



SURVIVOR-INFORMED SERVICES AMONG RUNAWAY AND HOMELESS YOUTH PROGRAMS

Human trafficking survivors, of all ages, are the experts of their own experiences. Their experiences can provide a powerful insight on how youth-serving organizations can integrate survivor-informed practices to enlighten services, interventions, as well as decisions impacting young people, especially those who are at higher risk for human trafficking.

Survivor-informed services intentionally seeks the feedback from individuals with lived experience to enhance an organization’s practices. For example, some organizations integrate survivors’ expertise into their program structures through mentor positions, volunteer leadership, Youth Advisory Councils (YACs), or paid staff positions. Programs may also utilize survivor expertise to develop prevention activities, screening approaches, and to create safer spaces for other youth survivors of human trafficking.

Incorporating feedback from human trafficking survivors into a program’s structure and service delivery requires some work, but the benefits positively impact program effectiveness. Some of these benefits may include:

- Structured channels for receiving direct feedback from survivors about programs.
- Strengthened trust and connections to youth.
- Insight into enhanced direct outreach strategies for other vulnerable youth.
- Culturally competent, trauma-informed, and youth-oriented approaches.
- Unique solutions to complex problems faced by young survivors, or those at higher risk of human trafficking.
- Expanded insight into the effect of trauma on young survivors’ decision making.
- Survivor empowerment through the provision of leadership opportunities.

This document aims to provide practical survivor-informed strategies to support organizations in creating opportunities for survivor feedback, leadership, and integration into youth-serving programs, such as runaway and homeless youth (RHY) programs. RHY settings can create opportunities to elevate the voices and expertise of survivors and utilize their expertise to improve services-delivery. Survivor’s experiences can strengthen the effectiveness, reach, and impact of programs for young people.

This survivor informed strategies document focuses on:

- The creation of leadership opportunities and the building of sustainable structures that facilitate integration of survivor expertise and feedback
- The importance of identifying when survivors are ready to provide feedback or leadership
- The value of supporting and meeting the needs of survivors, whether youth or staff, who inform your services or exercise leadership within the organization
- The significance of managing social dynamics related to integrating young survivors into youth programs

Note:

A level of risk to survivors, related to triggering or placing survivors at risk of relapse, is associated with this work. Survivor-informed services are needed, and when used, organizations should ensure that the physical and emotional safety of youth accessing their services is maintained. Organizations should establish an appropriate organizational structure and adequate internal capacity before incorporating survivor-informed services into their existing programs.

Building and Maintaining Sustainable Leadership Opportunities

Soliciting and incorporating survivor feedback is a continuing process. Survivors have different experiences, ideas, and perspectives on anti-trafficking efforts. Additionally, trends in human trafficking and general changes in youth culture necessitate ongoing feedback. This means that seeking survivor feedback cannot simply involve asking one or two survivors what they think about a program or practice. An effective means of incorporating survivor expertise into youth programs must be ongoing and sustainable.

Survivors should know ahead of time exactly what is asked and expected of them. Opportunities for providing feedback or leadership should be explained clearly, and efforts should be made to recognize and honor the value of the emotional work of trafficking survivors, whether through leadership experience, enhanced skills, or monetary compensation. Organizational capacity and a structure that welcomes survivors as part of your workforce or integrates their feedback into existing programs are important elements that will help to secure positive survivor-informed services.

The following are strategies for creating structures to foster and sustain feedback and leadership opportunities for survivors. It is recommended that organizations consider which of these structures would most benefit their organizations' work.

I. Youth Advisory Councils

Youth Advisory Councils (YACs) can provide youth-serving organizations with valuable youth perspectives. Typically comprised of 8-10 youth who were previously or are currently enrolled in services (possibly more for larger agencies), YACs advise on the organization's structure, policy, content, and delivery of youth services. YAC members usually have some knowledge of the organization's history and a perspective on its mission and services. Organizations should ensure that YAC decisions are heard and have an impact within the organization.

YACs provide youth with the opportunity of changing, redesigning, and expanding the services offered to them and their peers. Survivors can participate in YACs as members or advisors, providing their lived experiences to enhance programs and activities focusing on vulnerable youth. YAC participation, either as a member or advisor, can be an empowering experience for survivors of human trafficking who want to be involved in addressing the intersection of human trafficking and youth homelessness.

YAC members can be invited to apply by the program staff or the YAC itself. Recognizing that YAC membership is a privilege and a position of power, candidates for membership should be chosen based on interest, skills, and fitness for the role. For example, if your organization wants a perspective informed by a working knowledge of social media, visual design, street outreach, or sports to inform certain projects, potential candidates should possess those skills, talents and experiences.

"When talking with a young survivor, I ask them, 'What is your dream?' As you know, for survivors, learning to have and be given choices is hard... [Asking this question] makes a big impact in our program."

Many aspects of managing the YAC are varied, based on organizational preferences. YACs can decide to meet on a weekly or monthly basis, ultimately making their own decision on what to include on their agenda. Some YACs are facilitated by the council members, some by a staff member, and others co-facilitated by both youth and staff. While YACs should be largely self-directed, they should always have staff available for assistance and support. These staff resources can provide a range of services including answering program related questions in support of informed decision making, disseminating YAC discussions and decisions within the organization, and providing supervision to manage any unhealthy group dynamics which may occur.

II. Project-Oriented Teams

"We have survivors come in to do trainings... They talk about how to stay out of the street life by providing mentorship, guidance, leadership, and help with their education."

Some organizations integrate youth leaders into specific programs. For example, survivors of human trafficking may have ideas of where and how to conduct outreach, and how to identify a youth victim of trafficking while conducting outreach. Street outreach staff may therefore, taking safety precautions, work with these youth to support outreach activities. Survivor outreach teams may prepare outreach materials or join outreach staff in conducting outreach. Survivors can also solidify their relationship with the organization by representing the organization among their peers.

If your organization provides training to service providers, educators, law enforcement, the general community, or other groups, consider creating a team of survivors to help with the planning and delivering of these trainings. Survivors can learn more about human trafficking beyond their experience and they can gain skills in education and public speaking by engaging in this work. Furthermore, survivor trainers give a face to the issue for people receiving the training.

III. Leadership Opportunities

"[We have] a group of college students who took the initiative, wanting to help human trafficking victims. They give us feedback that we couldn't get from the kids, but they can because they are in the same age range. We're just getting started, but they're doing a lot of research on how to implement the strategies that they want to do. They mentor. They sit on the task force and come to every meeting we have. Some of them are survivors, and the rest of them are kids who want to be involved to help runaway and homeless youth and human trafficking victims."

Survivors and young people with lived experience should be invited to apply for leadership positions with clearly defined roles and responsibilities. For example, if an agency offers a mentorship program for youth at risk or victims of human trafficking, the agency might ask a young person who has accessed services and who has recovered to a significant degree from their experience to apply to be a mentor to their peers. Peer mentors may be more likely than adult or non-survivor mentors to recognize the circumstances and needs of their mentees and may offer creative responses informed by their own experiences of human trafficking and social services.

"In the human trafficking program, we really try to incorporate the survivors in commenting [in] weekly staff meetings, talking about case management and whether we're missing anything with clients."



Survivors in leadership positions should receive regular supervision and support from program staff and, when appropriate, be included in staff meetings. To ensure sustainable involvement, a leadership position should be continued and filled if a survivor chooses to stop fulfilling that role.

Survivor Employment

"There's a trickle-down effect and we see longer stays and less runs, [fewer] youth leaving unplanned and coming back... And I think it's because it started with survivor leaders who helped to ground the program. We had staff that youth could really identify with that could help them stabilize, and then with time they become survivor leaders in the program for new youth."

Your organization should ensure that job eligibility requirements do not present barriers to employing survivors. Many agencies encourage survivors to apply for positions, yet they include requirements that discourage them from applying. The ability to meet many of these requirements, including background checks, criminal histories, and driver's licenses, may be affected by poverty, homelessness, access to services, or criminal histories. Trafficking survivors often have criminal records for crimes that they were coerced or forced to commit, which they have not been able to vacate.

Job descriptions can be written with the support of youth or survivors at your organization. For example, you might require that all job descriptions be reviewed by the YAC, if you have one. Another option might be hiring a trafficking survivor to join your Human Resources team, specifically to ensure that survivors are given fair opportunities for employment in your organization.

Some agencies hire survivors who are currently accessing or who recently accessed services at that agency. This decision largely depends upon the health and recovery of the survivor, their level of maturity, and, of course, the skills and expertise that they offer. Consider designing paid entry-level positions in such a way that a young survivor can apply, be considered, and be hired. Gainfully employing survivors supports them by providing them with financial security, work experience, and increased confidence. Furthermore, staff survivors can connect at a different level with young people and supply the organization with important insights into program design, implementation and evaluation.

Leadership roles, including mentors, outreach workers, training teams, and youth advisors, may be paid, unpaid (i.e., internship), or given a stipend. The roles may also qualify for academic credits in social work, psychology, public health, and other educational programs.

Focus Groups

"Every other year, we've been doing youth feedback focus groups and we have a topic in mind...[They] help determine things like what materials we should hand out for victims and give feedback on what barriers might exist [and] good areas for outreach workers to be stationed at. Other focus groups in past years have looked at programs to see what's working and what's not working, and we've given them a stipend for participating in the focus groups."

Focus groups are meant to delve into particular questions that an organization is seeking to answer. If your organization starts offering a new policy or service, you may be interested in hearing the perspectives of youth who do and do not access that service. A focus group can happen a varied timeframes: once, a few times over a short period, or on a seasonal or annual basis. Focus groups can be particularly useful for organizations lacking long-term involvement of individual youth. If repeated, they can be conducted with the same or with different youth, so that you can hear how opinions change over time or you can seek the perspectives of different people each time.

Focus groups generally include 8-12 youth who currently receive or recently received services from an organization. Participants should be selected by staff to represent a range of opinions. Since conducting a focus group is a type of research, it is common for participants to receive some sort of stipend or compensation for their participation in the project.

You should decide how many focus groups you need based on the questions you seek to address. If you are interested in how youth experienced one of your organization's policies, you could select youth to have a focus group session with questions about their experience with that policy.

However, if you are curious about how responses to a policy or service may change over time, or if you are continuing to implement changes in your organization, it may be helpful to meet with the same youth for a repeat session or to recruit new youth for a second focus group.

Program staff should facilitate focus groups to gather information from young people and young survivors of human trafficking to improve anti-trafficking activities. Programs can also facilitate this session in collaboration with a survivor of human trafficking, along with a program staff. Programs can work with the survivor to prepare a set of open-ended questions designed to explore the issues that the focus group was convened to discuss. Focus groups may be moderated or guided by a discussion facilitator or focus groups may consist of open discussions among participants. It helps to have a second staff member available to listen and take notes on youth feedback.

Identifying and Recognizing When Survivors Are Ready to Provide Expertise and Feedback

"It's a really slow process. With our survivor leaders, it's important that we check in and ask: 'Are you comfortable doing a presentation? Is this group okay for you? Do you want to comment on this?' It's important to check in and continue to do that throughout their employment."

Survivor feedback and input should be apparent at all levels of an agency's work with youth at risk or victims of human trafficking. However, this work can be especially emotionally taxing for survivors of human trafficking. Depending on the stage of recovery and age and maturity of the survivor, your organization must consider how much responsibility and what potentially triggering experiences a survivor, especially a young survivor, can manage at that time in their recovery process.

Your organization should never expect or require that a youth or a young survivor provide his or her feedback, or fulfill leadership responsibilities, in return for services. The organization should make it clear that

participation in feedback processes or leadership roles are voluntary and can be excellent opportunities for young survivors who choose to participate. However, it is critical that the young survivor is a willing participant, ready to participate, and is compensated for their participation (i.e., stipend, internship, educational credit).



"If I were going to employ a youth as a worker, they'd have to be at a point where they are ready for the position. It depends on what training they've had, what we can do to train them, what support group we can offer before putting them in that position, and if they are ready themselves. If they come to us saying, 'I want to do this work,' we would start doing that training and prep so that the youth can be successful in that role."

When offering leadership opportunities to a survivor, consider starting with responsibilities to help them achieve success in their positions. Experiences of failure can be counterproductive to a survivor's recovery process, and the goal is to set them up for success.

Setting survivors, including young survivors, up for success involves preparing them for the role beforehand. This includes training for the role and ensuring that they have the emotional and psychological stability to do the work. By starting with minor responsibilities and then offering greater leadership opportunities, in time, you can better monitor their response and readiness.

Meeting the Needs of Survivors Who Inform Your Services

"It's important to make sure that you have everything setup so you have wraparound support and services. Without that you wouldn't have healthy survivors to assist your mentorship—and that's the number one important thing and best practice, to make sure they're in a good place and [their work or leadership role] won't be detrimental to them."

Survivors of human trafficking may face challenges when supporting anti-trafficking efforts within your programs. Whether the survivor informing your organization is a youth or staff, they should be enveloped in a support structure that emphasizes their health and self-care and the value of their expertise to the organization.

For survivors of all ages, who provide feedback or who are engaged in leadership opportunities, you can take several steps that may help to support them in that role:

- Ensure survivors continue accessing support and services as necessary
- Regularly talk to the survivor about balancing their level of responsibility with self-care
- Flexibly negotiate responsibilities as needed and be prepared to step in to support the survivor when needed
- If things do not go as expected, frame pauses or changes to their role as positive signs of growth and self-awareness and not as failures or incapacities

For staff survivors of trafficking (whether or not they received services from your organization), you can:

- Be aware of the emotional toll of working in the anti-trafficking field as a survivor
- Recognize that staff who are survivors may still be working through some of the results of their trafficking experience and allow time off so they can address survivor-related situations associated with their mental health, families, litigation or court cases, and use of social services
- Provide access to counseling and mental health services
- Support staff in managing their workload. Some survivors may understandably not want to take on too much whereas others may want to do everything to make a difference.
- To prevent burnout, support survivors on staff in finding a healthy balanced workload.

- Support and expand policies that create flexible work environments, like teleworking and having flexible hours
- Foster a work environment where survivorship is not taboo or silenced:
 - Work with staff to destigmatize survivorship and associated personal experiences such as commercial sex, homelessness, intimate partner violence, substance abuse, and mental health.
 - Ensure that staff respect each other's privacy and work with a respect and sensitivity toward their co-workers' mental health and personal experiences.

Managing Social Dynamics Specific to Youth Survivor Leadership

"It was a struggle with her for harm reduction... sometimes people don't want shelter and you have to give what you can."

Young people with lived experience (e.g., homelessness and human trafficking) who are provided with leadership opportunities, whether as volunteers or as paid staff, may find themselves with a new status within your organization. Their new roles, expectations for work, and relationships with other youth can result in some difficult dynamics that should be addressed.

Recognizing that everyone has the right to self-determination can be difficult for a survivor who wants to see the end of human trafficking. Supporting survivors so that they have realistic expectations for what their work looks like and what outcomes they can expect from this work will help ensure their continued health and help prevent burnout.

"[The survivor] was also friends with youth in our other programs, so it was difficult working on boundaries with her. [We had to discuss] what does it mean to have that paycheck, what are dual relationships, and how do you work through that."

When offering a survivor-leadership role to a young person, organizations should set clear expectations and continuously address whether or not the work differs from what they hoped for or expected. Survivors may have never held a formal leadership role in an organization, so you have the opportunity to help them develop realistic expectations. It is also important to mention that dual relationships among youth can cause boundary issues and ethical dilemmas, so they should be managed with care. They are likely when youth with lived experience are offered leadership opportunities, especially when those opportunities are paid positions. As an organization, you should be aware of dual relationships between youth leaders and other youth. You should provide support to youth leaders as they manage these relationship dynamics.

“Our kids will sometimes say, ‘Why is this youth getting this service, why am I not getting it?’ Some kids will say, ‘I can do that, why didn’t I get that job?’ And you have to talk about how everyone is different and may need different things, and there are certain services that a survivor may need that another youth may not need—as long as you sit down and make sure they feel heard, their feelings are important, and what they say matters.”

Establishing clear communication channels and ensuring that youth feel heard are important to preventing conflict. Providing one youth with an opportunity may not always make others feel resentful, but if it does, you should be prepared to recognize and discuss these emotions. Other youth may feel left out if they are not considered for the position. Should this occur, you should find other avenues for them to be involved and ensure that they also feel valued in the organization.

Conclusion

There are many ways to incorporate the expertise and skills of survivors of human trafficking into the work of youth serving organizations. Some of the promising practices suggested here are practical options for smaller organizations with limited funding, while other strategies may be more appropriate for larger organizations. As you consider how your organization would like to further integrate survivor-informed practices into your programs, consider asking young people how they would like to be involved, or create activities for survivors to support young people in your programs. Including youth in programmatic decision-making and identifying ways of including survivor informed models into your program can be an excellent first step in the process of encouraging survivor-informed practices.

The effectiveness of programs and the development of creative and informed techniques for working with human trafficking survivors depends on input, involvement, and leadership of those with lived experiences. Effectiveness is also dependent upon organizational structure as each organization must be prepared to approach and integrate survivor experiences into youth programming. Learning of and integrating survival experiences not only creates opportunities to enhance services, but also benefits the recovery of survivors and the youth served by your program.

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