



## Sex Trafficking – From the Eyes of a Survivor

What is sex trafficking? Over the years, there have been multiple trainings, definitions and images of what sex trafficking is. But have you ever really considered what sex trafficking looks like?

The Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) defines sex trafficking as the “recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purpose of commercial sex acts.” To prove an adult is a victim of sex trafficking, you must prove that they were forced, deceived or coerced into doing the sexual acts. If a victim is a minor, you do not have to prove force, deception or coercion.

But do these victims believe they are being forced, frauded or coerced into performing these sexual acts day in and day out? Do they really believe they are victims?

Viewing the case from the perspective of the victim can lead to a successful investigation. Keep these tips in mind when working sex trafficking cases.

### **DON'T START ASKING QUESTIONS RIGHT AWAY.**

How officers initially approach a survivor is crucial to their cooperation in the investigation. Investigators should not start asking questions right away. Survivors typically do not trust law enforcement. They were trained by their trafficker to think officers are the bad guys. Law enforcement is only there to arrest them and put them in jail. They may have been victimized by law enforcement in the past. So now, the investigators are like every other John<sup>1</sup> to them.

Remember that these survivors have likely been beaten, raped, starved and sleep deprived. They have been living a life that most will never understand. And it is not for us to understand. We are not in their shoes. We do not physically

and emotionally know what they go through day in and day out. We have only learned or heard about it second hand from a survivor.

### **THINK ABOUT THE IMMEDIATE NEEDS OF THE SURVIVOR.**

When the questioning does start, do not interview the survivor as if they are a suspect. Remember, in their mind, they are not a victim. They will shut down and not cooperate. Bring them to a safe environment and meet their basic needs. Get them food, safety, or security and let them sleep.

### **FIND A BALANCE BETWEEN INVESTIGATOR AND SYMPATHIZER.**

The conversation should not be treated like an interrogation. Do not ask the survivor a line of questions and expect them to answer and then call them out when you believe they are lying. Similarly, don't feel sorry for them, because they don't feel sorry for themselves. They do not need to be babied. They have been in survival mode for quite awhile. If the wrong approach is taken from the beginning, the investigator could lose their best witness.

### **BUILD TRUST.**

If the investigator tells a survivor they are going to do something, but does not follow through, they could lose the witness and the case. Trust must be built. If something is offered or promised, make sure it can be done. Do not make open-ended promises.

### **BE PATIENT!**

Investigators must build a rapport with the survivor. The first few contacts will be about building trust. There will be multiple interviews. All the information will not be shared in the first interview; rather, the



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<sup>1</sup> A John refers to the person paying for services.



survivor will share bits and pieces throughout multiple interviews, until the full story comes to light. These cases take time. The survivor may be uncooperative at first. They could fear what will happen to them or their family if they talk.

### FOCUS ON THE SURVIVOR, THEY ARE THE CASE.

Investigators must be survivor-centered, not case-centered. Interviews or meetings need to be about the survivor, not building the case. If the focus is on the survivor, they will build the case for the investigator. Do not initially talk about their trafficker.

### CHOOSE YOUR WORDS WISELY.

When it is time to talk about the trafficker, do not use the term pimp. When you refer to a pimp as a trafficker, the pimp is stripped of their power, and it also reiterates that the survivor is a victim. It is acceptable to use their terminology, but don't use it in excess, and don't use it in a derogatory manner. This will cause the survivor to shut down.

### EMPOWER THE SURVIVOR.

Give the survivor power. Let them choose where to meet. Let them know that they have control of when the interview is over. Let them know they get to choose what to talk about. If they want to talk about what happened, then great! If they want to talk about the weather, then that is great as well, because they are talking! They have been forced to do things that they did not want to do. Avoid making them feel that way again.

### MAKE CONNECTIONS WITH POTENTIAL SURVIVORS.

If officers on the street come across a situation that does not seem right, ask questions! That officer could be the one that saves a survivor. S/he could be the one they have been waiting

for. Once the potential survivor drives/walks away, they may not have another chance to get help.

### REMEMBER, NOT ALL SURVIVORS LOOK THE SAME.

Not all survivors are adults. The average age of entry in the "life" is 12 to 14-years old. These are adolescents living in an adult world. They may have a difficult time understanding certain situations and at this young age, they likely have experienced more trauma than the average adult encounters in a lifetime.

### BE PROACTIVE!

*Be proactive and partner with a victim advocacy center in the community. Advocates are trained to interact with survivors. They have safe houses for the survivor to stay for a few nights, or throughout the duration of the investigation. They will be a great asset during the investigation. Law enforcement agencies should not wait until they have a survivor of trafficking before connecting with a victim advocacy center. Start now. Build that rapport with them and set the boundaries and expectations now, so their services will be available when they are needed, any time – day or night.*

### INVEST IN THE SURVIVOR.

Remember these survivors have been through very traumatic experiences. When people go through a traumatic experience, their brains repress information as a form of self-protection. Sometimes these survivors really do not remember certain situations or details.

Law enforcement's priority is to arrest the bad guy. Get the trafficker, build the case and put them away for life. But if investigators invest in these survivors, not only are they making the case stronger, but they are also giving the survivor a chance at a normal life.

