Safety Tips and Safety Plans

Safety Considerations for Working with Victims of Trafficking

Large Cases - With cases involving large numbers of victims, keep in mind that not all of the traffickers and enforcers can be identified immediately. When possible, keep the victims separated to ensure their safety. Often, with large numbers, shelter is harder to find and so victims may be paired or grouped into sleeping arrangements. Even after initial interviews, safety for large groups can be jeopardized by undiscovered enforcers or victims who still identify with their trafficker (the trafficker may be a boyfriend). Make sure victims have an opportunity to privately report endangering behavior to law enforcement (other victims making phone calls to trafficker, threats made to other victims about speaking).

Ethnic Groups - When victims come from small or close-knit ethnic groups, it can be very easy for the trafficker to track their location. Members of the ethnic community may not even realize their connection to the trafficker, but the ties from city to city and from city to other states can be quickly maneuvered when the ethnic population is small. It is possible that the story of what happened will spread back home in the victim’s country of origin, and can then be dispersed by that community to their various relatives living in the U.S. In this way the news can spread throughout the U.S. to these small ethnic communities.

Confidentiality - Confidentiality is of extreme importance when you are trying to prevent the victim from being located. Everyone who is part of your coalition or task force should be in agreement about and have an understanding of the confidentiality issues surrounding human trafficking. Beyond that, anyone providing direct services to victims must have a confidentiality protocol within their agency that protects the victim from being identified in the community. Anyone from the coalition or task force who may be contacted by media for stories on trafficking should also have an understanding and agree on how to protect the victim.

Contact with Trafficker(s) - It is common that victims abused for longer periods often develop a survival bond with their captor. This is true in domestic violence, prisoner of war, and human trafficking situations. This tendency may be further manipulated by traffickers who pose as boyfriends. The boyfriend technique can be used in the recruitment and maintenance of a victim. Victims may be fully convinced of the mutual love they share and wish to call and warn the boyfriend of investigation. Situations may also occur where a “john” is the boyfriend (but not the trafficker) and the victim may want to warn him of the raid. Victims may not see themselves as manipulated or victimized at this point and may still identify more easily with the trafficker.

Flight Risk - Even in situations where the victim has not bonded with the trafficker, there may be a flight risk. Victims have urgent needs for money – this is usually the motivating reason for coming to the U.S. Never underestimate the need to send money home to feed a child or provide medical attention to a family member. In pre-certification time, especially when it is lengthy, this is the most common factor in victims running. Another consideration with flight-risk is the rules of the shelter where they may be housed. Often shelters have rules that can seem similar to those of the trafficker – you must report where you are going, you must share your room with strangers, you cannot have possession of your medications, you cannot use the phone unsupervised, etc. These rules can feel punitive, despite the security they provide, and can result in a victim choosing to leave. Implicit in both of these scenarios is the lack of bonding with anyone in the helping agency. If a victim is rescued and then left alone in the hotel for 10 hours a day, or is brought into the shelter but doesn’t meet with the case worker or counselor as often as the other residents (this may occur in domestic violence shelters who do not have a trafficking program) there is no reason for them to stay. They may feel that the trauma of the trafficking situation and then the rescue/escape has left them completely alone with no one to depend on.
Media - The issue of human trafficking can be a media hot topic, especially in large or sensational cases. The media may call any and everyone looking to talk to a victim. The media may find out where the victims are housed and then speak to hotel staff to get the “inside scoop.” It is important to anticipate this coverage beforehand and have an agreed upon response. You may decide to always refer the media to law enforcement, who will be working to protect the privacy of their case. Or you may choose a media contact for your agency or coalition to educate the community on human trafficking. Make sure you never use identifying information or in any way exploit the victim in spreading this awareness. This can be a fine line to walk because the media will always look for a personal, dramatic story. If you develop trusting relationships with the media outlet or reporter beforehand, this can be avoided in most cases.

Personal Safety of Victim - The victims usually know best just how dangerous, well-connected, and resourceful the trafficker is. Never underestimate the ability of the trafficker to find the victim or their family. One of the first assessments to be done with the victim and a case manager or counselor is a risk assessment. Some questions to ask include:

- Does the victim live in a different city/state from those he/she fears?
- Does the trafficker have any idea where victim’s family or friends live (in US or overseas)?
- Could the victim ever meet the trafficker here (church, social events, etc.,)?
- Are the victim and trafficker from the same geographic, ethnic or religious community?
- Did the trafficker looked for the victim after escape?
- Have the trafficker and victim had contact since escape? If so, why?
- What threats were used against the victim and victim’s family by the trafficker?

Ensure the victim knows how to dial (and memorizes) help numbers in case of an emergency. Make sure they know the procedure for 911 (especially if they do not speak the common languages of that city).

Safety for Those Working with Victims – All of the above considerations illustrate the need for safety precautions when working with victims of trafficking. If the trafficker is still at large and is possibly still in your city, use extreme caution when out in the community. Make sure staff knows where you are and that the agency itself is aware of the situation. Talk openly with the victim about risks so that they know not only the reality of the current situation, but also that others may be endangered if the situation isn’t taken seriously. Be careful to not allow these precautions to result in punitive actions. Not allowing phone calls or closely monitoring all activities can make victims feel like they are the criminals.

*This page was compiled by Kate Rocke and the Central Texas Coalition Against Human Trafficking and reprinted with permission.*