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*Taking a Survivor-Based Approach to Anti-Human
Trafficking Initiatives in New York:
An Educational Advocacy Toolkit*

By Madison Turunen, Millennium Fellow



Introduction

In this toolkit, readers will engage in a concise overview of current human trafficking initiatives in New York and how they can be transformed to better reflect the needs of survivors. Further, definitions will be provided for: human trafficking, survivor-based approach, and trauma-informed approach. This toolkit will also provide advocacy examples and resources for individuals to call for survivor-based initiatives.

Defining Human Trafficking

Human trafficking is the forced labor of individuals for profit, by exploiting and harming the well-being of individuals and communities across the globe. Human trafficking encompasses **forced labor** – in which a person is coerced into working through the threat of violence (physical, emotional, and psychological), such as debt bondage and domestic servitude – and **sex trafficking** – where an individual is forced to engage in commercial sex work because of force, threats of force, fraud, or coercion. Human trafficking can also include forced child labor and child sex trafficking. Human trafficking can affect anyone regardless of

background: age, race, gender, ethnicity, nationality, immigration status, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, or socio-economic class.

Why does this matter?

Continuously, human trafficking is deduced to a foreign issue, outside of the context of the United States. The US Department of State estimates that 14,500 to 17,500 people are trafficked into the US each year, however, this does not account for the number of individuals trafficked within US borders (ACLU, 2021). Despite these numbers, conversations on human trafficking as a national issue are few and far between.

The United States has adopted the “3P” paradigm in fighting human trafficking – prosecution, protection, and prevention – a framework reflecting the 2000 Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) and the Palermo Protocol of the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime (US Department of State, 2021). Unspoken, is a 4th “p” of the paradigm, partnership, which enlists society in the fight against human trafficking – however, there is no federal policy to back this.

Furthermore, New York state is especially vulnerable to trafficking as a result of its location and population size. This makes addressing human trafficking within the state, not only nationally, a pressing matter.

What are current New York State laws on human trafficking?

In 2007, New York State established the Interagency Task Force on Human Trafficking, co-chaired by the Division of Criminal Justice Services (DCJS) and the Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA); the task force emerged from legislation targeting sex and labor trafficking, working with law enforcement to collect and analyze data “detailing the nature and extent of human trafficking throughout the state” (NY Interagency Task Force on Human Trafficking, 2019). In 2019, the task force recorded 1,654 referrals of instances of human trafficking, allowing them to identify and confirm 1,541 victims in New York state. It is important to note that more than half of these cases occurred outside of New York City – while the city itself has a localized vulnerability, the crisis is state-wide.

Along with the task force’s connection to New York State Police, they work extensively with the following offices to collectively address human trafficking:

- Office of Addiction Services and Supports
- Office of Children and Family Services
- Office of Mental Health
- Department of Health
- Department of Labor
- Office of Victim Services

Despite the comprehensive legislation and policy tackling human trafficking in New York, a **survivor-based approach** is missing from the work of the task force.

What is a survivor-based approach?

The United Nations defines a survivor-based approach (also referred to as a survivor-centered approach) as seeking to empower survivors by prioritizing their rights, needs, and wishes, by ensuring

survivors have access to appropriate, accessible, and good quality services including health care, psychological and social support, security, and legal services (UN Women 2013). By having the appropriate knowledge and skills to prioritize a survivor’s needs, an environment is created that respects the survivor, as well as their dignity and rights, in recovery and addressing the harms they faced.

UN Women (2013) details that **survivor’s rights** include:

- Being treated with dignity and respect
- Choosing the course of action in dealing with violence
- Privacy and confidentiality
- Non-discrimination
- Comprehensive information to make their own decisions

It is also important to recognize that survivors who are not aided by a survivor-

centered approach face victim-blaming attitudes, powerlessness, shame, stigma, discrimination, and risk of revictimization or abuse (UN Women, 2013). Furthermore, taking a survivor-based approach allows actors to be **trauma-informed** in aiding survivors of trafficking.

What does it mean to be trauma-informed?

The experiences faced by survivors are heavily linked to trauma; in order to properly center the survivors in approaching human trafficking laws and policies, activists and other professionals must also take a trauma-informed approach. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2020) defines trauma-informed through six principles: safety, trustworthiness and transparency, peer support, collaboration and mutuality, empowerment of voice and choice, and recognizing the cultural, historical, and gender specific issues. By

applying these principles to a survivor-based lens, dignity and rights are at the forefront of anti-human trafficking initiatives.

What does this look like?

The US Department of Justice explains that survivor-based approaches “honor [the] unique experiences vital to providing appropriate services” (Rose, 2020). Survivors are often alienated in anti-human trafficking campaigns through misconceptions perpetuated by inaccurate depictions of the crime; such as the stereotype that coincides sex trafficking with prostitution. To completely understand the complex nature of human trafficking, survivors must be at the center of all action.

The Office for Victims of Crime used a survivor-centered approach to ensure that the lived experiences of survivors were included through full participation of survivors in anti-trafficking work, including efforts in research, advisory boards, program

staff, and peer support groups (Rose, 2020). Survivor engagement in anti-human trafficking efforts allows for thoughtful and sustainable work to be conducted and can be modeled in all legal systems and advocacy efforts.

How can a survivor-based approach be applied to New York laws specifically?

First and foremost, the language of New York State Laws needs to be reframed from “victim” to “survivor”. The language we use is directly associated with our conceptualization of the issue in focus; if the foundations of anti-human trafficking efforts do not emphasize the relationship to surviving, they cannot adequately encapsulate a survivor-based approach.

Laws and policies, and the actions of the Interagency Task Force on Human Trafficking, need to center the rights of survivors, with an emphasis on their needs. This replaces the current emphasis on punishing perpetrators with rehabilitating survivors. Moreover, this changes the framework from identifying cases to recognizing the people and lives involved in the crime.

What can we, as individuals, do? Advocate!

In the following section, the toolkit will lay out ways we as individuals can advocate for changes in New York’s approaches to human trafficking and better support survivors.

Contact Local Representatives

Effective change within the current system is dependent on the actions of our government. As a US citizen, you have the right to demand your representatives addresses specific key issues. With a quick google search, if you do not already know, you can find out your local, state, and federal representatives based on your place of residence – after doing so, you will be able to find a phone number and/or email to connect with your representatives. Below are scripts to use in advocating for action on human trafficking that reflects the needs of survivors:

By phone:

Hello, my name is (first and last name) and I am one of your constituents from (city, state). I am calling regarding an action item I believe to be of utmost importance. While I am aware that the US and specifically (state) have laws addressing the heinous crimes of human trafficking, I do not believe they are adequate for the needs of survivors. I am asking you, as my representative to call for our state to adopt a survivor-based approach in laws and policy, which will place the needs and desires of survivors at the center of our response to human trafficking. Furthermore, this must reflect the dignity of survivors and respect their lived experiences by applying a trauma-informed lens to any action. I firmly believe we can do better in supporting the rehabilitation of trafficking survivors and encourage you to learn about placing survivors first and advocating for them. Thank you.

By email:

Dear (representative),

I am one of your constituents from (city, state) and I am writing you to ask that you act in addressing human trafficking from a survivor-based approach. Our current laws and policies, federal and state, do not directly address the needs of survivors. I believe we must advocate for the policies to be reshaped to center the lived experiences and rehabilitation of survivors. Furthermore, they must include a trauma-informed foundation that ensures harm and revictimization does not occur, while also addressing the rights and dignity of survivors. This can be done by advocating for accessible, adequate, and appropriate services, including mental and physical health care, psychological and social support, security, and legal services, all of which must actively push back on the shame, stigma, and discrimination survivors face. The current state of our response to human trafficking does not serve survivors as it should; I encourage you to learn more and advocate for survivors.

Thank you, (first and last name)

Educate Friends and Family

Sharing information and knowledge with your closest circle is the easiest way to create an educational domino effect. What you teach someone can then be taught to someone else! Solidify your understanding and use your voice. This can be done by bringing up important conversations at the dinner table, encouraging your friends and family to read about the issue and contact their representatives, asking each other uncomfortable but necessary questions, and sharing information on social media. Here are example questions to get the conversation started:

- Did you know human trafficking can affect any individual, regardless of their background?
- Are you familiar with survivor-centered advocacy?
- Do you know how many people are trafficked in the US each year?
- Have you heard of trauma-informed responses to harm and crime?
- Are you familiar with New York State policies on human trafficking? Or its shortcomings?
- What is the difference between a punitive focus versus a rehabilitation focus? Especially in response to human trafficking.
- What do you need to feel safe and secure? Then explain how survivors of trafficking lack access to many of these needs.
- What are the rights of survivors?
- How do you perpetuate stigmas and stereotypes? How can we do better?
- What language do you typically use when discussing human trafficking? How can you change your language to better support survivors?
- What can you do to advocate for survivors?

Continue to read, learn, and ask questions; grow your understanding and help inform others!

Resource for Survivors and Organization for Advocates to Support

Safe Horizon

Based in New York City, Safe Horizon is one of the nation's leading victim assistance organizations. Safe Horizon works with victims of all forms of violence in "moving from crisis to confidence" and they have done substantial work to aid human trafficking survivors. Their mission is to provide support, prevent violence, and promote justice.

On their website, [safehorizon.org](https://www.safehorizon.org), survivors can find the following resources:

- Hotline: 1-800-621-HOPE, healing beginning with a simple phone call
- Anti-Trafficking Program which provides legal and case management services
- Immigration Law Services that aid in status, relief, and economic security
- Community Programs: support groups and group counseling
- Streetwork Project Drop-In Centers for those experiencing homelessness
- Counseling through a licensed mental health clinic

Advocates can use the website to get involved through volunteer work, as well as internships and jobs. It also lists events taking place in the city that are in support of survivors, and donations are welcomed. Further, there are educational resources on human trafficking and different forms of violence, as well as up-to-date annual reports.

Safe Horizon has partnered with this toolkit in urging New York state legislators to work towards policy reform, in which human trafficking initiatives are survivor-centered and trauma-informed. Human trafficking cannot be adequately addressed until the lived experiences, needs, and respect towards survivors are the main focus of policy.

If you or someone you know is in immediate danger, please do not hesitate to contact local law enforcement.

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