

Human Trafficking in **AMERICA'S SCHOOLS**

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How Schools Can Combat Human Trafficking in Partnership With People With Lived Experience



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Office of Safe and Supportive Schools

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- ▶ Courtney Litvak, U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking

A Note on Language

Some people who have experienced sex or labor trafficking identify themselves as victims or survivors; others may use a different term or no term at all. Self-identification is a deeply personal matter. For simplicity, in this resource we use the term “people with lived experience,” or PLE.

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Introduction

Schools working to prevent and intervene in child sex and labor trafficking have many resources upon which to draw. None is more important, however, than people who have experienced trafficking themselves. Increasingly, researchers and those with lived experience are calling for greater inclusion of the voices and expertise of people with lived experience in prevention and intervention programs and insisting that their inclusion be meaningful and ethical.¹ Indeed, in recent years, including experts with lived experience of trafficking in the development, implementation, and evaluation of anti-trafficking initiatives has become a best-practices standard.²

This supplement to *Human Trafficking in America's Schools: What Schools Can Do To Prevent, Respond, and Help Students To Recover From Human Trafficking*, 2nd Edition, describes ways schools can partner effectively with people with lived experience of trafficking, and explores some of the unique benefits these consultants offer. Note that this supplement should be used as a companion document to *Human Trafficking in America's Schools*, which explores in much greater detail information on the risk factors and indicators of trafficking, as well as on program planning and development.

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Somebody with lived experience is critical because they are your experts. The same as you would hope that a state legislature wouldn't pass laws about schools without consulting with school administrators, teachers, and superintendents, the same should be [true for] developing policy for any other program.

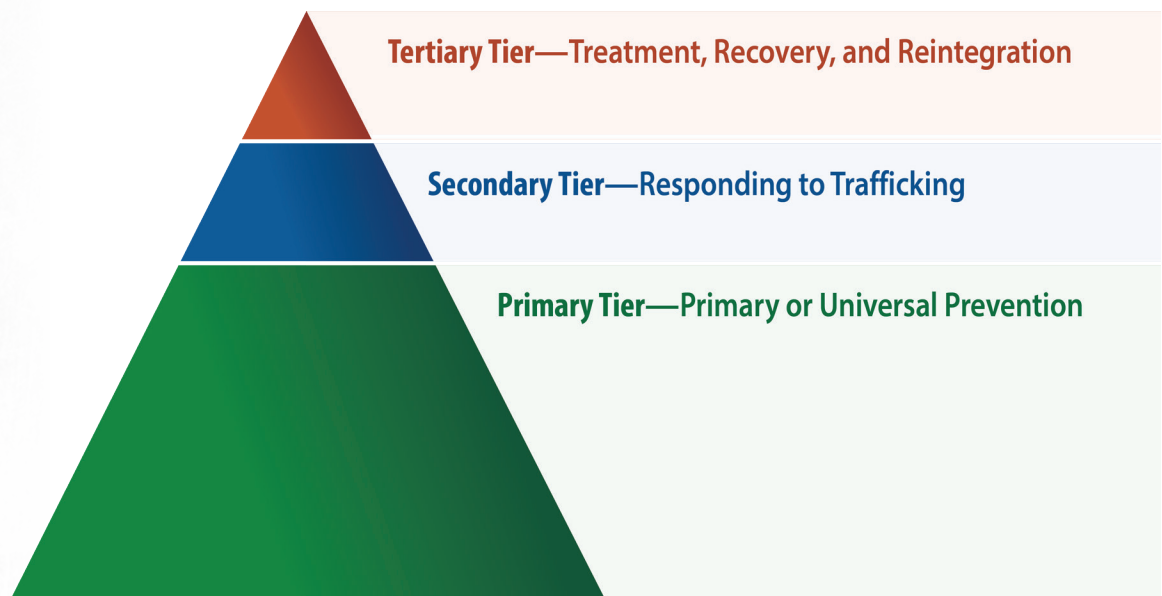
–Judge Robert Lung,
Former Council Chair, U.S. Advisory
Council on Human Trafficking

¹ Lockyer, S. (2020). Beyond inclusion: Survivor-leader voice in anti-human trafficking organizations, *Journal of Human Trafficking*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23322705.2020.1756122>

² Ibid.

Developing a School-Based Trafficking Prevention and Intervention Program

Human trafficking prevention efforts in schools are often organized into three tiers: primary or universal prevention; recognizing and responding to suspicions of human trafficking; and treatment, recovery, and reintegration of survivors.³ The mix of approaches any school ultimately develops depends on local factors and priorities and the capacities of the school and its partners.



Schools just beginning to develop their trafficking prevention and intervention programs should consider the following developmental components, each of which should ideally include people with lived experience.

Create partnerships.

In addition to working closely with one or more consultants who have lived experience of trafficking, schools should develop partnerships with child welfare agencies, local law enforcement, anti-trafficking agencies, child assessment centers, parents and caregivers, civic groups, and other stakeholders in the community. Deep and ongoing engagement with diverse community partners, including people with lived experience, is vital to the success of trafficking prevention and intervention efforts. Community engagement establishes a common understanding of the dimensions of the local trafficking problem and helps schools develop the referral relationships they will rely on as their programs begin. While all partners can make important contributions, PLE can offer invaluable ground-level insights into the dynamics of local human trafficking—insights that are unavailable from any other source.

³ U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Supportive Schools. (2021). *Human trafficking in America's schools: What schools can do to prevent, respond, and help students to recover from human trafficking* (2nd ed.). U.S. Department of Education.



Develop clear policies and protocols.

Schools working to prevent, interrupt, and help students heal from trafficking must develop clear protocols that define staff roles and responsibilities and guide the management of suspected cases of trafficking. A consultant with lived experience can provide special insight into the way the school's program will look and feel to a student potentially being trafficked. "Depending on where a school is in its development of policies and programs, they might engage an expert to advise, for example, on whether or not the environment they're working in is trauma-informed . . . and if not, consider what changes might need to be made," said Judge Robert Lung, Former Council Chair, U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking.

Train staff.

All staff should be trained in risk factors and indicators of trafficking among students, particularly staff most likely to notice signs of trafficking, including front desk staff, bus drivers, assistant principals, school counselors, social workers, and attendance officers. **Risk factors** for trafficking include poverty, a history of maltreatment, sexual abuse, minimal social support, involvement in the child welfare system, and recent migration or relocation to the area. **Indicators** of trafficking include signs of physical abuse; changes in behavior or academic performance; and lack of control over personal identification, travel documents, money, or schedule.⁴ A consultant with lived experience can go beyond these categories, though, by helping school staff understand the real-life experiences of students who have been trafficked and what schools could have done to help. For instance, a person with lived experience can provide critical context by discussing how they themselves looked and behaved in school, and why; how they might have been labeled by teachers; what protective factors or actions might have helped prevent or end their trafficking situation; and what supports and services they might have needed to heal from their experiences.

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Stigmas and stereotypes have led people to believe that this is not happening near them, or in their community, or in their schools. Transparently sharing that this happened to me, and that there were so many missed opportunities for my path to be deterred by school staff—it sparks something in staff, that “These are patterns and things that I can observe.”

–Courtney Litvak,
U.S. Advisory Council on Human
Trafficking and Consultant on Trafficking

⁴ U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Supportive Schools. (2021). *Human trafficking in America's schools: What schools can do to prevent, respond, and help students to recover from human trafficking* (2nd ed.). U.S. Department of Education.



Working Effectively With Consultants With Lived Experience of Trafficking

Consultants with lived experience of trafficking should be involved in all facets of planning a school’s trafficking prevention and response program, and may also have roles in training, implementation, and evaluation. To make the most of the valuable insights and skills those with lived experience bring, schools should do the following:

Engage people with lived experience early.

People with lived experience are experts who can help shape every aspect of a school or district’s trafficking prevention and intervention work. Schools should bring people with lived experience in early and give them the opportunity to help steer the project from the beginning rather than asking them to cosign a program or policy that has been developed without their input.

Try to stay local.

Work with local partners to identify a consultant with lived experience who reflects your student population, knows your area, understands the local dynamics, and can work with the school as long as necessary. Connect with agencies in your community that specialize in trafficking prevention, child assessment, or domestic violence; they may already employ people with lived experience as staff or consultants, or may be able to make a recommendation. If you need help identifying a consultant, or need technical assistance, contact the National Human Trafficking Training and Technical Assistance Center (NHTTAC; see the “Resources and Support” section).

Realize that one consultant may not be enough.

All consultants, including trafficking experts with lived experience, have distinct backgrounds and skill sets—no single person, no matter how knowledgeable, can be



Ensure that the expert you’re bringing into the room really has knowledge of the community that the program is trying to serve. . . . You’ll get a person with better understanding of demographics and the cultures and languages shared within that community. Looking inward is usually the best start.

–Suleman Masood, *Council Chair, U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking and Subject Matter Expert on Human Trafficking and Male Victimization*

expected to have all the answers or represent all possible perspectives. While some consultants may have a history of both labor and sex trafficking, many will not. Courtney Litvak, a member of the U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking and a consultant to schools, says schools must be open to hiring as many consultants as their local issues require. “Schools should assess their needs—whether they need to bring in one consultant or if they need multiple consultants, or one person with both sex and labor trafficking expertise. It is most beneficial to have as much diversity [in backgrounds] as possible.”

Provide meaningful opportunities.

Bringing in a consultant with lived experience for a one-time speaking engagement will not make meaningful change and could even be retraumatizing for the consultant. Rather than limiting a consultant’s engagement to giving presentations about their victimization or rubber-stamping projects that have already been designed, create opportunities that allow them to contribute to the nuts and bolts of the project. In his work consulting with a California school district where labor trafficking was a particular issue, U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking Chair Suleman Masood helped design key program components. “We created an [anti-trafficking] curriculum to teach students in elementary, junior high, and high school in their health classes,” he said. “There were three different levels, so we wanted to provide three different types of outreach. For elementary, we focused on safe spaces and emergency responsive services, knowing when something looks out of the ordinary or does not feel right, knowing local resources to contact. Junior high was more of the same, but also understanding the impact of social media. And for those whose parents may be day laborers or working on a farm, helping them understand resources and workers’ rights. In high school, where students also become eligible to start working, we focused on what labor rights look like for them and for their parents.”


Be trauma-informed.

By definition, consultants with lived experience of trafficking have endured trauma, and schools should create processes and environments that do no further harm. Conduct meetings in places that are comfortable and convenient for consultants. Discuss boundaries and limits with them ahead of time and realize that they own their story; they are not obliged to share it unless they want to and agree it is important to the success of the program. Furthermore, they should be given the chance to share not just the details of their trafficking, but the story of their eventual healing and empowerment and the wide range



of experiences, both personal and professional, that they have had since their exploitation.⁵ There are many actions schools can take to make their environment safe and welcoming for people with lived experience of trafficking; some can be adapted from NHTTAC's *Toolkit for Building Survivor-Informed Organizations*.⁶

Compensate appropriately.



Consultants with lived experience of trafficking should be compensated for their time and expertise at the same level as other consultants. Asking people with lived experience to work for free is problematic and may trigger reminders of their trafficking situation, when someone else profited from their labor without reciprocity. Failing to compensate PLE can also send the message that, while the educational professionals with whom they are working are all worthy of pay, they themselves are not. Individuals with lived experience of trafficking have a wide range of personal and professional experiences to bring to the work, and they may have developed expertise applying their lived experience to education, policy, training, social work, peer support, and more. However, some consultants with lived experience may not have standard academic qualifications or employment histories; engaging them as paid subject matter experts can provide them with important financial support and professional development experience.⁷ In engaging those with lived experience, school administrators should ask themselves, “Are we compensating these consultants the same way I would expect to be paid for sharing my own expertise?”⁸

⁵ Countryman-Roswurm, K., & Patton Brackin, B. (2017). Awareness without re-exploitation: Empowering approaches to sharing the message about human trafficking, *Journal of Human Trafficking*, 3(4), 327–334. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23322705.2016.1201374>

⁶ National Human Trafficking Training and Assistance Center. (2018). *Toolkit for building survivor-informed organizations: Trauma-informed resources and survivor-informed practices to support and collaborate with survivors of human trafficking as professionals*. https://nhttac.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/2018-06/toolkit_for_building_survivor_informed_organizations.pdf

⁷ Powers, L., & Paul, N. (2018). *The need for survivor-informed research to fight human trafficking*. Delta 8.7, United Nations University Centre for Policy Research to Alliance 8.7. <https://delta87.org/2018/11/need-survivor-informed-research-fight-human-trafficking/>

⁸ Ibid.

Resources and Support

For the latest information and resources on eliminating human trafficking in America's schools, visit the U.S. Department of Education's [human trafficking webpage](#). See also [Effective Engagement of Individuals with Lived Experience](#), a 2022 webinar by the National Center for Safe Supportive Learning Environments.

See also:

- ▶ [National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments](#)
- ▶ [The Office on Trafficking in Persons](#)
- ▶ [The National Human Trafficking Training and Technical Assistance Center](#)
- ▶ [SOAR Training: School-Based Professionals](#)
- ▶ [The U.S. Department of State](#)
- ▶ [U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking](#)
- ▶ [National Advisory Committee on the Sex Trafficking of Children and Youth in the United States](#)
- ▶ [PBIS Practice Brief: Addressing the Growing Problem of Domestic Sex Trafficking in Minors Through PBIS](#)
- ▶ [National Survivor Network](#)
- ▶ [Survivor Alliance](#)



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