of whom already face impossible odds. Anti-trafficking public policy has harmed all of them.



Note: We have blurred the faces in this photo to protect their identity. Photo credit WILX 10 News; <https://www.wilx.com/2022/09/12/human-trafficking-sting-results-160-arrests-including-high-school-teacher-disney-employee/>

There are so many more examples like the one above. Anti-trafficking advocates can make changes in their advocacy work to benefit all those in the sex trades.

First, organizations should find ways to include sex worker safety perspectives in public policy work. After they have done the work to create partnerships with advocates in the space, providers can share advocacy platforms where sex workers are not typically welcome to show solidarity. Leveraging privilege and power to include these perspectives in coalitions, meetings with government officials, and policy strategies will help build trust while creating a more holistic dialog on human trafficking issues. If an anti-trafficking organization is working on passing a specific bill, they can introduce legislators to these communities early on to determine if there are unintended consequences that they didn't see and support changes to address those potential harms.

Anti-trafficking organizations should also intentionally commit to supporting the policy positions and priorities developed by sex worker safety advocates by requesting to join coalition meetings or following sex worker safety advocates' work on social media or through newsletters. This information can surface opportunities for collaboration and inform anti-trafficking advocacy. Once service providers have this information, they can show up in many positive and productive ways. Consider these questions:

- Can anti-trafficking organizations lend resources, including training on public policy advocacy, to the effort?
- Do they have relationships that might be helpful to their case?

Closing

We hope the information in these guidelines sparks new conversations for you and your organization. We recognize that some content may be new or contradict what you learned from other human trafficking resources. As social justice professionals, we must embrace a learning mindset. If something feels impossible or inaccessible, look for one suggestion you can implement. Something as simple as following a sex worker safety organization on social media or reading a book written by someone who works in the sex trade can begin to expose you to their perspective and illuminate how anti-trafficking organizations can align with sex worker safety initiatives. The sooner we realize their struggles and hopes are interconnected to our own and the survivors we serve, the closer we are to collective liberation.

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FREEDOM NETWORK USA

Freedom Network USA is the largest coalition of advocates working on human trafficking issues in the United States. Our network includes survivors, legal and social service providers, researchers, and expert consultants. The network mobilizes its collective strength to build a transformative approach to human trafficking that is grounded in anti-racism and anti-oppression. Together with our members on the ground, we envision an anti-trafficking movement where

survivors have what they need to thrive, including access to holistic services that are available to all, and all advocates are committed to dismantling harmful systems that create vulnerability.

NATIONAL SURVIVOR NETWORK

The National Survivor Network is a values-based membership association of survivors of human trafficking from all over the United States and abroad who are working (or hope to work in) the many movements to end violence. Our mission is to develop, equip, and empower a community of survivors of human trafficking engaging in advocacy, education, peer-to-peer mentorship, prevention, and policy work using a public health, human rights, and harm reduction approach. We are survivors of all forms of human trafficking working together to create a world without human trafficking and a movement that is led by survivors.

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