

Housing Navigators: An Innovative Strategy to Improve Housing Access for Trafficking Survivors



"Access to safe and affordable housing can be a challenge for victims of human trafficking. Many victims face unique barriers to accessing and maintaining housing as a direct result of their victimization."

- [OVC Human Trafficking Capacity Building Center](#)¹

Introduction to Housing Navigators

Housing Navigators are one strategy in assisting survivors of trafficking who face unique housing barriers. As more federal funding streams begin to encourage applicants to hire and staff housing navigator positions, organizations will be able to offer trafficking survivors dedicated support in obtaining and maintaining safe and affordable housing. This resource will provide an overview of the Housing Navigator position, explain the specific responsibilities of the position, and how those duties can be implemented within anti-trafficking housing programs.

Housing Navigators work directly with trafficking survivors by providing specialized housing advocacy throughout the housing process. They acquire knowledge of housing systems, federal rights, and state laws; build partnerships with landlords, property management companies and other local housing programs; aid in lease negotiations; and educate survivors about tenant responsibilities. Building collaborative partnerships with local landlords, Public Housing Authorities and Continuums of Care helps identify housing options and remove housing barriers for survivors.

Some federal funders, including the Office for Victims of Crime (OVC), are including this type of position as an eligible funded position within anti-trafficking housing programs; therefore, it is important to differentiate the scope of a Housing Navigator's position. For example, Housing and Urban Development (HUD) has utilized the position of Navigators² and tends to focus on supporting people in need of housing assistance to navigate the Coordinated Entry System (CES) as an element of case management services.

Housing navigators that work with specific populations (such as survivors of human trafficking) should have intentional training and skills in working with the identified population in addition to the collaboration skills necessary to identify and secure housing for the individuals they are serving. To facilitate this, OVC encourages funded programs to create specific housing navigator positions which have different responsibilities than case managers or advocates. Separating and clarifying responsibilities between positions helps to ensure each staff receives relevant professional development and organizational support. Appropriate staffing would match staff with the skills and experience that is best suited for each position.

Responsibilities of Housing Navigators

Assisting Survivors to Locate, Obtain, and Retain Safe Housing

Housing Navigators will be working at the intersections of both housing barriers and also barriers that are specific to human trafficking. For example, a primary responsibility for Housing Navigators is helping survivors locate, obtain, and retain affordable, and stable housing. This responsibility requires expertise in housing options within the local community and working with local landlords. However, Navigators are also expected to have the necessary trafficking expertise to help survivors access safe housing.

Case Study:

Amber recently fled from her trafficker after finding out that she was pregnant. She has not had access to her personal documents for as long as she can remember. She is eligible for and accepted into your housing program.

What are some ways a Housing Navigator could assist her prior to signing a lease?

Tips:

1. Consider the documents and general information that she will need to gather to apply for housing based on the type of housing she wants.
2. Ask Amber about what she wants and needs from your program. Ask about her goals and challenges.
3. Evaluate what your program can provide and what referrals would be helpful to access community resources.



Below are examples of assistance that help trafficking survivors apply for and obtain housing. Amber can choose from a list of activities, based on what she wants and needs. It is important to only ask for documentation and information based on the needs communicated, or work with the survivor in obtaining the necessary materials to meet the communicated needs. Asking for unnecessary information can come across as aggressive and mirror dynamics of control from the trafficking relationship.

Documents Needed	Information to Gather	Internal Programming	Community Resources
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identification • Social security card • Birth certificate • Pay stubs • Bank statements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rental history • Employment history • References • Credit score • Debt and arrears 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education • Employment • Childcare • Transportation • Skill building • Safety planning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Donated household items • Public benefits • Workforce development • Healing options

Housing Navigators can offer a variety of housing based services and supports, which are linked to building stability. Although it can seem that assisting survivors obtaining their GED (General Education Development) is not linked to housing, a GED can increase earning potential. Higher earnings increase housing options and long-term sustainability. Alternatively, when trafficking survivors need emergency services (hygiene, clothing, food, etc), Housing Navigators can refer them to the appropriate community resources.

Services that are more obviously linked to housing include helping survivors with finding available units; understanding and filling out housing applications; and accompaniment to look at units. Again, Housing Navigators will demonstrate their dual expertise. As Navigators tour available units with survivors, they will offer safety planning based on the survivor's experiences and unit.

For example:

- The unit may be in an unsafe location.
- It may lack appropriate lighting in the hallways, laundry rooms, stairwells, and parking areas.
- The door might not have a peephole or chain lock.
- The unit may be on the ground floor level with windows that are easy to access (break and enter).
- Landscaping may be overgrown and create hiding places by blocking clear views.

Housing Navigators can help talk through potential safety issues to assess if they are “deal breakers”. However, the ultimate decision in selecting a unit is the survivor's.

Assisting Survivors Understand Leases

Leases are typically written in legal jargon; therefore, when it comes time to sign a lease, Housing Navigators can offer to help trafficking survivors understand the language and terms of the lease. Trafficking survivors will need to remember when rent is due; late fee amounts; which repairs are their responsibility; if utilities or trash costs are included in the rent or billed from separate companies; and which lease violations result in eviction. Navigators can assist survivors in developing tools and reminders to support themselves in meeting these requirements.

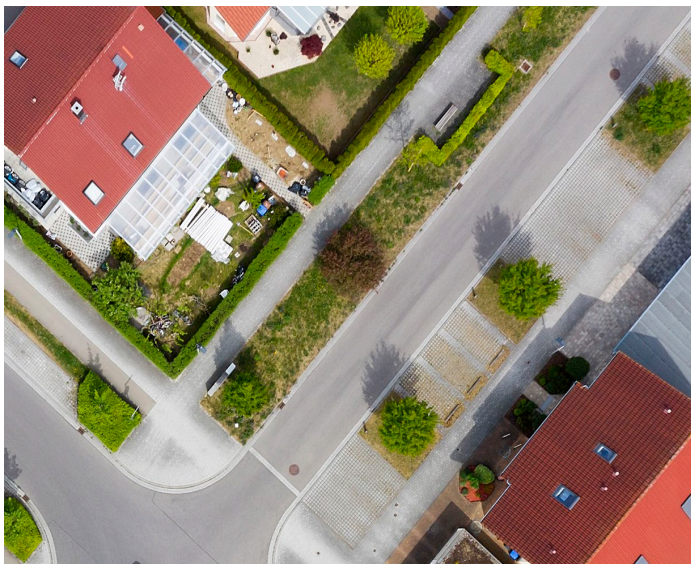
This task is important even if the lease is under the name of the agency. Survivors will eventually obtain housing under their own name, so this knowledge is important.



Aiding in Lease Negotiations

Navigators may be able to help with lease negotiations. For example, landlords may be willing to waive or reduce pet fees or utilities. They may agree to two months of advance rent rather than a security deposit. In return, Navigators can offer to refer program participants to the landlord's vacant units.

Survivors without a car can offer up their parking space for another tenant to use, offer to give extra notice when they do not want to renew the lease; or agree not to smoke in the unit. Navigators can also look for potential lease clauses or requirements that violate federal and state tenant rights, such as the Fair Housing Act³.



Assisting Survivors with Challenges

Housing Navigators provide vital assistance to trafficking survivors facing barriers to access and maintain safe and stable housing. Navigators help survivors negotiate with landlords, connect to rental assistance resources, and prevent evictions when financial constraints arise. They may support survivors with learning basic property maintenance expectations and submitting for housing repairs to ensure habitable living conditions for those learning these skills or identifying resources. Additionally, Navigators may help survivors strategize around lease specifications on visitor parameters. For example, they may assist with establishing new boundaries regarding long-term guests such as friends and families (including street families), and individuals who are still involved in trafficking. Conversely, they may assist in advocating to landlords about overly strict visitor policies. In this position Housing Navigators can support survivors on how to mitigate issues with neighbors, communicate with landlords about property needs, or best practices for documenting rental payments. Through individualized safety planning, Navigators provide guidance to identify and minimize risks and connect survivors with crucial community resources and support.

For example, Navigators can link survivors who are seeking recovery from substance use addictions to harm reduction and recovery services that offer stability building and wellness programming. They're able to connect survivors to legal advocacy to help navigate housing rights⁴, immigration status, and related needs. Navigators take a trauma-sensitive, restorative approach that addresses underlying challenges, while delivering practical housing assistance. This model aims to improve housing sustainability through survivor empowerment and control over their own lives.



Tenant Counseling

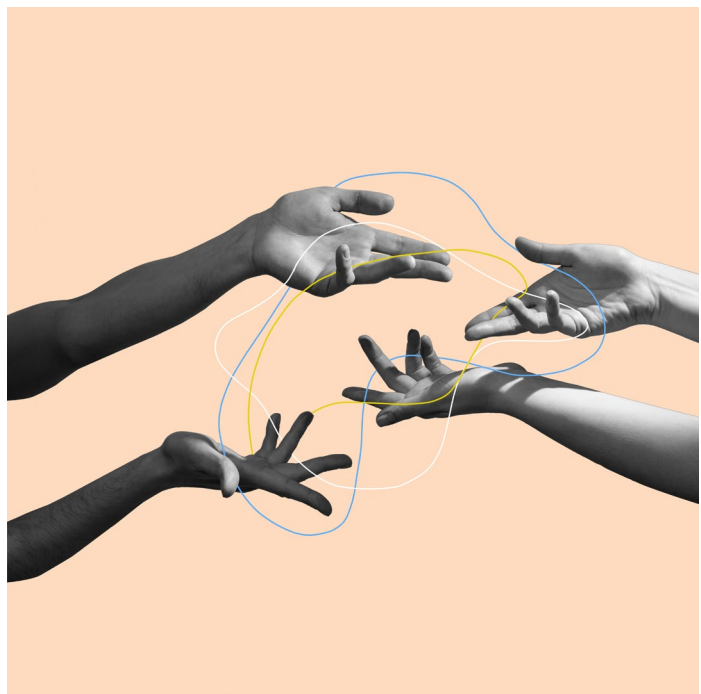
Housing Navigators can assist survivors in obtaining rental insurance, and maintaining a safe, habitable residence. Instilling financial knowledge and positive rental habits empowers survivors on their journey toward maintaining their rental unit and potential homeownership.

After a trafficking survivor has secured housing, Navigators continue providing guidance on exercising tenant rights and responsibilities. They are better equipped to assist survivors facing housing discrimination when they have a full understanding of applicable federal and state laws, and Tribal codes. They help in understanding lease terms, connecting to legal aid for landlord disputes, and avoiding eviction through repayment plans or other suggested remedies if behind on rent. Navigators may also collaborate with, and educate, landlords to resolve conflicts, potentially preventing legal action. Their support in accessing resources and advocating for rental rights is invaluable.

The relationships that Navigators form with survivors during the rental process enables them to facilitate long-term financial planning for the survivor and long-term relationships with landlords. They further assist survivors in safeguarding health through education on topics like emergency preparedness and maintaining a hazard-free home. By taking a holistic, ongoing approach, Navigators aid survivors in achieving housing security and overall well-being.

Attending Local Housing Meetings

Housing Navigators play a critical role in shaping housing programs and related policies in their communities. With the availability of various housing assistance options through municipalities, boroughs, counties, and housing authorities, Navigators actively participate in housing coalition convenings and provide input on developing wrap-around services and supports. Their perspective is instrumental for ensuring programs safely meet the needs of trafficking survivors, especially those with intersecting identities (LGBTQ+ survivors, male survivors, survivors with disabilities, etc).



More specifically, Navigators can advocate for coalition meetings that center survivor voices. They can offer feedback on trauma-informed approaches to housing, to avoid re-traumatization. Navigators also understand which programs survivors qualify for and gaps or barriers that need to be addressed. Since local housing authorities, Continuums of Care, and other federally funded housing programs influence funding decisions, Navigators are key to steering resources toward survivor-focused projects. Their expertise makes them essential partners in designing housing programs that effectively empower and include survivors. Because of their knowledgeable contributions, Navigators can transform communities into ones that provide pathways to safe and stable housing for all.



Developing Relationships with Landlords and Apartment Associations

Developing strong rapport with local landlords⁵ is a core role for Housing Navigators seeking to expand options for trafficking survivors. Landlord relationships built on trust are key to whether survivor applications are accepted. By deliberately cultivating community connections, Navigators can increase survivors' access to safe, stable housing.

Housing navigators should get to know landlords, realtors, and management companies as partners in this work. They can communicate ways in which supporting survivor tenants aligns with company values or interests. Navigators also share resources to meet landlord needs around trauma-informed practices and incentives. With written and informed consent, they can serve as a mediator after serious incidents, removing the need to involve law enforcement. Overall, Navigators' advocacy and guidance foster mutually beneficial arrangements between landlords and survivors. Their community-level relationships open doors to safe, affordable, and sustainable living that may otherwise remain closed to

Conclusion

There are a multitude of advantages to incorporating Housing Navigators into anti-trafficking programs. They build organizational capacity, establish clear roles and boundaries between different staff positions, free up time for other staff members, and improve housing outcomes for survivors. They are specialist positions, which necessitate intentionality towards ensuring that they are providing services within their scope and that they are not isolated at organizations. Because Navigators may be the only staff members at an organization who are providing these specialized housing services, it is important to encourage team building and provide support to maintain a team connection regardless of role.

Additionally, it is common for programs to add tasks to a navigator position, especially when other positions may be “short-staffed”. However, Navigators should not be used to temporarily fill vacant positions. They have a very intentional purpose that could compromise housing access and stability if pulled into tasks outside of their role. Housing Navigators’ jobs are not done after survivors are moved into units. Navigators play a critical role in providing ongoing services and support to survivors, building partnerships, educating housing stakeholders, and engaging in local housing meetings. Trafficking survivors benefit from this specialized housing assistance, in order to overcome their unique barriers in accessing safe, stable, and affordable housing.

Resources

1. [Addressing Housing for Victims of Human Trafficking](#)
2. [COVID-19 Homeless System Response: Housing Navigation](#)
3. [Fair Housing: Equal Opportunity for All](#)
4. [Tenant Protections Resource: ERASE Project](#)
5. [Landlord Engagement: Partnering to Safely House DV & SV Survivors](#)