

Applying the Five Tiers of Economic Empowerment to Anti-Trafficking Housing Programs

Introduction

“Economic independence and security are critical to the safety and well-being of survivors of human trafficking.”

-Futures Without Violence, 2017.

This resource will provide multiple strategies to support trafficking survivors' education and employment growth. Utilizing the Futures Without Violence [Five Tiers of Economic Empowerment model](#), service providers can implement economic empowerment throughout a range of shelter and housing options. The guidance provided below will include ways that these tiers can be woven into short, medium, and long-term housing services:

- **Tier 1: Crisis management** - addressing immediate, safety, legal, and basic needs for trafficking survivors.
- **Tier 2: Career exploration** - assisting survivors in learning about relevant interests, values, skills, and characteristics to pursue certain occupations.
- **Tier 3: Skill building and work readiness** - providing opportunities for survivors to build the foundational and soft skills necessary to integrate into the workplace.
- **Tier 4: Experience building** - linking survivors with applicable volunteer work, internships, job shadowing, apprenticeships, and community leadership positions.
- **Tier 5: Employment** - supporting survivors in finding employment that aligns with their interests, skills, and experience.

The first step in incorporating this tiered model is conducting a detailed [needs assessment](#) to determine gaps in services that connect survivors to economic empowerment opportunities. Once the gaps are identified, housing programs are encouraged to build strategic partnerships with a variety of education and career training programs, employers, financial institutions and community-based organizations. These strategic partnerships help expand options for survivors and build capacity of housing programs to address barriers survivors face in accessing affordable education, safe and living wage employment, and economic mobility across diverse industries.

Some of the barriers survivors of trafficking face to economic empowerment opportunities are:

- Trauma: physical, emotional, and cognitive
- Criminal records associated with trafficking
- Gaps in education and work history
- Lack of housing, food, and basic living resources
- Undocumented and legal right to work challenges
- Unsafe work environments

To effectively address these barriers, housing advocates should identify education and economic empowerment partners that are willing to be trained in confidentiality, the impact of trauma on employment, vetting education programs, creating trauma-informed workplaces, and safety in the workplace for survivors. A formal partnership/memorandum of understanding agreement (MOU) is important for outlining roles, responsibilities, and protections that keep survivors safe and fulfill the gaps in supportive services within housing programs.

Economic empowerment is strongly tied to housing advocacy. However, housing programs often focus on financial literacy only. While financial literacy is important, there needs to be a more comprehensive approach that helps survivors build capital and connect to broader economic and education opportunities. Resources for this comprehensive approach, Reimagining Financial Literacy for Survivors along with the Five Tiers, can help programs expand on their understanding and implementation of economic empowerment programming. In order to create safety and stability for survivors, housing advocates must move beyond financial literacy to meaningful collaborations with workforce, education, and economic development advocates. This collaboration can help address program capacity issues and build strategies that connect survivors to housing opportunities. Landlords may be more willing to rent to trafficking survivors engaged in education and employment programs, even when they do not meet the income criteria, because survivors are moving towards meeting rental qualification requirements with a potential for stable employment and increased income.



This guide will support housing advocates in understanding the five key components of economic empowerment and how each tier could be implemented within the following housing models: Emergency Shelters, Transitional Housing (TH), Rapid Re-Housing (RRH) and Permanent Housing. When reviewing this guide, it is important to note the following:

- When implementing economic empowerment strategies, it is important to consider the diverse needs of your community. Housing programs should build strategic partnerships within each tier that supports the inclusive needs of neurodivergent survivors, survivors with disabilities, LGBTQI+ survivors, survivors with criminal records, survivors who experience immigration/legal right to work challenges and language barriers, and Black, Indigenous, and people of color who are often systematically disconnected from opportunities. Key resources that support these specific communities are:
 - [National Human Trafficking & Disabilities Working Group](#)
 - [Centerlink: The Community of LGBTQ Centers](#)
 - [Supporting the Education and Employment Needs of Survivors with Criminal Records](#)
 - [Immigrants Rising: Transforming Lives Through Education](#)
- Although this document associates specific tiers with each housing model, they are not strict instructions. Housing advocates are encouraged to incorporate any and all suggestions, across all models based on program needs, goals and capacity.
- Rural communities often struggle to access the workforce development infrastructure and resources to support survivors with education and employment needs.
- Not all survivors access each/all of these housing options. For example, some may choose to skip emergency shelters or find alternative housing options within their community that best suits their needs. Housing advocates can commit to supporting survivors with economic opportunities regardless of which housing option they engage in.



Housing Model: Short Term Emergency Shelter

Emergency shelters are often considered the immediate solution when trafficking survivors are fleeing. They provide safety from violence, and responses to emergencies and crises. For example, shelters can assist survivors with accessing food, hygiene products, clothing, and other basic necessities. Shelter advocates can assist survivors in creating safety plans and addressing any medical or legal needs. Shelter services are relatively short term, and survivors primarily engage in those services between a few days to multiple months.

Economic empowerment is often overlooked within emergency shelters because the focus is on securing safety and immediate resources. While this priority is essential, it is very important for emergency shelters to introduce opportunities for cultivating financial resources and economic stability to support long-term safety. Trafficking survivors may find themselves in a dire financial situation that may push them to return to their traffickers to fulfill basic needs. While not all survivors will be ready to engage in the employment and experience building tiers of economic empowerment, emergency shelter staff can assist in other areas. For example, staff can help survivors explore their interests and expand skills supporting immediate and long-term financial security.

Emergency shelters are encouraged to implement the following economic empowerment tiers: Crisis Management and Skill Building/Work Readiness. Below are examples of implementation strategies for emergency shelter programs:

- **Crisis Management** - The primary goal of this tier is to support survivors in eliminating or mitigating barriers around starting or completing an educational, training, and/or employment program. Survivors of trafficking often have unmet safety, medical, mental health, legal, and basic human needs that make it difficult to access and maintain economic security. Meeting these unmet needs is critical in order for survivors to transition out of crisis and emergency shelters and into long-term housing stability. During this tier, emergency shelters can focus on community mapping and building strong collaborations to help address barriers and to increase economic empowerment options. Shelters can also explore obtaining and providing flexible funding to meet survivors' immediate and individualized needs.

- **Community Mapping:** Engaging in a thorough search of local, state, and national resources may reveal potential methods to eliminate educational, employment, and financial barriers that survivors are seeking to overcome. Shelters can also focus on building a robust and updated resource list on all the economic empowerment programs and educational opportunities that are available in the region by including information about eligibility, program offerings, and key points of contact. Survivors can also be connected to relevant public benefits and victim compensation. Through this community mapping, shelters can build a supportive network of care as survivors take a critical step towards recovery and financial independence. To support this community mapping process, explore the following resources:
 - [Community Resource Mapping Toolkit: Supporting the Needs of Human Trafficking, Domestic Violence, and Sexual Assault](#)
 - [Collaborative Community Resource Mapping to Support Survivors of Human Trafficking and Domestic and Sexual Violence](#)
- **Collaboration:** No single agency or program can address every barrier to education, employment, and financial security. Supporting someone in crisis requires resources across sectors. Without meaningful relationships with community-based partners, workforce development programs, educational institutions, and employers, shelter staff are left to play multiple roles with limited capacity, support, and training. Emergency shelters can ease this pressure and shortage of resources by investing in building meaningful relationships with local, state and national partners. Navigating confidentiality when building these relationships may require extensive conversations and a formal [Memorandum of Understanding](#) to protect the safety of survivors. The following resources offer guidance on creating and sustaining purposeful collaborations and partnerships to address barriers to economic empowerment:
 - [Building Collaborative Responses to Human Trafficking Project](#)
 - [Collaboration to Increase Access to Employment Opportunities for Survivors of Human Trafficking and Domestic and Sexual Violence](#)
 - [Building Partnerships and Pathways and Collaborations with Workforce and Education Systems: A Step-by-Step Guide on How to Form Partnerships with Education and Workforce Programs](#)
 - [Transformational Collaborations: Considerations to Apply a Racial Equity Lens \(Caminar Latino\)](#)
 - [Centering Racial Equity in Collaboration Survey \(Caminar Latino\)](#)
 - [Meaningful Engagement of People with Lived Experience Toolkit \(Survivor Alliance\)](#)
 - [Collaboration Toolkit for Anti-Trafficking and Housing Programs](#)

- **Flexible Funding** is “unrestricted funds given directly to survivors of abuse to help them with safety and stability as they rebuild their life after abuse. Flexible financial assistance can help with a wide variety of expenses, including transportation, education, employment, children’s needs, safety needs, housing, and time-limited and flexible rental assistance” ([Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence, 2023](#)). This type of financial assistance allows survivors to use it for what they need most without extensive administrative hurdles. Data demonstrates that access to low-barrier financial support can help survivors address their self-determined needs, build confidence, and increase access to long-term housing and economic stability. A longitudinal, qualitative evaluation of the [District Alliance for Safe Housing’s Flexible Funding Program](#) in Washington, DC, found that 94 percent of participants were stably housed six months after receiving an average of \$2,079 in funding. Thereby showing that flexible funding programs are a successful method to help survivors obtain safe housing and improve housing stability and overall well-being. These resources provide additional information about utilizing flexible funding for survivors:
 - [Trust Survivors: Building and Effective and Inclusive Cash Assistance Program \(FreeFrom\)](#)
 - [Flexible Funding for Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Survivors \(National Alliance for Safe Housing\)](#)
 - [The Power of Cash: Guaranteed Income Can Strengthen Worker Power \(Economic Security Project\)](#)

Skill Building/Work Readiness: Shelters may not have the staff capacity to formalize focused activities on this tier but are likely providing individualized assistance that increases access to education and skill-building opportunities. Shelter staff often make referrals to partnering organizations that specialize in workforce development. They may offer support around goal planning, filling out job applications, writing resumes, and finding interview clothes. Intentional engagement helps survivors build skills, and some shelters have created job readiness curriculums that are offered as workshops for small groups.

Housing Model: Medium Term Transitional Housing (TH) and Rapid Re-Housing (RRH)

Transitional Housing (TH) is typically provided for a 6 - 24 month time period, during which survivors move towards long-term stability and sustainability. TH activities focus on preparing survivors for long-term and permanent housing. Advocates offer housing search and relocation assistance, rental subsidies, economic advocacy, education and employment services, healing support, ongoing safety planning to adjust for life changes, and relevant referrals to other community resources.

Rapid Re-Housing (RRH) "is designed to help households establish a foundation to support long-term permanent housing success" (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2022). This type of housing support offers survivors the ability to move seamlessly into community based rental units and the length of rental assistance provided can vary depending on the program. Rapid re-housing has three core components:

1. Housing identification - quickly finding housing regardless of survivor barriers;
2. Move-in and rental assistance - providing assistance with security deposits, move-in expenses, rent, and utilities; and
3. Case management and support services - helping survivors connect with resources, build networks, and stabilize.

TH and RRH programs provide a great environment for survivors to begin cultivating skills and exploring career options that they can invest in long term. In order to fulfill the goals of medium-length housing, including helping survivors access permanent housing and long-term stability, the methods for supporting survivors with economic empowerment within these programs should honor trauma-informed strategies of transparency and survivor voice and choice. For example, staff may encourage survivors within this housing model to accept any job or education opportunity available without verifying if these jobs are safe, of interest, or providing a living wage. In addition, survivors in these programs may carry significant anxiety because they have too much idle time without a clear plan for sustainability when the program ends. Staff can engage survivors in skill and experience building, and facilitate connections to employment opportunities throughout the program, rather than waiting until housing assistance is winding down and survivors are preparing to take on rental payments without subsidies. Program staff are encouraged to incorporate the following economic empowerment tiers:

- **Crisis Management** - The road to stability, healing, and resource navigation is not linear. While program staff are more focused on stability than basic needs, there are many opportunities where trauma and societal barriers can impact a survivor's access to education, employment, and financial stability. These programs are encouraged to continually assess barriers at all stages of service delivery and connect to resources that will support survivors in navigating barriers effectively.

- **Career Exploration** - Program staff tend to focus on encouraging survivors to apply to any and every job possible to reach economic and financial security goals. Without career exploration, these jobs may not align with the skill set and desires that survivors hold for their lives. As a result, the retention rate at employment or training programs may be impacted, adding instability to the lives of the survivors being served. These housing programs can both facilitate and provide referrals to career exploration opportunities. It can be difficult for anyone to aspire for what hasn't yet been seen or experienced. Therefore, programs should invest in providing survivors with opportunities to explore and connect to new experiences. Some examples of career exploration activities within these housing programs include:
 - **Engaging Community Colleges:** Community colleges are often the largest and most affordable providers of associate degrees, credentials, certificates and/or courses that help survivors strengthen a variety of skill sets. Community colleges often have specialized programs that help students explore their strengths, interests, values and connect to higher education and professional development opportunities. Housing advocates should connect with their local community colleges through the American Association of Community Colleges- [Community College Finder](#)
 - **Career Interest Assessments:** programs can provide guided opportunities for survivors to complete, understand, and implement career interest and value assessments. It is important to identify assessments that are inclusive for all learning styles and abilities. Staff can engage in dialogue and action planning with survivors about the results of their assessments and connect them to the aligned opportunities. This dialogue can happen one-on-one or in a small group setting whereby peer-to-peer learning and connection can take place. Some assessment tools that programs can utilize include:
 - [Career One Stop Get My Future:](#) Free online assessments that help job seekers identify career interests, skills, and values.
 - [The Occupational Information Network \(O*Net Online\):](#) A no cost resource center that provides a detailed database of occupations, career exploration assessments, and tools to help job-seekers identify their career interests through its online career finder, [My Next Move](#).

- **Guest Speakers/Peer Mentorship:** Research has shown that “social capital”, or meaningful relationships, is one of the greatest indicators of economic stability and resilience. Programs can help survivors build their social capital by connecting them to guest speakers, faculty from education and training programs, peer mentors, and professionals with lived experience. These opportunities also encourage survivors to dream beyond their lived experiences. Some resources that highlight the importance of peer support and social capital include:
 - [Peer Support as a Social Capital Strategy for Programs Serving Individuals Reentering from Incarceration and Survivors of Intimate Partner Violence or Human Sex Trafficking](#)
 - [How Human Services Programs Can Use Social Capital to Improve Participant Well-Being and Economic Mobility](#)

- **Skill Building/Work Readiness** - There are foundational cognitive and soft skills that employers look for in job seekers. Programs are encouraged to provide ample formal and informal opportunities for survivors to build these skills by creating in-house training programs or collaborating with the workforce development system. Programs can leverage the following resources to support skill building and work readiness:
 - **In-House Skill Building:** A common challenge for in-house skill building is when trafficking survivors do not attend workshops or other activities that are offered. To address this challenge, it is important for staff to continuously survey survivors to determine their skills and interests. There is a significant connection between the career exploration tier and skill building/work readiness. Through investing in career exploration, programs can identify which training activities to provide in-house. Below are examples of curricula and certification programs that can be tailored to meet the training needs of survivors:
 - [Navigate your Career Workshop Series \(IWPR\)](#)
 - [ACT WorkKeys National Career Readiness Certificate \(NCRC\)](#)
 - [Office of Family Assistance: Online Work Readiness Assessment Resources](#)
 - **Adult Education & Language Access:** Survivors often need support with connecting to high school diploma, GED and adult education programs that focus on literacy skills. Immigrant survivors may need support with English as a Second Language (ESOL) classes and legal rights services that would increase their access to a diverse range of education and employment opportunities. Connecting with local Adult Schools through the [Directory of Adult Education State and Territory Directors](#) and [Adult Education & ESOL Finder](#)

- **Collaboration with Workforce Development System:** Because education and training are not housing staff members' primary goal, they may struggle with the capacity and the expertise to offer in-house skill building options. These programs are strongly encouraged to leverage existing resources by partnering with the Department of Labor's workforce development system which provides a wide range of education, skill development and work readiness programming.
 - [Opportunities for Survivors of Human Trafficking Through the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act \(WIOA\): A Primer](#)
 - [WIOA Training Program Finder](#)
 - [Obstacles and Opportunities: Improving Survivors' Access to Education, Training, and Jobs](#)
- **Experience Building** - Trafficking survivors often have a complicated, or absent, legal work history. Their victimization often makes it difficult to create a formal work history that they can describe on their resume. Therefore, programs can provide opportunities for survivors to build experience in the career field of their choice, while also providing assistance with safety planning in new work environments. Some examples of experience building opportunities that can be incorporated into a medium-term housing model are:
 - Volunteer work is unpaid; therefore, it is important to have conversations with trafficking survivors to assist with differentiating volunteer experiences versus exploitation.
 - Internships are short term and may be paid or unpaid work experience in certain industries. They often come with the potential of becoming long-term, paid employment.
 - Job shadowing is a short-term method of observing employees while they are performing their job duties. Survivors can ask questions, see typical interactions, and participate in industry tours.
 - Apprenticeship programs are similar to internships, but always provide payment for survivors' contributions.
 - Community leadership opportunities may include participation on community collaboratives, councils, and task forces. Survivors additionally benefit from networking and exposure to local organizations.



- **Employment** - It is imperative for service providers to focus on vetting for safety and economic mobility within job placement opportunities. Service providers can build partnerships with local employers, and educate them on the strategies and benefits of trauma informed supervision. Through collaboration and co-training on the impact of trauma on the workforce, service providers can connect survivors with safe and sustainable employment opportunities that match their long-term goals while supporting survivors with barriers that include mental health issues and substance abuse.
 - **Building Employer Partnerships:** Programs can utilize employer networking groups to identify partnerships that will provide survivors with safe and sustainable employment. Service providers can become members of [local Chamber of Commerce](#), [Rotary Clubs](#), and [Workforce Development Boards](#) in order to leverage employer relationships.
 - **Vetting Education and Training Partnerships:** There are many education and training programs to choose from. It is important to assess these programs to determine the effectiveness, relevancy to participants, and social supports for non-traditional students. Housing advocates should determine if the academic plans have a clear route to certification and access to broader professional development opportunities. Some resources to support in vetting:
 - [Vetting Programs and Creating Expectations](#)
 - [Upskilling Online: Helping Survivors Online Education and Training Opportunities](#)
- **Vetting & Creating Trauma Informed Workplaces:** Employment partners should be vetted, to ensure that they are safe and sustainable for survivors of trafficking. Trafficking is a unique type of victimization because exploitation happened within the context of work. Therefore, it is important for service providers to be intentional with the types of jobs and employers with which they build relationships. In order to support the process of vetting and creating trauma informed work opportunities for survivors, service providers should explore the following resources:
 - [Vetting Job Training & Employment Partners Guide \(FUTURES\)](#)
 - [Businesses Ending Slavery & Trafficking Alliance \(BEST\)](#)
 - [Department of Labor Good Jobs Initiative](#)
 - [Workplaces Respond National Resource Center](#)

Housing Model: Permanent Housing

Permanent housing programs work to establish long-term stability. The typical length of stay varies, depending on the funding source; however, permanent housing is considered indefinite and ongoing. Advocates are encouraged to partner with local housing programs to ensure that trafficking survivors have access to confidential, safe, and stable support that housing programs may not have the capacity or training to provide.

Permanent housing programs have the opportunity to intentionally focus on all five tiers based on the needs of survivors in their community. Permanent housing allows staff to truly cultivate the experience building and employment tiers of economic empowerment. In addition, permanent housing programs can focus on providing wrap-around services that help survivors maintain economic mobility opportunities.

- **Experience Building** - Experience building is important for helping survivors enhance their resume and connect to new experiences that will help shape their vision and goals for the future. Permanent housing programs can focus on providing diverse and creative opportunities for survivors to build new education, career, and life experiences. Some examples of experience building opportunities are community-based certifications offered by local public health offices/organizations such as Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) and ASIST Suicide Prevention; conferences that align with career interests; and leadership opportunities, such as participating in community leadership roles. These options help survivors build formal experience that will help with long term employment. Permanent housing programs can also partner with local apprenticeship programs to offer paid training and experience building opportunities.
- **Employment** - Survivors in permanent housing may need ongoing support to secure and maintain employment. These supports are helpful when navigating the impact of trauma and inequitable societal structures. Permanent housing providers can incorporate or partner with local employment model programs that provide survivors with wrap-around support and clear guidelines on workplace safety. Some toolkits and guides that can help with navigating employment, workplace safety and equal labor rights include:
 - [Supported Employment Evidence Based Toolkit \(SAMHSA\)](#)
 - [Individual Placement and Support \(IPS\) Supported Employment Center](#)
 - [Supporting the Education & Employment Needs of Survivors with Criminal Records](#)
 - [Wage & Hour the Fair Labor Standard Act Resources](#)
 - [U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission](#)
 - [National Safety Council](#)

Conclusion

Survivors enter shelter and housing programs with various needs and abilities, and economic empowerment activities should meet them where they are, similar to other programming. [The Five Tiers of Economic Empowerment](#) do not represent a fixed or linear process for assisting survivors in accessing safe and sustainable education, employment, and financial options. The information above is also not an all-inclusive list of methods for weaving economic empowerment into housing programming. However, each program can utilize this guide for ideas and implementation strategies that align with staff capacity, and adjustments can be made through trial and error. Certain tiers will match with shorter or longer lengths of stay; however, economic empowerment activities can also be offered during follow-up services. Service providers may initially focus on internal implementation and expand as partnerships are developed with local agencies and employers. Safe and confidential access to each tier (Crisis Management, Career Exploration, Skill Building, and Work Readiness, Experience Building, and Employment) assists survivors of trafficking in creating long-term economic independence and stability.

For additional support to implement economic empowerment practices into a housing program please contact training@freedomnetworkusa.org or peost@futureswithoutviolence.org

