



Standards of Care for Anti-Human Trafficking Service Providers: Process Guidance

Prepared for

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Introduction

The Office for Victims of Crime (OVC) and the Office of Trafficking in Persons (OTIP) have engaged in a multi-phase Standards of Care (SOCs) initiative to develop standards of care for anti-trafficking service providers in order to promote uniform service standards that will ensure consistent quality of care and reduce potential harm to trafficking victims. Under this initiative, Freedom Network USA (FNUSA) received a competitive cooperative agreement to develop SOCs for anti-human trafficking service providers. As part of this development FNUSA is tasked with convening a SOC Technical Working Group (SOC TWG) to identify, adopt, adapt, and/or develop SOCs. This work will be informed by findings from an extensive literature review conducted by RTI International (RTI) between May and September of 2023.

To support the SOC TWG approach, RTI was charged with developing a transparent, systematic, evidence-based process and set of criteria for the SOC TWG to develop SOCs for anti-human trafficking service providers. Upon conducting a thorough and extensive literature review, RTI is pleased to provide the following process and criteria guidance rooted in the evidence-base and field-based practice. The evidence-based methods and practice-based criteria we propose prioritize transparency and credibility, and they offer the SOC TWG a roadmap to create consensus-driven SOCs that will cultivate stakeholder buy-in.

The Search for Process and Criteria, or Thresholds

To inform the SOC TWG's process for identifying SOCs, RTI conducted a thorough review of literature and resources within the human trafficking field, seeking (1) existing SOCs or themes for SOCs, and (2) evidence-based or practice-based process, criteria, and/or thresholds for developing those standards. As described in the literature review document, to a great extent, the literature and resources focused on listing and describing SOCs themes or practices, rather than the preparatory process involved in actually developing standards. SOCs exist in the literature, as does limited evidence of process; however, threshold and/or criteria for how to develop a standard or what constitutes a standard unequivocally do not exist. As a result, RTI proceeded to search in other industries, sectors, and fields for criteria, thresholds, and formulas for writing standards, as well as what elements or components must be present in a standard. The search yielded limited guidance on important dimensions of standards, but, once again, did not identify thresholds for writing a standard or what constitutes a standard.

Below, we first delineate a proposed *process* and justification for developing SOCs. We then outline a proposed set of *criteria* for developing SOCs.

Process for Developing SOCs for Human Trafficking Service Providers

Of the 48 articles meeting literature review inclusion criteria, only three referenced a method or process for establishing human trafficking SOCs, and that method was consistently described as a consensus-driven process. One article described convening 19 child sex trafficking experts for a four-round process designed to establish consensus (the Delphi Method) for SOCs for

counselors.¹ Another method brought together research and the perspectives of 10 social workers across the globe to develop consensus on common strategies for service providers of trafficking survivors.² The third consisted of a panel that discussed best practices in their areas of expertise until consensus was reached.³

In response to the limited evidence for developing human trafficking SOC, coupled with the critical need for credibility and transparency involving the SOC TWG process and product, RTI recommends the use of a systematic, evidence-based process specifically designed for expert engagement and consensus: The Delphi Method.

Justification for a Consensus-Based Approach

In some industries and sectors, SOC can be found within peer-reviewed materials or materials that are from reputable sources but are not peer-reviewed. In the absence of established SOC, a consensus approach should be taken to approve a standard. In the literature, RTI identified (1) a systematic, evidenced-based process for engaging experts in setting standards, and (2) criteria for drafting standards based on multiple sectors, industries, and fields. Based on our findings and given the absence for clear thresholds for what constitutes a standard in the peer-reviewed and non-peer-reviewed literature, we are recommending the Delphi Method be adhered to. Consensus should be the path forward, and the vehicle for arriving at it is the systematic, evidence-based Delphi Method.

In the remaining document, we describe the Delphi Method, suggest prework to be completed in preparation for implementing this method, and outline a step-by-step application of the Delphi Method which includes responsible persons and associated action items. The Delphi Method can be implemented in concert with ongoing SOC TWG meetings to foster shared discussion with the goals of increasing efficiency and ensuring all voices are heard. We propose this method as an ancillary process to be implemented in concert with the projected 15 SOC TWG meetings.

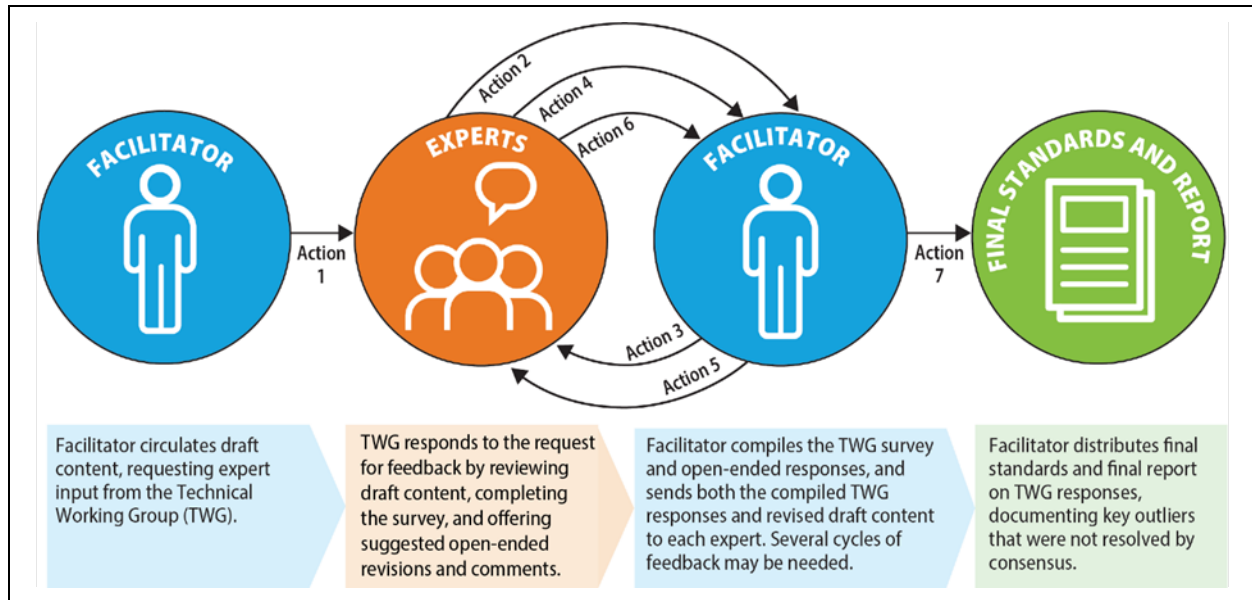
The Delphi Method

To encourage a systematic, structured, yet healthy discussion by which consensus on SOC can be reached, RTI recommends the Delphi Method. Developed by the RAND Corporation in the 1950s, this method uses the power of collective expertise, coupled with a systematic process for consensus building and controlled feedback. The FNUSA Standards of Care project is well poised to use this method, given the 25-member SOC TWG with extensive expertise in the subject matter. A SOC TWG Steering Committee, comprised of leadership from OVC, OTIP, and FNUSA, will oversee the process.

The process will involve the SOC TWG of experts, guided by a facilitator, engaging in a coordinated, iterative process that solicits individual, anonymous feedback from each expert in pursuit of group consensus. This technique drives consensus building by deploying a series of successive draft versions—in this case, of SOC—to solicit input and feedback (i.e., data) from a panel of selected subjects.⁴⁻¹⁰ Respondent anonymity is a strength of this method, allowing space for respondents to pause and reflect; independently change their rationale/opinion based on the responses from others; diverge in opinion or avoid conformity safely (which could

potentially yield innovations or new cutting-edge recommendations); comment on SOC's their committee may not be responsible for drafting; and have their voices equally represented/heard, thereby balancing in-meeting contributions of assertive and reserved experts. These signature strengths of the Delphi Method ultimately reduce bias in the final product. **Figure 1** illustrates a process overview of how the Delphi Method implements consensus building through the “controlled feedback process.”

Figure 1. Use of Delphi Method in Consensus Building with an Expert Working Group



The **controlled feedback process** allows for FNUSA to iteratively collect, analyze, interpret, summarize, apply, and distribute SOC TWG feedback from the prior Delphi iteration, and subsequently issue a revised set of standards for SOC TWG participants to review for the next Delphi round. **Analysis** of SOC TWG feedback on each draft will inform the status of consensus and guide development of the questionnaires for remaining Delphi rounds. Providing summary data reports between rounds promotes a facilitated information exchange that enables experts to transparently (but anonymously) review other group members’ qualitative reasoning in an effort to reduce error and increase understanding, consensus, and buy-in.

Up to four Delphi rounds are expected within the process; due to the structured nature of the process, more can occur if required. Through these multiple iterations, SOC TWG members are expected to become oriented toward problem-solving, to offer their opinions more insightfully, and—ultimately—to drive toward consensus. Round 1 is reserved for discussing the SOC themes identified within the literature review, whereas Rounds 2–4 are reserved for the drafting standards process. In keeping with the literature review findings, engaging in a consensus-driven process is a transparent, systematic, and evidence-based method for setting standards.

Suggested Application of the Delphi Method to the SOC TWG

Pre-work for FNUSA

Steps 1 through 4 will be completed in advance of the first in-person SOC TWG meeting:

- **Step 1:** FNUSA distributes the RTI *Standards of Care for Anti-Human Trafficking Service Providers: Literature Review* for the SOC TWG to review.
- **Step 2:** FNUSA prepares and assigns committees. Each committee has a facilitator (assigned or rotating) and a notetaker (assigned or rotating). FNUSA predetermines:
 - a proposed process to ensuring a standardized approach across committees;
 - how to address cross-cutting themes and avoid duplication across committees;
 - and how committees should address the *floor* and *ceiling* for a given standard.
- **Step 3:** FNUSA convenes the first in-person SOC TWG meeting.
 - **Step 3.1:** RTI presents key findings from the literature review, emphasizing the 15 emergent SOC themes, and provides a high-level overview of the Delphi Method.
 - **Step 3.2:** FNUSA explains the form and function of the Round 1 Survey at the meeting, including how the data will be used.
 - **Step 3.3:** FNUSA assigns committees. FNUSA provides guidance on how committees will both ensure a standardized approach, address cross-cutting themes, and avoid duplication across committees.

Round 1: Identifying Themes

- **Step 4:** The SOC TWG members come to the Round 1 meeting prepared to discuss SOC themes.
- **Step 5:** FNUSA programs the 15 SOC themes into a simple survey, i.e., the Delphi Round 1 Survey. The survey form and function follow:
 - Each SOC theme (e.g., Self-Determination) will be presented with a simple question, such as, “How important is it to retain this Standard of Care category?”
 - Respondents will endorse (5- or 7-point Likert scale) response options, for example:
 - Not at all important
 - Low importance
 - Slightly important
 - Moderately important
 - Considerably important
 - Very important
 - Extremely important
 - After respondents select their response option for each category rating, an open-ended text field will appear. The respondent can enter qualitative feedback in a text box for that category, e.g.:
 - “I think the ‘Cultural Competency and Accessibility, Including Language Access’ theme should be separated into two separate SOC themes:

- » Cultural Competency and Accessibility
- » Language Access”
- “I think this ‘Empowerment’ category could be incorporated within the ‘Self-Determination’ theme; I just don’t think we need two separate themes for those.”
- “While I see the importance of a ‘Human Rights-Based Approach’ for developing global SOCs, I don’t think that theme is relevant for domestic purposes.”
- “I think that the ‘Trauma Informed Care’ theme should be renamed ‘Trauma Informed Response.’”
- In total, there will be 15 questions, one for each theme; each question will consist of the rating question and open-ended text box. There will also be one open-ended “additional feedback” box where TWG members can, for example, suggest additional themes that are not present.
- **Step 6:** After the Round 1 meeting, FNUSA deploys the anonymous Round 1 Survey (described above); the SOC TWG complete this Round 1 survey within 2 weeks of receiving it.
- **Step 7:** Before the Round 2 meeting, FNUSA:
 - identifies the mean score for each of the SOC themes;
 - compiles, codes, analyzes, and summarizes the open-ended feedback for each of the final SOC themes;
 - applies the feedback to the draft list of SOC themes (i.e., revises the themes); and
 - distributes Round 1 Survey findings to the SOC TWG and the revised SOC themes to review in advance of the next SOC TWG meeting.

Rounds 2: Drafting Standards, Sub-Standards, and Service-Specific Standards

- **Step 8:** The SOC TWG members come to the next Round 2 meeting prepared to discuss the Survey 1 findings on SOC themes. Final themes will be identified and discussed.
- **Step 9:** At the direction of the SOC TWG Steering Committee, each assigned committee then drafts standards, sub-standards, and/or service-specific-standards reflecting the finalized SOC themes. Committees should incorporate Round 1 Survey findings and consult sources identified in the literature to guide the development of their draft standards. Draft standards are submitted to FNUSA.
- **Step 10:** FNUSA programs and deploys the Round 2 Survey (similar in form and function to the Round 1 Survey); the SOC TWG completes this Round 2 survey within two weeks of receiving it.
- **Step 11:** Before the next specified meeting, FNUSA
 - compiles, codes, analyzes, and summarizes the open-ended feedback for each of the draft standards;
 - applies the feedback to the draft standards; and
 - distributes Round 2 Survey findings to the SOC TWG and the revised standards to review in advance of the meeting.

Rounds 3-5: Drafting Standards, Sub-Standards, and Service-Specific Standards

- Repeat steps 8-11 for Delphi Rounds 3, 4, and 5.

Public comment

The solicitation for this project requires public comment on the final set of topical areas, or themes and categories, recommended by the SOC TWG. Public comment is not a component of the established Delphi Method; therefore, literature on the Delphi Model does not offer explicit guidance for integrating that form of feedback. As such, the SOC TWG Steering Committee will determine the most appropriate and optimal time to obtain public comment.

Achieving Consensus

If consensus is not achieved after Round 5, the committee(s) will notify the SOC TWG Steering Committee of the specific conflict. Using results from the most recent Delphi round, representatives from OVC, OTIP, FNUSA will convene to determine next steps, which may include 1) facilitating the committee's next meeting to engage in additional informal open verbal discussion aimed at achieving consensus, OR 2) conducting an additional formal Delphi Consensus Round. If these options do not lead to consensus, the SOC TWG Steering Committee will implement a *majority rules* decision-making approach within the SOC TWG Steering committee that includes a formal written summary of the committee's internal dissent and final decision.

Final In-Person Meeting

The Final Standards of Care and Report will be presented. Topics for discussion include any key outliers not resolved by consensus, implementation and roll-out, stakeholder buy-in, and other identified topics.

Critical Elements for Developing Standards of Care

As described in the introduction section, RTI's review of the literature found no clearly delineated criteria or thresholds for what constitutes a standard, or for what must be included in SOC's for service providers in this field. However, in reviewing returns from ancillary searches across industries, sectors, and fields, there were reoccurring themes related to key benchmarks or elements, i.e., formulaic components or requirements for drafting standards in general. We have outlined these findings in the sections below, concluding with RTI's recommended criteria for the SOC TWG's development of SOC's for human trafficking service providers.

Standards: Definition and Purpose

Standards serve as a reflection of shared values and responsibilities that people utilize as frameworks to guide their work in a given field.¹¹

Standards serve the essential function and purpose of ensuring that consistency, quality, safety, and efficiency are met.^{12; 13} Additionally, standards allow for practices to “co-exist correctly

A **standard** is a rule, principle, or specific action that serves as a reflection of shared values and responsibilities that people use to guide their work in a given field.

with one another, and to operate safely without causing harm.”^{13; 14} This allows a high level of quality and consistency among potentially concurrent practices, as well as the ability to continuously evaluate and measure impact of said practices and—ultimately—refine and improve them.¹⁵ This process leads to continued advancement within a given field.

Identifying Existing Standards and Creating New Standards

Standards can be located in various settings and documents, from practice to written policy and protocol. In health and science fields, standards of practice can be found within peer-reviewed materials or materials that are from reputable sources but not peer-reviewed. In the absence of existing standards, creating new standards is dependent on a consensus approach of experts in the given subject matter to create and approve a standard.

Approach to Writing a Standard

Writing a standard involves several key steps: defining the scope, audience, and purpose; conducting research to inform the standard; drafting the standard itself; obtaining input, review, and feedback on the standard; implementing feedback; and finalizing the standard.^{16; 17} The first step when writing a standard is to identify how it will likely be used and by whom.¹³ This will allow the standard to be reflective of a group’s specific needs. Standards should be grounded in reliable and current scientific evidence, drawing upon research, clinical guidelines, and best practices.¹³ Additionally, the ability to continuously review and update standards is an essential aspect of creating and maintaining them; standards should therefore be formatted and written in a way that allows flexibility to adapt to an evolving field.^{13; 14} Once developed, standards should articulate clear thresholds for achieving standards. For example, one approach is to utilize tiers such as “does not meet standards,” “meets standards,” or “exceeds standards” to describe different thresholds of activity.

Considerations for Writing Standards

Several criteria for writing standards exist. The timeline of writing and implementing standards is crucial. If a standard is created too early, it can become outdated due to rapid changes in a field. However, if a standard is established too late, it risks inefficiency, lack of consistency, and missed opportunities for improvement.¹³ Therefore, it is important to situate the development of standards within current and emergent best practices—and revisit and update standards at appropriate intervals.

Best Practices for Writing Standards

Best practices for writing standards follow:

- Standards should be relevant, aligned with the intended audience.¹⁸
- Standards should use intentional language. End users should be clear on what the standard is instructing them to provide—and how.¹⁹ For example, when drafting standards, consider the difference between “must,” which deems something as mandatory; “should,” which connotes the standard is suggested but not required; and²⁰ “may,” which provides decision-making power. Incorporating intentional language helps a reader distinguish what is a requirement versus a recommendation.²¹
- Standards must be succinct, clearly written, and unambiguous.^{16; 18-20; 22; 23} Use plain language.²¹ Avoid using jargon, generalized terms, and language that does not have clear meaning to the reader.^{13; 19; 20} Attention should be placed on minimizing opportunities for varied interpretation.
- A standard should be complete.¹³ That is, it should provide all information necessary for the reader to understand and meet the standard. This can be accomplished, for example, by footnoting information such as definitions, or referencing other relevant resources or materials.
- A standard should be objective; it should be free from bias, personal feelings, or opinions.^{12; 23} Do not use the first person (I, we), second person (you), or the third person personal (he, she, they).
- A standard should be actionable and provide concrete guidance; it will typically contain an action verb.¹⁹
- Standards should specify a benchmark, at or above which is successful, and below which is unacceptable.^{12; 23}
- Standards should be measurable (e.g., in terms of quality, quantity, timeliness); that is, the performance or outcome should be observable. Measurable does not necessarily mean quantifiable.^{12; 15; 19}
- Standards should be in harmony not only throughout the standards themselves, but other regulations, policy, existing practices, and expectations in the field.¹⁴
- A standard should be reasonable.^{12; 14} Ensure the standards you are setting are realistic and attainable to service providers and will not create unreasonable burden.^{14; 23}
- Last, all standards should be formatted in a parallel manner that is clear and easy to read. Follow a step-by-step format, where possible.²⁰ For example, bulleted items and checklists can be more effective than dense paragraphs for certain pieces of information.²⁰

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