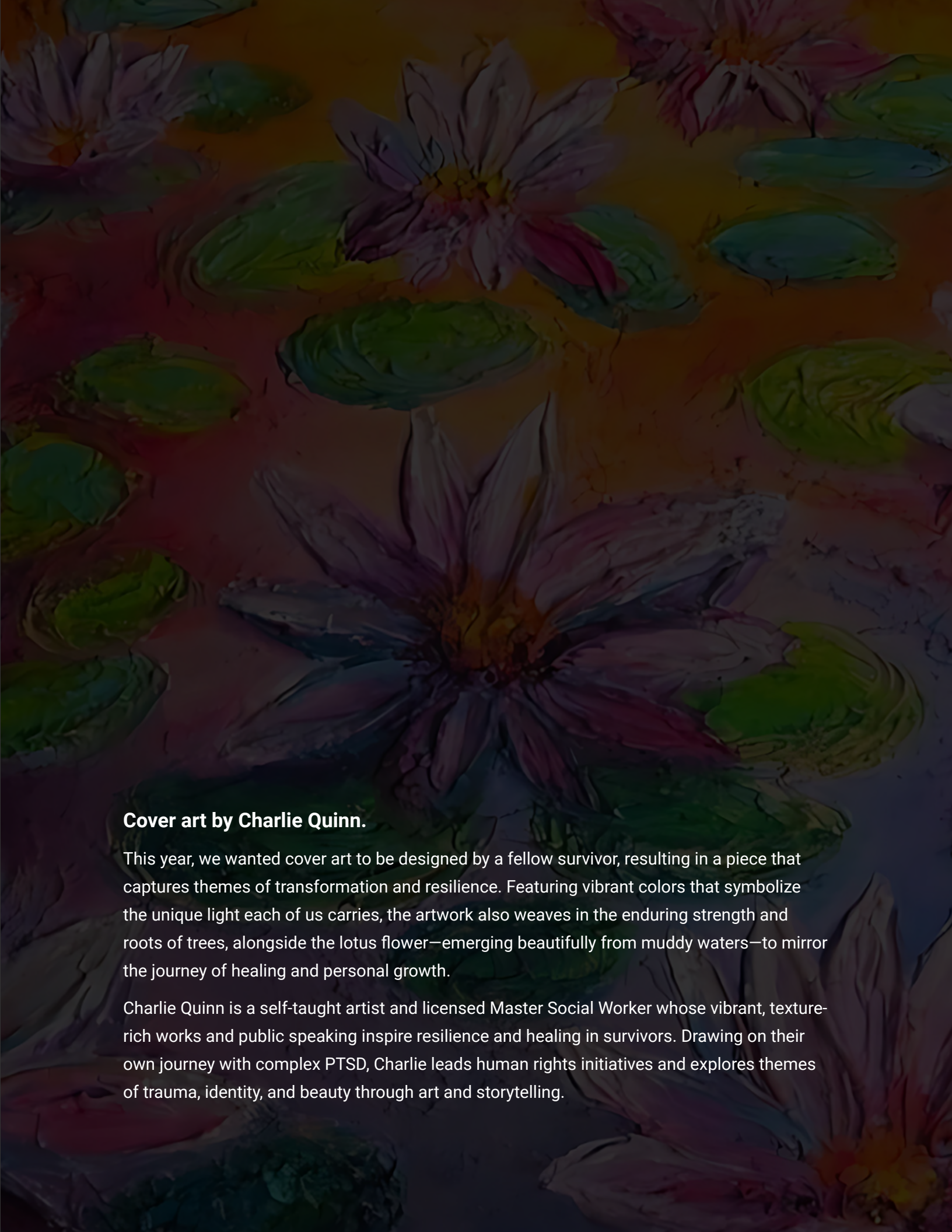


An impressionistic painting of a pond. The foreground is filled with several lotus flowers in shades of pink, purple, and white, with bright yellow centers. They are surrounded by large, green lily pads. The water is depicted with vibrant, swirling colors of orange, red, and purple. In the background, there are dark, silhouetted trees and a hazy, colorful sky. The overall style is expressive and painterly, with visible brushstrokes and a rich, saturated color palette.

**UNITED STATES
ADVISORY COUNCIL
ON HUMAN TRAFFICKING**

ANNUAL REPORT 2025

The background of the entire page is a painting of a pond. It features several lotus flowers in various stages of bloom, with petals in shades of pink, purple, and white. Large, green lily pads float on the water's surface. The water is depicted with dark, swirling brushstrokes in shades of brown, green, and blue. A semi-transparent dark overlay covers the bottom half of the image to provide space for text.

Cover art by Charlie Quinn.

This year, we wanted cover art to be designed by a fellow survivor, resulting in a piece that captures themes of transformation and resilience. Featuring vibrant colors that symbolize the unique light each of us carries, the artwork also weaves in the enduring strength and roots of trees, alongside the lotus flower—emerging beautifully from muddy waters—to mirror the journey of healing and personal growth.

Charlie Quinn is a self-taught artist and licensed Master Social Worker whose vibrant, texture-rich works and public speaking inspire resilience and healing in survivors. Drawing on their own journey with complex PTSD, Charlie leads human rights initiatives and explores themes of trauma, identity, and beauty through art and storytelling.

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About the Council

The United States Advisory Council on Human Trafficking (Council) comprises 13 survivor leaders who bring their expertise and experience to advise and provide recommendations to the President's Interagency Task Force to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons (PITF) to improve federal anti-trafficking policies.

The Council was established on May 29, 2015, in Section 115 of the Justice for Victims of Trafficking Act of 2015, Pub. L. 114-22, also known as the Survivors of Human Trafficking Empowerment Act. In February 2024, January 2025, and February 2025, the President appointed members of the Council to:

- Provide advice and recommendations to the U.S. government, specifically the Senior Policy Operating Group (SPOG) and the PITF, to strengthen federal policy and programming efforts that reflect best practices in the anti-trafficking field.
- Review federal U.S. government policy and programs intended to combat human trafficking, including programs relating to the provision of services for victims.
- Gather information from U.S. government agencies, states, and the community for the Council's annual report.
- Publish an annual report that contains the findings derived from reviews conducted on federal government policy and programs.
- Serve as a point of contact for federal agencies reaching out to survivors of human trafficking for input on anti-trafficking programming and policies in the United States.
- Represent the diverse population of survivors of human trafficking across the United States.

The Council brings expertise from members' personal experiences of human trafficking as well as members' ongoing work and leadership in various national, state, and local anti-trafficking efforts. Information about some Council members is provided on pages 5–6.



Below is biographic information on Council members.



RAFAEL BAUTISTA
Council Chair

Consultant | Educator | Trainer |
Subject matter expert with lived
experience in labor trafficking



JOSE ALFARO
Council Vice Chair

Peer support specialist | Public
speaker | Consultant | Subject
matter and lived experience
expert on trafficking affecting
specific populations, including
males, 2SLGBTQIA+¹ individuals,
and minors



UMMRA HANG
Council Secretary

Subject matter expert | Consultant |
Educator and facilitator | Researcher
Public speaker | Advocate |
Entrepreneur | Small business
owner | Poet | Master of Social
Welfare, UCLA | Bachelor of Arts
in Psychology, San Jose
State University



BENJAMIN ADRIANO

Father to Bentley | Author | Public
speaker | Survivor and advocate
against labor trafficking | Graduate
of Texas State University, Applied
Arts and Sciences, *magna cum
laude* | Master's candidate in
Long-Term Care Administration



TRIS LESTER BACANI

Subject matter expert with lived
experience in labor trafficking |
Consultant | Registered nurse



CRISTIAN EDUARDO

Subject matter expert with lived
experience of international and
domestic sex and labor trafficking |
Immigrant and bilingual speaker |
Secretary of the New York City HIV
Planning Group | Training provider
specializing in human trafficking,
immigration, survivor engagement,
2SLGBTQIA+ communities, and
trauma-informed practices |
Former mechanical engineer

¹ 2SLGBTQIA+ refers to individuals who are two-spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, or asexual.



YURI GUERRERO

Human trafficking survivor
advocate | Consultant | Bilingual
speaker | Texas licensed realtor |
Singer



HOLLY AUSTIN GIBBS

Author | Advocate | Public
health professional



SAMEER JAIN

Subject matter expert in labor
trafficking, work visa processes,
immigrant populations, and
unaccompanied minors | Director,
Survive and Thrive Advocacy
Center | Florida Certified
Contract Manager



FAINESS LIPENGA

Subject matter expert and activist |
Former training advisor for the
Human Trafficking Legal Center |
Former Survivor Alliance board
member and National Survivor
Network member



AUBREY LLOYD

Senior project director | Master's in
Social Work | Strategic influencer |
Committed to survivor voice and
shared leadership | Educator |
Creator-justice architect |
Wife-mother-granddaughter of
immigrants and First-Nation
leaders | Loved and loving



CHRISTINA LOVE

Award-winning advocate and
broadcaster | Tribal member |
Thought leader | Keynote speaker |
Senior consultant | Subject matter
expert | Educator and author |
Not Invisible Act commissioner |
Member, Trilateral Working Group
(U.S., Canada, and Mexico)



AUDREY MORRISSEY

Subject matter expert consultant |
Co-author of a prevention
curriculum for girls | Founder of a
survivor-led mentoring program
for exploited youth

About the President's Interagency Task Force

The PITF was authorized by Section 105(a) of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000, Pub. L. 106-386, and established by Section 1(a) of Executive Order 13257 (Feb. 13, 2002). The agencies of the PITF are:

Department of State (State)

Department of the Treasury (Treasury)

Department of Defense (DOD)

Department of Justice (DOJ)

Department of the Interior (DOI)

Department of Agriculture (USDA)

Department of Commerce (DOC)

Department of Labor (DOL)

Department of Health and Human Services (HHS)

Department of Transportation (DOT)

Department of Education (ED)

Department of Homeland Security (DHS)

Domestic Policy Council (DPC)

National Security Council (NSC)

Office of Management and Budget (OMB)

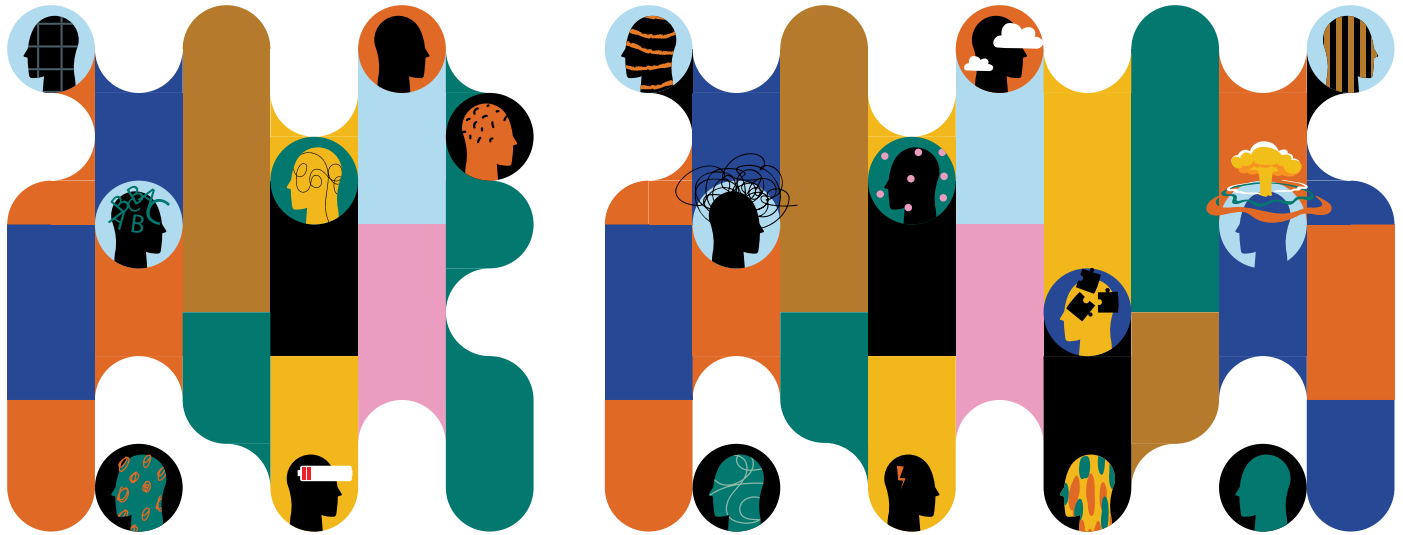
Office of the United States Trade Representative (USTR)

Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI)

Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)

U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC)

Forms of Human Trafficking



istock images/Annaspoka

The below definitions of various human trafficking forms can be found in the 2021-2024 National Action Plan to Combat Human Trafficking.²

FORCED LABOR: The term forced labor is defined for enforcement purposes in two separate sections of the United States Code. In the criminal statutes of Title 18, it encompasses the range of activities involved when an individual or entity uses prohibited means that include force or physical threats; psychological coercion; abuse of the legal process; a scheme, plan, or pattern intended to hold a person in fear of serious harm; or other coercive means to obtain the labor or services of a person. Once a person's labor is obtained by such means, the person's previous consent or effort to obtain employment with the trafficker does not preclude the person from being considered a victim, or the government from prosecuting the offender. Forced labor in Title 18 also encompasses when an individual or entity knowingly benefits, financially or by receiving anything of value, from participating in a venture that has engaged in providing or obtaining labor or services by prohibited means, knowing or in reckless disregard of the fact that the venture has engaged in providing or obtaining labor or services by such prohibited means. In the customs-related statute of Title 19, it is also defined in connection with the prohibition on the importation of goods produced wholly or in part by forced labor, including forced child labor; convict labor; and/or indentured labor under penal sanctions. In this context, forced labor is defined as: "all work or service which is exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty for its nonperformance and for which the worker does not offer himself voluntarily." In addition, Title 22 includes the following definition to describe this as a severe form of human trafficking: "the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services, through the use of force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery."

²The White House. (2021). *The national action plan to combat human trafficking*. <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/National-Action-Plan-to-Combat-Human-Trafficking.pdf>

FORCED CHILD LABOR: Forced child labor is always implicitly included in prohibitions related to forced labor in U.S. law. Although some children may legally engage in certain forms of work depending on the jurisdiction, forced child labor continues to exist both in the United States and globally, despite legal prohibitions and widespread condemnation.

SEX TRAFFICKING: When a person is required to engage in a commercial sex act as the result of force, threats of force, fraud, coercion, or any combination of such means, or when a person under the age of 18 is caused to engage in commercial sex, that person is a victim of sex trafficking. Under such circumstances, perpetrators involved in recruiting, enticing, harboring, transporting, providing, obtaining, advertising, maintaining, patronizing, or soliciting a person for that purpose are guilty of the federal crime of sex trafficking. This is true even if the victim previously consented to engage in commercial sex.

CHILD SEX TRAFFICKING: U.S. law explicitly includes a distinct definition of “sex trafficking of children.” Any child (under the age of 18) who has been recruited, enticed, harbored, transported, provided, obtained, advertised, maintained, patronized, or solicited to engage in a commercial sex act is a victim of human trafficking, regardless of whether or not force, fraud, or coercion is used. Children cannot consent to commercial sex; therefore, child sex trafficking occurs regardless of whether or not force, fraud, or coercion is used.

TRANSNATIONAL OR EXTRATERRITORIAL CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE (FORMERLY REFERRED TO AS CHILD SEX TOURISM): Transnational or extraterritorial child sexual abuse is a crime that occurs when an American citizen or legal permanent resident travels to a foreign country or resides abroad (whether permanently or temporarily) and engages in illicit sexual conduct with a child. Though not every instance of transnational or extraterritorial child sexual abuse is child sex trafficking, this offense can involve child sex trafficking when the offender engages in a commercial sex act with a child. It is also a crime to arrange or facilitate such travel for the purpose of commercial or private profit. This conduct is a crime whether or not the offender had the intent to engage in sexual activity with a child before the travel took place.



The Council notes that federal law also makes it unlawful for any person to knowingly acquire, receive, or otherwise transfer any human organ for valuable consideration for use in human transplantation if the transfer affects interstate commerce.³

The Council also believes that it is important to understand forced criminality within the context of human trafficking. As State has noted, an “often under-identified, characteristic of human trafficking is forced criminality. Traffickers may force adults and children to commit crimes in the course of their victimization, including theft, illicit drug production and transport, prostitution, terrorism, and murder.”⁴

³ National Organ Transplant Act, 42 U.S.C. § 274e. (1984). <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/42/274e>

⁴ U.S. Department of State, Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons. (2014). *The use of forced criminality: Victims hidden behind the crime.* <https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/233938.pdf>

Introduction

The past decade of the U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking reflects a vital undertaking by survivors committed to social change and justice. In honor of the 10-year anniversary of the Council, this year's report is an effort to examine our shared progress, challenges, and lessons learned as we confront the complex realities of human trafficking. The past 10 years have been marked by expanding perspectives, shifting landscapes, and recognizing that meaningful progress requires both introspection and action.

At the heart of this report lies the importance of looking back—not simply to mark achievements, but to illuminate the persistent root causes that enable exploitation and hinder recovery. By understanding the systemic, social, and economic forces underlying human trafficking, we position ourselves to develop more nuanced policies and interventions that address not only this crime's symptoms but the very sources of vulnerability.

Equally critical is our focus on the continuum of service delivery. Survivors' needs are diverse, spanning immediate crisis response to long-term healing, reintegration, and aftercare. This report underscores the necessity of comprehensive, coordinated care that adapts to individuals' journeys. By exploring the full spectrum of support—prevention, intervention, protection, and restoration—we aim to foster greater collaboration across agencies, disciplines, and communities.

Another crucial dimension of this report is the evolving integration and elevation of survivor engagement. Over the years, we have witnessed a transformation—from initial calls for survivors to be compensated for their contributions (2016 report), to a robust recognition of the diverse and indispensable perspectives survivors bring (2023 report).^{5,6} Today, survivors are not only heard—they are uplifted as organizational leaders, shaping strategies and challenging program designs to be truly survivor defined, while acknowledging the multifaceted realities and needs that exist across our nation.



A vital aspect of healing is providing space for the difficult moments that inevitably arise during the process. Too often, we hold survivors of trafficking to an unrealistic expectation that they should move through the short- and long-term effects of trauma seamlessly, without setbacks or struggles. Healing from deep wounds takes time and is rarely linear. There may be pauses, detours, or even moments of regression, all of which are a natural part of recovery. Survivor leaders must be extended the same understanding and grace as they navigate their own healing journeys. There is a lot of pressure from the anti-trafficking sector for survivors to show up in perfect and sanitized versions of themselves, without any effects of trauma. Healing deepens when survivors are free to be seen as they are.

As we reflect on the last decade, we must recognize both the progress achieved and the solidarity required for continued change. Our efforts must go beyond these pages—redefining how survivors are referenced and making space for their full identities. True progress demands that survivors are recognized not only for their experiences of victimization but also as vital, valued members of every community to which they belong.

The following pages represent the voices, reflections, and analyses of dedicated advocates and leaders from the last 10 years of the Council. Together, we strive to build on our shared knowledge and experience, forging a future where human trafficking is confronted at its roots and every survivor is met with compassion, effective support, and access to resources in every community.

⁵ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2016). *Annual report 2016*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

⁶ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2023). *Annual report 2023*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

Reflecting on and Addressing Root Causes

INTRODUCTION

The root causes of human trafficking are complex and continually shifting in response to changes in policy, community dynamics, and technological advancements. As such, we believe PITF agencies, and the anti-trafficking field must remain vigilant and proactive in understanding the evolving status and impacts of these root causes. We further recognize that root causes can become static when system leaders make assumptions about what survivors need, neglect to track essential data to inform decisions, and fail to communicate effectively with survivors.

We define root causes as the multilayered underlying factors and contexts that drive, enable, or exacerbate the risk and possible vulnerabilities of individuals and communities to human trafficking. Root causes that are not acknowledged, or that are minimized or ignored, also significantly influence the ability of individuals and communities to heal; unaddressed root causes continue to exacerbate societal harms. This report does not list all possible root causes but underscores the necessity of understanding that these factors exist and can evolve. Adapting responses based on this knowledge is crucial in anti-trafficking efforts.

To effectively strengthen our response to human trafficking, it is essential to embrace a holistic and adaptive strategy that weaves together prevention, prosecution, and partnerships at every level. Policymakers, community leaders, and anti-trafficking organizations must continually invest in education and targeted training, remaining vigilant to the evolving tactics of traffickers and ensuring that new insights inform both awareness campaigns and on-the-ground initiatives. Prevention efforts should be embedded in community outreach, public education, and early intervention programs that empower individuals with knowledge and resources, reducing vulnerability before exploitation occurs.

Root causes are not traits to look for in people but a lens through which we can better understand underlying gaps and possible vulnerabilities in our communities. These root causes can prevent survivors from being identified and hinder their ability to seek the support they need.



Photo by Holly Austin Gibbs

Engaging survivors as key partners in shaping and implementing responsive interventions is vital. Their lived experiences illuminate hidden realities and ground policies in compassion and effectiveness. Concurrently, a commitment to rigorous, ongoing data collection and analysis will reveal emergent patterns and root causes, empowering stakeholders to identify and address new threats proactively.

Prosecution of perpetrators must be robust, just, and victim centered, ensuring that legal frameworks are agile enough to pursue traffickers across shifting landscapes while safeguarding the rights and dignity of survivors. Law enforcement agencies, social services, and the judiciary should be equipped with specialized training and resources to respond sensitively and effectively.

Finally, forging strong, transparent partnerships across governmental, nongovernmental, and community sectors is the linchpin of a successful anti-trafficking strategy. Open communication, resource sharing, and collective action amplify the impact of individual efforts, creating a united front that anticipates challenges and adapts swiftly. By integrating prevention, enhancing prosecution, and nurturing dynamic partnerships, we can more powerfully disrupt systems of exploitation, support survivors' ongoing recovery, and work toward the eradication of human trafficking in all its forms.

There is no single root cause for exploitation. Recognizing the diverse harms and resiliency factors that individuals and families may experience and be exposed to is crucial for informing the community and enhancing prevention efforts. This understanding also ensures that programs continually evolve to meet the needs of survivors.

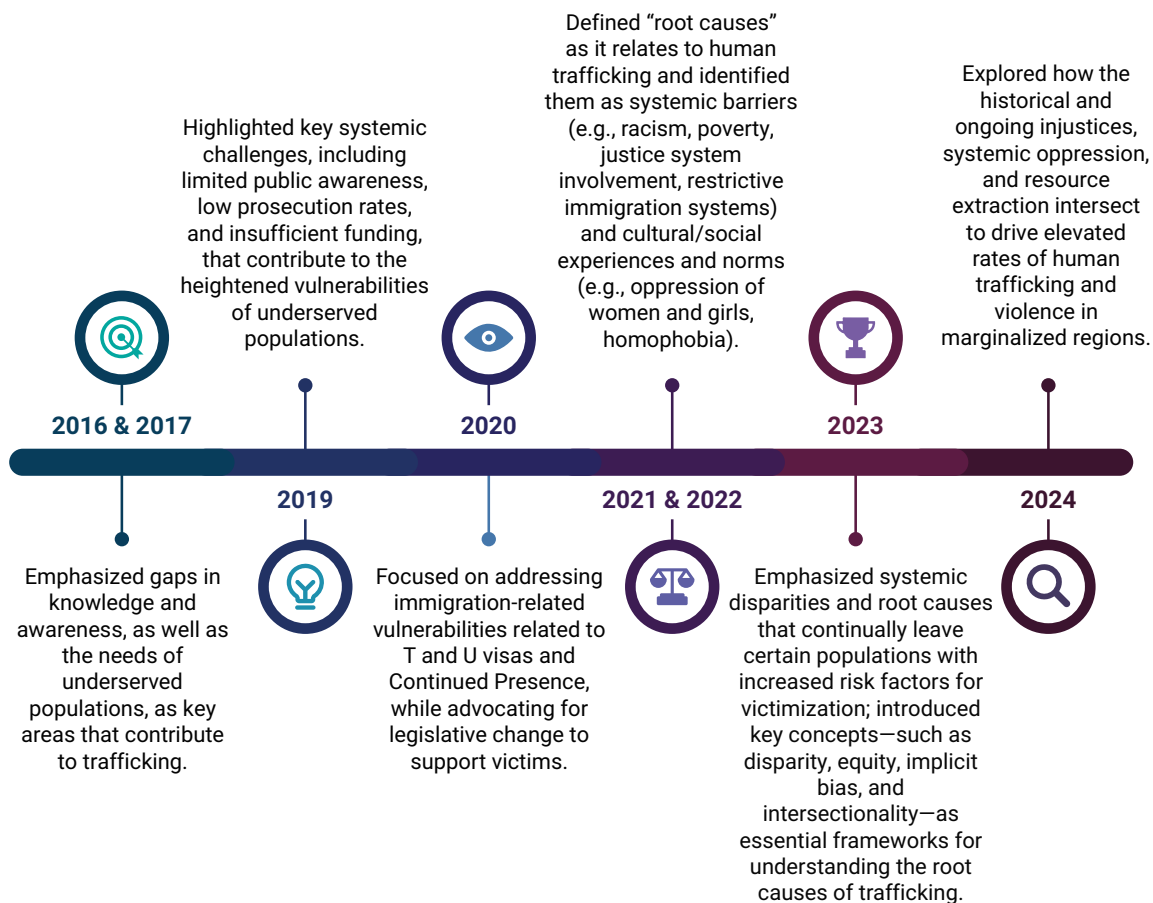
For our 2025 report, we conducted a comprehensive review of how the Council has defined and formulated recommendations concerning root causes over the past decade. Our analysis showed an increasing effort in the anti-trafficking sector to examine root causes, while each Council report has also uniquely addressed them. A consistent theme is the urgent call to assess and address the current needs of victims and survivors. This imperative has evolved from acknowledging the presence of domestic human trafficking to confronting the harsh reality of persistent systemic and community barriers that hinder prevention, identification, and the provision of essential services. Moreover, the anti-trafficking sector's understanding of healing and pathways to justice for survivors of exploitation has significantly progressed. Justice and healing are deeply intertwined, both profoundly influenced by root causes. Justice entails dismantling systemic barriers and societal/cultural norms, safeguarding survivors, reforming policies, and ensuring accountability for perpetrators. In parallel, healing prioritizes survivor-led recovery through trauma-informed care, financial empowerment, and robust community support. Addressing root causes is paramount to enabling both justice and healing, thereby breaking cycles of harm and re-victimization.

The following timeline and narrative underscore the Council's unwavering commitment to exploring this critical issue, incorporating diverse perspectives while continually deepening our understanding of the root causes of human trafficking.



A DECADE OF DIALOGUE ON ROOT CAUSES

Exhibit 1: A Focus on Root Causes Over 10 Years of Council Reports



As shown in Exhibit 1, while the 2016 and 2017 reports do not explicitly discuss root causes, they emphasize gaps in knowledge and awareness and the needs of “underserved populations” as key areas that increase the likelihood of trafficking.^{7,8} These inaugural reports emphasize prevention through increased public awareness and improved law enforcement training, and implicitly connect a lack of awareness and insufficient support systems to increased risk. They focus on enhancing existing efforts rather than explicitly addressing systemic societal issues. They also introduce concepts of “trauma-informed awareness” and hint at a deeper understanding of victims’ needs beyond identification. There is also a rising recognition of the specific challenges faced by Tribal communities and the importance of data collection in understanding the prevalence of trafficking among these groups.

The 2019 report discusses common underlying challenges, such as “limited public awareness, lack of data, limited service providers, fewer prosecutions, and limited funding” as contributing to underserved populations’ vulnerability.⁹ The Council also called for disaggregated data collection to better understand and serve specific underserved populations such as labor trafficking victims, men and boys, 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals, Indigenous populations, people with special needs/disabilities, and the elderly. This marks a shift toward a more targeted approach based on specific demographic vulnerabilities.

⁷ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2016). *Annual report 2016*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

⁸ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2017). *Annual report 2017*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

⁹ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2019). *Annual report 2019*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

Similarly, the 2020 report refers to underlying challenges and vulnerabilities that contribute to human trafficking.¹⁰ This report further highlights the exacerbating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on these vulnerabilities. It also has a strong focus on addressing immigration-related vulnerabilities related to T and U visas and Continued Presence, while advocating for legislative changes to support victims.

The 2021 and 2022 reports explicitly define “root causes” and identify them as systemic barriers (e.g., racism, poverty, justice system involvement, restrictive immigration systems) and cultural/societal experiences and norms (e.g., oppression of women and girls, homophobia).^{11,12} This reflects the Council’s efforts to apply an analytical framework to understanding root causes with an emphasis on cultural competence, trauma-informed care, and addressing historical and generational trauma. Both reports also highlight the critical link between online exploitation, pornography, and human trafficking, and advocate for legislative changes and increased digital forensic tools.

The 2022 report directly builds on definitions noted in the 2021 report, explicitly identifying systemic barriers and challenges.^{13,14} The report emphasizes the urgency of addressing online sexual exploitation and targeting demand through the investigation and prosecution of all those participating in or profiting from human trafficking, including sex buyers and commercial enterprises utilizing forced labor.

The 2023 report emphasizes “systemic disparities” (lack of gender-affirming services, access to housing, and systemic violence of Native women and girls) and root causes that continually leave certain populations, including Indigenous, Black, and Brown communities, with increased risk factors for victimization.¹⁵ It introduces



¹⁰ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2020). *Annual report 2020*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

¹¹ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2021). *Annual report 2021*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

¹² U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2022). *Annual report 2022*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

¹³ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2022). *Annual report 2022*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

¹⁴ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2021). *Annual report 2021*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

¹⁵ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2023). *Annual report 2023*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

concepts like “disparity,” “equity,” “implicit bias,” and “intersectionality” as integral to understanding these root causes. It also explicitly adds “substance use coercion” and “mental health coercion” to this framework. The 2023 report also conveys a strong focus on culturally specific and language-accessible strategies, increasing access to mental health and substance use services, and addressing the unique challenges faced by Indigenous communities and unaccompanied children.

Finally, the 2024 report directly expands on the root causes, particularly emphasizing how historical and ongoing injustices, systemic oppression, and resource extraction are deeply intertwined with high rates of human trafficking and violence in regions like Alaska and the Texas-Mexico border.¹⁶ It highlights poverty, lack of access to resources, a lack of identification and prosecution of labor trafficking cases, and colonization as key contributing factors. The report emphasizes addressing systemic issues, restoring what has been stolen (land, culture, and resources), and centering the voices of those most affected. The focus on restitution and addressing mental health and substance use coercion is also significantly expanded with practical, actionable steps.

As evidenced by the evolution of the Council’s exploration of root causes in the last 10 years, to effectively combat human trafficking, it is essential to adopt a comprehensive and multifaceted approach. Each layer of our society, from individuals to communities and institutions to broader societal norms, must be engaged to address this pervasive issue. Strategies should consider the physical, emotional, social, and economic dimensions that contribute to human trafficking (see Exhibit 2). By acknowledging and tackling these complex factors, we can create strategies that protect vulnerable populations and dismantle trafficking networks. This requires coordinated efforts and collaboration across multiple sectors, ensuring that responses are proactive, sustainable, and rooted in understanding the intricate web of influences that perpetuate human trafficking. We must view root causes as not a singular form but an ever-changing one that requires multi-systemic responses.

Exhibit 2: The Social Ecological Model Informs How the Anti-Trafficking Movement Can Address the Root Causes of Human Trafficking



Source: McLeroy, K. R., Bibeau, D., Steckler, A., & Glanz, K. (1988). *An ecological perspective on health promotion programs*. *Health Education Quarterly*, 15(4), 351–377. <https://doi.org/10.1177/109019818801500401>

¹⁶ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2024). *Annual report 2024*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

REFLECTIONS

A significant challenge in addressing human trafficking is the widespread failure to clearly identify and confront the root causes that perpetuate this crime. This critical oversight results in fragmented policies, severely impeding our efforts to combat trafficking effectively. The lack of a nuanced understanding of the various root causes of trafficking also presents challenges for survivor leaders transitioning into advocacy roles. They might end up advocating for narrowed solutions instead of pushing for a united, comprehensive response that addresses the comprehensive needs of all survivors.

Delving into these themes and acknowledging the multiple root causes of trafficking is essential for evaluating the crime's impact and developing effective, long-term strategies. These strategies must create meaningful change for all survivors. Below, we explore some of the root causes highlighted in previous reports, discuss their impact, and share reflections for agencies' consideration.

Lack of Public Awareness and Misidentification of Victims

A key root cause identified in previous reports is the misidentification—or lack of identification—of victims, a persistent challenge partly driven by poorly executed awareness campaigns. These campaigns often fail to accurately depict the diverse realities of trafficking scenarios, which then undermines identification efforts and support services. The Council has consistently emphasized that public awareness is a foundational pillar in the fight against human trafficking. The Council has highlighted both the importance and the limitations of awareness efforts across multiple annual reports:

- **2016–2017:** The Council emphasized the need to increase general awareness that trafficking occurs within the United States, not just abroad. These reports stressed the need for trauma-informed public outreach and better law enforcement training to improve identification of victims.
- **2019–2020:** The Council began to critique the lack of disaggregated data and the narrow portrayals of trafficking victims. The Council noted that “awareness campaigns often reinforced stereotypes,” which made it harder for the public to recognize diverse forms of trafficking.
- **2021–2024:** The Council took a nuanced stance and argued that “awareness alone is insufficient” without addressing systemic barriers. The Council warned that focusing solely on awareness can spread misinformation or sensationalized narratives, harm survivors by reducing their stories to trauma, and result in fragmented policies not grounded in data or survivors' needs.



The consequences of poor awareness campaigns have been a hindrance in the anti-trafficking movement and have had a direct impact on survivors.¹⁷ As discussed in the 2019 report, awareness initiatives not grounded in current prevalence data and research risk perpetuating harmful myths about trafficking, leading the public to mistakenly believe that only certain demographics or communities are at risk.¹⁸ This misrepresentation leaves many victims unseen and unsupported. When campaigns spread and promote misinformation or sensationalized narratives, they fundamentally distort the public's perception of trafficking within the United States and impede effective identification and intervention. The response to this issue has often focused superficially on the appearance of the crime rather than its underlying human aspect. Although awareness campaigns have diversified the images and stories they use, this has frequently been a superficial adjustment that falls short of addressing the real needs of survivors. Instead of merely changing visuals, it is crucial to develop comprehensive strategies that recognize the complex realities of trafficking and the dignity of all survivors.

As the Council discussed in its 2023 report, survivors should be engaged not strictly for their stories, but as paid consultants and staff to inform programs and policies.¹⁹ Instead of being recognized for their resilience and authentic experiences, survivors are often pressured to fit into narrow portrayals of trafficking shaped by institutional or programmatic priorities.

This relentless focus on sensational elements, rather than addressing the nuanced and often unheard needs of survivors, perpetuates a skewed understanding of the crime. It is imperative to shift the narrative toward a more holistic and empathetic approach that genuinely reflects the lived realities of survivors.

Awareness of the crime has shifted and grown as the sector has deepened its understanding. Behind the labels of victims and survivors are real people—spouses, siblings, parents, friends, and neighbors. While raising awareness about human trafficking is crucial in combating it, prioritizing an understanding of the individuals most impacted is essential. Reflecting on the Council's past recommendations reveals a growing focus on not just the crime itself, but also the broader context of intersecting community struggles.

Moving forward, it is important to develop campaigns that portray the multifaceted experiences of survivors and their journeys, voices, and experiences. Messaging must be survivor-led and survivor-defined and address the unique needs of each community with precision and empathy. Only through campaigns rooted in clear definitions, data, and authentic survivor narratives can we cultivate a deeper, more accurate public understanding and drive transformative change.

Based on the above section, we applaud the Council's prior focus on public awareness efforts. We urge PITF agencies to recognize that survivors continue to hold vital priorities that must not be overlooked. Even when immediate action is not possible, engaging in thoughtful reflection is crucial for honoring survivors' perspectives and needs. With this in mind, we offer the following points for consideration:

- **Understand the person, not just the crime:** By focusing solely on the crime, the complexity and nuances of a survivor's lived experiences may be overlooked. As discussed in many past Council reports, agencies must invest in comprehensive support programs that address the broad spectrum of survivor-defined goals and needs beyond their exploitation. Prioritizing these elements in all funded training and programming efforts is critical. Training for peer reviewers and all funded training and technical assistance providers and contractors on this paradigm shift will ensure that potential federal grantees are not only better identified but also have support in applying these crucial changes.

¹⁷ Savoia, E., Piltch-Loeb, R., Muibu, D., Leffler, A., Hughes, D., & Montrond, A. (2023). *Reframing human trafficking awareness campaigns in the United States: Goals, audience, and content*. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 11. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2023.1195005>

¹⁸ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2019). *Annual report 2019*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

¹⁹ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2023). *Annual report 2023*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

- **Move beyond general awareness:** Raising awareness is a critical first step, but it is far from sufficient. PITF agencies must champion a comprehensive, multifaceted approach that extends beyond superficial discussions about human trafficking. PITF agencies can support standard training development criteria for all programs funded by PITF agencies to ensure consistency and move beyond generalized 101 human trafficking training.
- **Ensure campaigns are data informed and survivor led:** As noted in the Council’s 2019 report, effective campaigns must be deeply rooted in robust data and propelled by the genuine experiences of a diverse array of survivors.²⁰ Accurate data collection and thorough analysis are essential to uncover trends, identify risk factors, and spotlight areas that need urgent intervention to ensure that resources are strategically allocated for maximum impact. Survivor-led campaigns, particularly those that include survivors with diverse experiences, amplify the authenticity of voices and experiences, and drive advocacy efforts that resonate powerfully and drive meaningful action. PITF agencies must forge strong partnerships with survivor networks to co-create initiatives that not only reflect current needs but also devise effective solutions. Additionally, it is imperative to provide comprehensive training and technical assistance to ensure that these best practices are consistently replicated across all federally funded programs. PITF agencies could also prioritize funding programs that can demonstrate a variety of survivor inclusion practices and data analysis as part of their project design.
- **Avoid over-reliance on trauma narratives as the primary awareness tool:** As noted in the Council’s 2021 report, relying solely on trauma narratives can inadvertently perpetuate harmful stereotypes and reduce survivors to their experiences of victimization.²¹ Agencies must diversify their awareness strategies by incorporating community-specific data, identifying and analyzing service gaps that reveal which populations are not being served, and calling for long-term solutions that extend beyond immediate support. This comprehensive approach will promote a deeper understanding of human trafficking and drive a more robust and sustainable community response.

“A mentor once told me, we fix things, not people. People are not broken—they do not need to be repaired. They may suffer harm, [and] they may carry wounds, but what they truly need is time, compassion, and real access to healing resources. Campaigns that reduce survivors to helpless victims in need of ‘rescue’ are not only misguided, but they echo the very tactics of control used by traffickers themselves. Organizations committed to genuine change must break this harmful narrative and instead uplift the strength, resilience, and unique journeys of survivors. To keep profiting from stories that frame us as dependent is to participate in our exploitation, not end it. If you truly want to make a difference, do not perpetuate the problem. Honor our power, our agency, and our capacity to heal.”

—Honorable Aubrey Lloyd, Member of the U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking

Lack of Data

Data is not just numbers or keywords used in anti-trafficking campaigns. Data represents the experiences of each survivor, their pain, and their resilience. Data offers ways in which agencies and communities can find effective avenues to justice and healing, as well as ways to reconsider their approaches and positions in the

²⁰ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2019). *Annual report 2019*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

²¹ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2021). *Annual report 2021*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

anti-trafficking sector. Moreover, failure to collect, analyze, and use data related to human trafficking (both related to victims and perpetrators) robs us of a critical way to identify and understand its root causes. Data should not be seen as just an analyst’s responsibility. Rather, data—and the tools we have today to analyze it (see page 46)—is a critical part of the strategy and story we must all embrace and protect for each survivor we walk alongside.

Comprehensive data collection is crucial in the fight against human trafficking, as underscored by the Council’s reports. Without it, trends and root causes remain hidden, making prevention and intervention less effective. Policymakers rely on reliable data to make informed decisions, and gaps in data can lead to fragmented responses that fail to address the full scope of the issue. Inaccurate or incomplete data can lead to policy gaps, where certain aspects of human trafficking are not adequately acknowledged or addressed. Robust data analysis reveals patterns and trends, enabling precise interventions and informed policymaking. By scrutinizing data, stakeholders can assess the effectiveness of anti-trafficking programs, ensuring optimal allocation of resources. Prioritizing the survivors’ experiences in data collection ensures their voices are heard and their needs are met, leading to more impactful support programs. Sharing data across different agencies and organizations fosters a unified and coordinated approach to combat human trafficking.

The Council has consistently emphasized the importance of comprehensive data collection and analysis to identify trends, evaluate the effectiveness of anti-trafficking efforts, and guide policy development.^{22,23,24} This includes leveraging technology to enhance data systems, advocating for investments in tools that improve data accuracy and accessibility, and gathering “more detailed information about underserved populations to better inform agencies’ resource allocations and service offerings.”²⁵

The Council has also promoted data practices that prioritize survivor experiences, including engaging survivors in the design and implementation of data collection and analysis to ensure accuracy and to protect privacy.^{26,27} The Council has underscored the value of cross-agency collaboration to share insights and develop unified, data-driven strategies that address systemic issues and highlight effective service models.

Lack of Data on Labor Trafficking Hinders Effective Prevention and Response²⁸

A fundamental root cause of labor trafficking is the lack of reliable, centralized data, which severely limits the ability to understand, prevent, and respond to this form of human trafficking. Law enforcement, labor agencies, nongovernmental organizations, and immigration services operate separately without integrated data systems, leading to fragmented and inconsistent information. This data gap obscures the true scale and nature of labor trafficking, especially in agriculture, the food industry, factories, care services, domestic work, and construction, where exploitation is often hidden. Victims frequently go unreported due to fear of retaliation, deportation, or mistrust of authorities, further compounding the data deficit.

²² U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2016). *Annual report 2016*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

²³ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2023). *Annual report 2023*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

²⁴ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2024). *Annual report 2024*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

²⁵ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2019). *Annual report 2019*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

²⁶ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2019). *Annual report 2019*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

²⁷ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2023). *Annual report 2023*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

²⁸ Eyerma, J., Labriola, M.M., González, I. (2023). *Current and future research on labor trafficking in the United States* (RR-A1681-1). RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1681-1.html; Berthet, A., Chen, J., Formisano, C., Tekisalp, L., & Quinn, A. (2024). *Building an effective data ecosystem to address forced labor in global supply chains*. Tech Against Trafficking & BSR. <https://techagainstrafficking.org/resources/BSR-TAT-Effective-Data-Ecosystem-Supply-Chains.pdf>

Poor data practices also contribute to misidentification and weak enforcement, where labor trafficking is misclassified as labor law violations. Nefarious employers may only be penalized under wage and hour laws when, in fact, they are traffickers, while victims may be misclassified as persons without legal status/documentation or as victims of only a labor law violation. This may result in part because frontline responders may lack the training to recognize trafficking indicators. Additionally, labor inspections can be limited in scope, particularly in informal or hard-to-regulate sectors, and federal and state agency resource constraints can hinder oversight. These systemic data limitations create blind spots that allow labor trafficking to persist largely undetected and unaddressed.

To effectively combat labor trafficking, PITF agencies must invest in a robust, centralized data system that tracks immigrant labor requirements by industry and state, alongside visa application and acceptance records, so that industries know how many workers are needed in various industries and when. A monitoring system should also be established to ensure data quality through quality assurance processes that identify and remove redundancies. Additionally, promoting random data audits grounded in field realities will help validate and refine the data, enabling more accurate identification and response to trafficking.

Support for survivors may fall short without survivor-centered data. Programs designed to assist those affected by trafficking might not fully meet their needs, impeding their recovery and reintegration into society. Good data is essential for monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of anti-trafficking efforts. Without it, there is less accountability for organizations and agencies involved in combating trafficking. Robust data ensures that efforts are continually assessed and improved.

Based on the above section, we applaud the Council's prior focus on data. We urge PITF agencies to recognize that survivors continue to hold vital priorities that must not be overlooked. Even when immediate action is not possible, engaging in thoughtful reflection is crucial for honoring survivors' perspectives and needs. With this in mind, we offer the following points for consideration:

- **Invest in Technology and Training:** Allocating resources to develop and share advanced data collection and analysis tools is crucial. For example, using artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning to detect service gaps, patterns, and trends in real time can significantly enhance our understanding of human trafficking (see also page 46).²⁹ Additionally, providing comprehensive training for federally funded organizations is essential. Standardized training ensures that staff are proficient in using these technologies effectively to capture, analyze, and share high-quality data. Enhanced training can lead to more accurate tracking of survivors' needs and better coordination between agencies.
- **Prioritize Survivor-Centered Data:** Focusing on gathering real-time data from individuals who have directly experienced trafficking is crucial. This involves creating and implementing feedback mechanisms designed to capture the nuanced needs and experiences of survivors in every program. By ensuring that the data collected is directly reflective of survivors' voices, agencies can develop more tailored support programs that address the specific challenges survivors face. Moreover, this data can help track the effectiveness of the support provided over time, leading to continuous improvements in survivor services and better coordination between various support agencies.
- **Prioritize Program Evaluation:** As part of their reporting, PITF agencies should urge federally funded programs to prioritize the collection and analysis of data on the effectiveness of their initiatives. These programs must establish a culture of continuous improvement rooted in robust data practices. Clear,

²⁹ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2022). *Annual report 2022*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/> (the Council's 2022 report also discusses using technology and AI to identify and address child sexual abuse material).

actionable metrics should be defined from the outset, encompassing not only quantitative outcomes but also the nuanced insights gained from qualitative assessments. By regularly monitoring progress and being responsive to emerging trends and feedback, agencies can fine-tune their strategies to maximize both immediate and sustained impact. This balanced approach ensures that programs do not simply chase impressive numbers, but genuinely foster meaningful change—optimizing resources, reducing the prevalence of human trafficking, and providing comprehensive support to survivors. Ultimately, embedding this reflective, evidence-based approach into performance reporting will drive real progress and lasting results that can be shared amongst federal agencies.

Systemic Barriers and Cultural/Societal Experiences

Past Council reports emphasize that human trafficking is a grave violation of human rights that transcends the actions of criminals and is deeply rooted in broader societal structures and norms. The reports categorize these underlying issues as “systemic barriers” and “cultural/societal experiences and norms.” As noted in the 2022 report, systemic barriers refer to institutional, structural, and policy-driven obstacles that limit individuals’ access to resources, opportunities, and safety, thereby increasing their susceptibility to exploitation.³⁰ Cultural and societal experiences and norms refer to deeply ingrained beliefs, attitudes, traditions, and accepted behaviors within society or specific communities that, intentionally or unintentionally, create environments where exploitation can flourish or where victims are shamed and silenced.

Erasing these truths or reducing them to mere political talking points not only perpetuates injustice but emboldens traffickers and enables further abuse. Such willful negligence devastates support networks, destroys lives, and betrays the fundamental responsibility to protect and uplift survivors. The consequences reverberate far beyond individual cases—every instance of apathy erodes the safety and dignity of entire communities, putting countless more at risk and deepening cycles of exploitation. To prioritize rhetoric over real action is to stand complicit in ongoing harm.

Human trafficking is fueled by a complex interplay of systemic barriers and cultural factors that create and exploit vulnerabilities in individuals and communities.



³⁰ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2022). *Annual report 2022*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

Systemic barriers that were explored in past reports include:

- **Racism and Discrimination** deeply entrench economic disparities, limit opportunities, and erode trust in institutions, especially for Black, Indigenous, and other people of color. Traffickers exploit these vulnerabilities, targeting those without equitable access who fear seeking help from authorities.
- **Poverty and Economic Disparity**, including unstable housing and a lack of basic necessities, make individuals and families desperate and urgently seeking ways to survive. This desperation is readily exploited by traffickers offering false promises of work or a better life.
- **Justice System Involvement and Mass Incarceration** disproportionately impact racial minorities and impoverished communities. Individuals with criminal records or those recently released from incarceration are targeted due to their limited resources and desire for stability, often becoming trapped in a cycle of forced criminality.
- **Restrictive Immigration Systems** create significant vulnerabilities for non-citizens,³¹ including temporary workers, students, and green card holders. Complex processes, fear of deportation, and limited legal aid leave individuals susceptible to exploitation, with traffickers leveraging threats of detention and removal to maintain control (see also page 27).

Cultural/societal experiences and norms that were explored in past reports include:

- The **Oppression of Women and Girls**, rooted in their historical objectification and devaluation, which normalizes exploitation. This cultural acceptance reduces agency and fosters an environment where trafficking thrives.
- **Homophobia, Transphobia, and Discrimination Against 2SLGBTQIA+ Individuals** lead to rejection, social isolation, and homelessness. Traffickers exploit this lack of support, offering false promises of community and acceptance.
- The **Normalization of Exploitative Practices**, such as the demand for cheap labor and insufficient penalties for child labor violations, fuels trafficking. Consumer demand for inexpensive goods incentivizes the exploitation of workers.
- **Substance Use and Mental Health Coercion** are powerful tools of control for traffickers. Traffickers exploit existing or induced substance use and mental health experiences to isolate victims and compel forced labor or sex acts, often convincing victims that no one will believe or help them.
- The **Stigma of Male Victimization**, coupled with harmful myths about masculinity, deters boys and men from seeking help or disclosing their experiences. Traffickers expertly exploit this fear, shame, and guilt, preventing victims from self-identifying and seeking support.

These interconnected systemic and cultural factors create a fertile ground for human trafficking, leaving certain populations disproportionately susceptible to exploitation. Failing to recognize and address these systemic barriers and cultural/societal experiences perpetuates human trafficking and could lead to several unintended consequences:

- **Continued Victimization and Re-Exploitation:** Without addressing underlying vulnerabilities, individuals remain susceptible to trafficking, leading to cycles of victimization and re-exploitation.
- **Ineffective Interventions:** Programs that only focus on immediate services without addressing systemic issues fail to provide long-term solutions, leading to high rates of re-trafficking.³²

³¹ Various non-citizens can legally be in the United States—their residency and work rights may vary depending on their specific immigration status. Noncitizens may include individuals who have Lawful Permanent Resident status, Temporary Visitor status, refugees or asylees, among others.

³² The Law Institute. (2023, December 13). *Understanding re-trafficking: A persistent challenge*. <https://thelaw.institute/rehabilitation-and-prevention/understanding-re-trafficking-persistent-challenge/>

- **Mistrust of Authorities:** Restrictive policies, lack of culturally sensitive responses, and punitive approaches (e.g., criminalizing victims) erode trust between vulnerable communities and law enforcement or service providers, making victims less likely to seek help.
- **Undercounting and Under-Serving:** A lack of understanding and data on specific populations (e.g., men and boys, 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals, labor trafficking victims) means services and resources remain inadequate or inaccessible for these groups.
- **Perpetuation of Harmful Norms:** Failure to challenge societal norms like the objectification of women, transphobia, homophobia, and stigma about male abuse breeds an environment that fuels trafficking.
- **Increased Vulnerability in Crisis:** As seen during the COVID-19 pandemic or the fentanyl crisis, existing systemic vulnerabilities are exacerbated during times of crisis, creating new opportunities for traffickers if not proactively addressed.³³
- **Limited Justice and Restitution:** Victims may face significant barriers to legal recourse, restitution, or vacatur of criminal records if the systemic factors that led to their involvement in trafficking are not recognized and accounted for in the justice system.

Based on the above section, we applaud the Council's prior focus on cultural and systemic barriers. We urge PITF agencies to recognize that survivors continue to hold vital priorities that must not be overlooked. Even when immediate action is not possible, engaging in thoughtful reflection is crucial for honoring survivors' perspectives and needs. With this in mind, we offer the following points for consideration:

- **Incorporate Nonpartisan Advocacy:** Expand the objectives of internal working groups and committees to actively promote nonpartisan support for survivors, free from political influence. Establish collective agreements on survivor-centered values, share best practices, and set actionable steps to ensure survivor voices are meaningfully included. Mandate comprehensive training for all federally funded programs on trauma-informed and survivor-defined care, as well as a thorough understanding of victims' rights, so that staff can consistently recognize and respond to the evolving needs and inherent rights of survivors.
- **Recognize Universal Harm:** The detrimental effects of trafficking experienced by survivors are extensive and profound, reaching far beyond the confines of isolated or targeted populations. When considering the broader implications of addressing this crime, it becomes evident that the harm inflicted on survivors permeates various aspects of life, impacting individuals, families, and communities universally. Hyper-focusing on a single group of survivors will not alleviate suffering and can contribute to the universal harm affecting everyone.
- **Support Male Victims:** As alluded to in the 2019 report, support awareness campaigns about the realities faced by male victims of trafficking, aiming to dispel misconceptions and societal stigmas.³⁴ Ensure federally funded programs offer and/or partner with tailored support services for male victims. PITF agencies could also coordinate a multi-agency male survivor leadership advisory committee to discuss ongoing trends and effective solutions across federal agencies.
- **Ensure Legal Support:** As discussed in the 2024 report, recognize and account for the systemic factors that lead to trafficking to help victims achieve legal recourse, restitution, and vacatur of criminal records.³⁵ PITF agencies can support continued funding for legal services as a priority area for healing and justice for survivors.

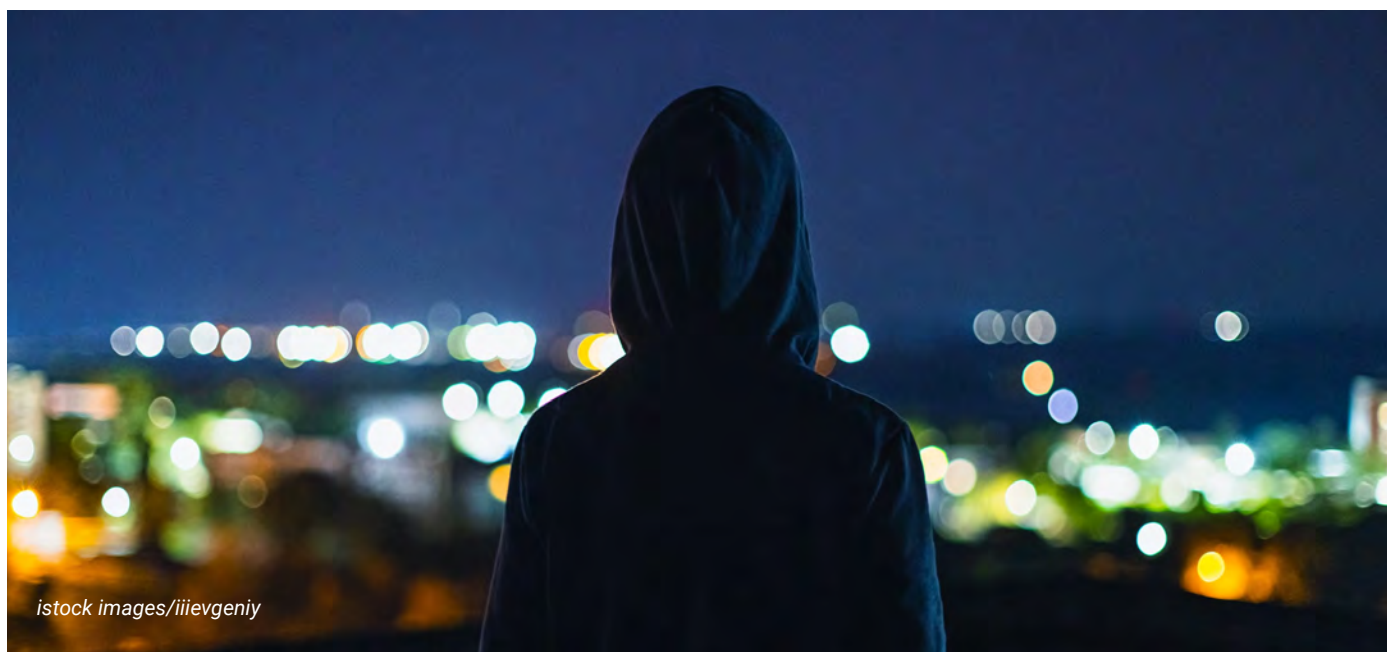
³³ U.S. Department of State. (2021). *Trafficking in persons report*. <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/TIPR-GPA-upload-07222021.pdf>

³⁴ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2019). *Annual report 2019*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

³⁵ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2024). *Annual report 2024*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

- **Offer Inclusive Services:** As noted in the 2019 report, increase data collection and research on effective models and practices to better understand and support specific populations, such as men and boys, 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals, and labor trafficking victims, to ensure services are adequate and accessible.³⁶
- **Provide Comprehensive Programming:** Implement long-term, systemic solutions that address the root causes of trafficking to reduce the risk of re-exploitation.^{37,38}
- **Challenge Harmful Norms:** As discussed in the 2022 report, actively work to dismantle societal norms that contribute to trafficking, such as objectification of women, transphobia, homophobia, and stigmas surrounding male abuse.³⁹
 - Support and amplify the voices of those affected by trafficking and harmful societal norms.
 - Support organizations and legislation that aim to protect and empower marginalized communities.
 - Engage in community outreach and support programs that address the vulnerabilities leading to trafficking.

Failing to address these systemic and cultural issues perpetuates a vicious cycle of human trafficking and re-exploitation. Without comprehensive interventions that consider the underlying vulnerabilities of specific populations, such as men and boys, 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals, and labor trafficking victims, the effectiveness of anti-trafficking measures will remain limited. The persistence of societal stigmas and harmful norms will continue to erode trust in authorities, leaving victims with little hope for legal recourse or restitution. As crises arise, these unaddressed vulnerabilities will only be magnified, increasing the likelihood of further exploitation.⁴⁰ Ignoring the harsh realities faced by survivors not only hinders the identification of trafficking but also undermines consistent justice and accountability. Addressing these realities directly is crucial for making meaningful progress in combating trafficking and supporting victims.



³⁶ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2019). *Annual report 2019*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

³⁷ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2016). *Annual report 2016*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/> (calling for comprehensive services)

³⁸ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2022). *Annual report 2022*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/> (calling for agencies to understand and address the root causes of human trafficking)

³⁹ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2022). *Annual report 2022*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

⁴⁰ U.S. Department of State. (2021). *Trafficking in persons report*. <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/TIPR-GPA-upload-07222021.pdf>

Lack of Training for Law Enforcement

Law enforcement personnel often face challenges in preventing human trafficking due to gaps in knowledge and skills—particularly in recognizing the complex indicators of trafficking and in using trauma-informed approaches when engaging with victims.⁴¹ Improved law enforcement training can help address this challenge by promoting trauma-informed and collaborative practices that reduce harm, enhance victim identification, and build trust with marginalized communities. Further, the complex nature of human trafficking requires specialized training that encompasses an understanding of victim psychology, the manipulative tactics used by traffickers, and effective methods for building trust and ensuring safety in interactions with victims and communities. By addressing these critical training deficiencies, we can empower law enforcement agencies to identify, assist, and support victims of trafficking more effectively.

Enhancing law enforcement training is vital because inadequate training that is not trauma informed can result in misinterpreted situations, overlooked victims, or unintentional harm. This can result in missed opportunities to identify victims or provide essential support, prolonging their suffering and increasing their vulnerability. Specifically, a lack of trauma-informed training can lead to:

- Re-traumatization of the individual during interviews if conducted by untrained officers who may ask distressing questions that hinder a victim's recovery.⁴²
- Failure by law enforcement to recognize victims and inadvertently placing them in harm's way by, for example, arresting victims for crimes they were coerced into committing, leading to further trauma and criminalization rather than protection.
- Victims being returned or choosing to return to their trafficker, which may exacerbate the psychological damage they have already endured.
- Victims not cooperating with investigations because of fear or a lack of understanding, which may be exacerbated by language barriers or terms law enforcement use to describe exploitation that may be unfamiliar to the victim.
- Victims recanting their stories and, in turn, being at the risk of continued violence (recantation is not evidence that abuse did not occur—it is frequently a survival strategy shaped by fear of their trafficker or of law enforcement). Understanding these dynamics is essential for accurate risk assessment, survivor safety, and trauma-informed response.
- Victims developing a distrust of authorities if they perceive their experiences as unacknowledged or invalid, causing them to hesitate in seeking help.

Proper training equips law enforcement officers with the ability to recognize subtle signs of trafficking that may not be immediately visible, as victims often struggle to self-identify due to fear, manipulation, or trauma. When law enforcement demonstrates a keen understanding of the harm linked to trafficking, it fosters a sense of safety and trust, encouraging victims to come forward for help. More robust training also helps law enforcement better understand different forms of coercion, including those related to substance use, economic, technological, documentation, and mental health coercion. Ultimately, effective and compassionate responses from law enforcement can strengthen community trust and engagement, while negative interactions can foster skepticism and disengagement, complicating efforts to combat human trafficking.

The connection between law enforcement and communities is vital for effective policing and crime prevention, particularly in addressing human trafficking. When officers are embedded within communities, they develop a deeper understanding of the unique challenges and needs of residents. This connection fosters trust and

⁴¹ Police Executive Research Forum. (2020). *How local police can combat the global problem of human trafficking: Collaboration, training, support for victims, and technology are keys to success*. <https://www.policeforum.org/assets/CombatHumanTrafficking.pdf>

⁴² Santoro, S. & Hubbert, P. (2018, May 22). *DHS Blue Campaign: Interviewing victims of human trafficking for law enforcement*. U.S. Department of Homeland Security. <https://www.dhs.gov/medialibrary/assets/videos/21886>

open communication, encouraging community members to collaborate with law enforcement in identifying and addressing local problems. Informed law enforcement can better recognize resources available to community members, such as support services for victims of trafficking, mental health resources, and outreach programs. Understanding these resources allows law enforcement to connect victims with the appropriate assistance and support, enhancing their recovery and reintegration into society.

Moreover, community engagement enables law enforcement to gather valuable insights about local dynamics, helping them to implement community-specific and effective strategies. By actively involving community members in discussions and decision-making processes, police can build strong partnerships that enhance public safety and foster a collaborative approach to combating crime. Ultimately, a well-connected law enforcement agency not only improves community relations but also enhances the overall effectiveness of crime prevention efforts.

In the last 10 years, the Council has made significant strides in advocating that law enforcement agencies improve their approach to human trafficking. Over time, recommendations shifted from increasing general awareness to actively pursuing practical solutions, reflecting the understanding that effective training is essential for successful law enforcement operations. The Council's recommendations broadly addressed awareness and identification but shifted toward implementing practical, victim-centered training that not only raises awareness but also equips officers with the necessary tools to engage effectively and in a trauma-informed way with victims. To this end, the Council has recommended creating specialized training programs that focus on trauma-informed approaches, effective communication with victims, and the identification of trafficking indicators. Many recommendations underscore the importance of incorporating trauma-informed care into training and emphasizing the need to understand the psychological impacts of trafficking on victims.

The consequences of inadequate training for law enforcement can lead to serious unintended outcomes that significantly hinder efforts to combat human trafficking. Ultimately, the lack of adequate training contributes to broader systemic failures in addressing human trafficking, resulting in missed opportunities for intervention and undermining community efforts to support survivors effectively.

Based on the above section, we applaud the Council's prior focus on law enforcement training. We urge PITF agencies to recognize that survivors continue to hold vital priorities that must not be overlooked. Even when immediate action is not possible, engaging in thoughtful reflection is crucial for honoring survivors' perspectives and needs. With this in mind, we offer the following points for consideration:

- **Mandatory Training:** Building upon the 2016 report, it is essential to establish and enforce mandatory training requirements for law enforcement agencies that focus on recognizing human trafficking indicators, employing trauma-informed practices, and utilizing victim engagement strategies.⁴³ These trainings should be regularly updated to reflect new findings and best practices while also being tailored to multiple law enforcement roles and jurisdiction-specific constraints.
- **Include Survivors:** As discussed in the 2016 and 2020 reports, incorporating the voices of survivors of human trafficking into the training development process is crucial, as their insights can provide valuable perspectives on the needs and challenges that victims face, ensuring that training remains relevant and effective.^{44,45}
- **Launch Campaigns:** Building upon the 2021 report, focus on community awareness campaigns to educate the public about human trafficking and its signs, thereby fostering more informed interactions

⁴³ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2016). *Annual report 2016*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

⁴⁴ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2016). *Annual report 2016*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

⁴⁵ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2020). *Annual report 2020*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

between the public and law enforcement.⁴⁶ This, in turn, creates an environment that encourages reporting and support for victims (see also page 16).

- **Develop Feedback Loops:** Develop mechanisms for regular assessment and feedback loops to enable the ongoing evaluation of training effectiveness, facilitating continuous refinement of training approaches that meet the evolving needs of both victims and law enforcement.
- **Collaborate with Local Communities:** As alluded to in the 2023 report, by actively engaging with community members and understanding their needs and available resources, law enforcement can better support victims and implement community-sensitive and specific strategies that improve public safety and collaboration in combating human trafficking.⁴⁷ This may include reviewing existing state and local law enforcement strategies and best practices, especially those that use multidisciplinary approaches and incorporate partnerships with mental health professionals and emergency responders.

Economic Instability

Economic instability is a root cause of human trafficking because it fosters conditions that heighten individuals' vulnerability to exploitation.⁴⁸ Without access to stable employment, fair wages, and essential resources, individuals may feel desperate to support themselves and their families. This desperation makes them more susceptible to traffickers who make misleading offers of employment, education, or improved living conditions.⁴⁹ This is true for men, but these risks are even greater for women, migrants, and ethnic minorities, who often encounter systemic barriers and a lack of support systems that may hamper their economic opportunities (see also page 21).⁵⁰

In addition, financial pressures and debt may compel individuals to accept precarious jobs, sometimes resulting in debt bondage, where traffickers impose fabricated or inflated debts to exert control over victims. In areas marked by significant economic instability, informal and unregulated labor markets can provide a shield for traffickers, leaving victims without necessary legal protections.⁵¹ Additionally, economic instability can drive displacement and migration; migrating individuals, particularly those lacking legal status, face an elevated risk of trafficking due to their vulnerable circumstances and insufficient support systems.⁵²

Addressing economic instability as a fundamental cause of human trafficking is critical to disrupt the cycle of exploitation, as it directly targets the vulnerabilities that traffickers seek to exploit. Individuals experiencing poverty, unemployment, or inadequate access to essential resources are significantly more likely to fall victim to deceptive offers or false promises of employment, education, or a better life. Therefore, it is imperative to combat economic instability through various measures, including job creation, enhanced access to education, comprehensive social safety nets, and the implementation of fair labor practices (see pages 38 and 41). Such initiatives have the potential to substantially diminish the number of individuals who are vulnerable to trafficking. Moreover, building economic self-sufficiency can help prevent the re-victimization of survivors who may have otherwise continued to experience financial instability, making them vulnerable to re-exploitation.

⁴⁶ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2021). *Annual report 2021*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

⁴⁷ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2023). *Annual report 2023*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

⁴⁸ AchieveCE. (n.d.). *How socioeconomic factors contribute to human trafficking*. <https://achievece.com/blog/how-socioeconomic-factors-contribute-to-human-trafficking>

⁴⁹ Polaris Project. (2019). *Sex trafficking in the U.S.: A closer look at U.S. citizen victims*. <https://polarisproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/us-citizen-sex-trafficking.pdf>

⁵⁰ Walk Free. (2023). *The global slavery index 2023*. <https://cdn.walkfree.org/content/uploads/2023/05/17114737/Global-Slavery-Index-2023.pdf>

⁵¹ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. (2020). *Global report on trafficking in persons 2020*. https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tip/2021/GLOTIP_2020_15jan_web.pdf

⁵² Laboratory to Combat Human Trafficking. (2023, March 13). *The intersection between migrant work and labor trafficking*. <https://combathumantrafficking.org/blog/the-intersection-between-migrant-work-and-labor-trafficking>

Additionally, economic insecurity fuels the growth of informal and unregulated labor markets, where traffickers can operate with little oversight and victims lack legal protections. This not only strains social services and justice systems—forcing them to respond reactively rather than preventively—but also undermines broader human rights and development goals. Ultimately, ignoring economic instability allows trafficking to thrive and makes it harder to build safe communities.

Understanding the Connection Between Economic Insecurity and Labor Trafficking

A mix of complex factors increases individuals' risks of experiencing labor trafficking. These factors often stem from economic hardship and weak protective structures that traffickers exploit:

- Individuals in impoverished regions may seek better economic opportunities and are forced to migrate making them vulnerable to trafficking.
- Limited access to education can result in a lack of awareness about rights and available protections, making individuals more susceptible to labor trafficking.
- War and political unrest can displace populations, leading to increased vulnerability to trafficking as individuals seek safety and stability.
- Industries that rely on low-cost labor, such as agriculture, construction, and manufacturing, can perpetuate labor trafficking by creating conditions that exploit vulnerable workers.
- Inadequate laws and enforcement mechanisms can allow traffickers to operate without recourse, making it easier for them to exploit victims.
- Certain groups, such as migrants and minorities, may face discrimination leading to a higher risk of experiencing labor trafficking.

In the last 10 years, the Council's reports have reflected a growing recognition that economic insecurity and poverty are fundamental drivers of human trafficking, and that addressing these root causes is essential for both prevention and long-term recovery. Early recommendations emphasize the need for economic empowerment strategies, such as building the capacity of survivor-led organizations, incentivizing services for underserved populations, and supporting long-term education and employment pathways (see also page 33). These recommendations acknowledge that economic vulnerability often makes individuals more susceptible to exploitation, and that sustainable solutions must go beyond immediate rescue and support.

Past recommendations also clearly emphasize the importance of integrating survivors into the economic system through workforce development, entrepreneurship, and job readiness programs. In the Council's 2020 report, it called upon agencies to collaborate with survivor consultants to design occupational training and transitional job programs tailored to survivors' needs.⁵³ The Council also called on federal agencies to define and promote economic self-sufficiency in grantmaking, ensuring that survivors have access to education, housing, childcare, and legal support.⁵⁴

In more recent years, the focus has expanded to systemic change. In 2022, the Council addressed poverty as a root cause of human trafficking by framing it as a systemic barrier that increases individuals' vulnerability to exploitation.⁵⁵ It emphasized that traffickers often target people based on their economic and social vulnerabilities, particularly in marginalized communities where access to education and employment is limited or perceived to be out of reach. To combat these root causes, the report called for targeted interventions, such

⁵³ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2020). *Annual report 2020*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

⁵⁴ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2020). *Annual report 2020*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

⁵⁵ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2022). *Annual report 2022*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

as increasing economic opportunities, supporting restorative justice and education programs for at-risk youth. It also advocated for greater research into the intersection of poverty, trauma, and trafficking. In 2024, the Council urged federal agencies to prioritize funding for community-led, population-specific organizations and to adopt policies that address factors that increase the risk of human trafficking.⁵⁶

Based on the above section, we applaud the Council's prior focus on economic insecurity. We urge PITF agencies to recognize that survivors continue to hold vital priorities that must not be overlooked. Even when immediate action is not possible, engaging in thoughtful reflection is crucial for honoring survivors' perspectives and needs. With this in mind, we offer the following points for consideration (see also page 41):

- As also discussed on page 41, **invest in professional development for survivors of human trafficking**, which may include mentorship, career coaching, and skills training that aligns with survivors' long-term goals and helps reduce the likelihood of re-exploitation.⁵⁷
- As also discussed on page 41 and the 2021 report, **expand access to financial literacy training**, including training on banking, credit, taxes, and budgeting, for families and individuals who may be at risk of experiencing human trafficking.⁵⁸
- **Increase public awareness about labor trafficking**, especially in vulnerable communities, to help individuals recognize exploitative practices.
- **Ensure ethical employment practices for survivors working with federal agencies on anti-trafficking efforts**, including providing fair pay, career growth opportunities, and safeguarding against tokenization and re-exploitation.
- As discussed in the 2023 report, **support expedited work authorizations for individuals with pending T or U visa applications**, which will enable them to achieve financial independence and stability, to decrease the likelihood of re-exploitation.⁵⁹

Loopholes in Immigration Practices

Temporary workers, particularly holders with H-2A, H-2B, and H-1B visas, are at increased risk for labor exploitation and labor trafficking.⁶⁰ These visas are sponsored by employers, meaning that a worker's legal status in the United States is directly tied to their job. If they are fired or choose to leave, they often lose their immigration status and face deportation. This dynamic gives employers disproportionate power over the worker and enables exploitation, as workers are often too afraid to report abuse, wage theft, or unsafe conditions for fear of retaliation or loss of their legal status.

Moreover, fraudulent recruitment practices, misclassification of jobs, and inflated job orders often go unchecked. Employers, recruiters, and third parties sometimes charge illegal fees, mislead workers about job conditions, or even use their identities to commit financial fraud.⁶¹ These systemic weaknesses not only facilitate trafficking but also trap workers in vicious cycles of debt bondage, fear, and silence, which are all hallmarks of labor trafficking today. Addressing these flaws is essential to dismantling the conditions that allow trafficking to thrive under the guise of legal employment.

⁵⁶ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2024). *Annual report 2024*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

⁵⁷ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2021). *Annual report 2021*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

⁵⁸ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2021). *Annual report 2021*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

⁵⁹ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2023). *Annual report 2023*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

⁶⁰ Polaris Project. (2022). *Labor trafficking on specific temporary work visas: A data analysis 2018–2020*. <https://polarisproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Labor-Trafficking-on-Specific-Temporary-Work-Visas-by-Polaris.pdf>

⁶¹ National Employment Law Project. (n.d.). *Ending independent contractor misclassification*. <https://www.nelp.org/explore-the-issues/contracted-workers/misclassified-workers>

Additionally, unaccompanied children (i.e., those who arrive in the United States without a parent or legal guardian) are among the most vulnerable to human trafficking. A complex mix of violence, poverty, family separation, and environmental disasters often drives their migration. These children are frequently fleeing gang violence, extortion, and extreme poverty, or seeking to reunite with family members already in the United States. However, the journey itself and the conditions they face upon arrival expose them to significant risks. Many are handed over to smugglers or traffickers.⁶² According to the Congressional Research Service, an estimated 75–80% of unaccompanied minors arriving at the U.S.-Mexico border are victims of human trafficking.⁶³

Recent investigations by DHS have also uncovered abuse and exploitation of unaccompanied children placed with poorly vetted sponsors.⁶⁴ Some sponsors were found to have fraudulently claimed familial ties. Children in their care were subjected to forced labor, sexual abuse, and neglect. These findings underscore how the lack of safeguards in the placement and monitoring of unaccompanied minors can directly lead to trafficking and exploitation—making their migration not just a humanitarian issue, but a root cause of human trafficking in the United States.

Consequences for Workers, Children, and Systems

Workers exploited under temporary work visas often suffer physically, psychologically, financially, and legally. They may endure unsafe working conditions, long hours without rest, and even physical or sexual abuse, while living in overcrowded, unsanitary housing. Fear of retaliation or deportation often prevents them from seeking medical care, leading to untreated injuries or chronic illnesses. The trauma of exploitation can result in anxiety, depression, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and substance use, while illegal recruitment fees and wage theft trap many in debt bondage. These workers may also lose their immigration status due to employer fraud, face criminalization for survival-based actions, and live in fear of law enforcement.

Similarly, unaccompanied children face risks of trafficking due to their age, isolation, and lack of guardianship. Without proper screening, sponsor vetting, and post-release support, they may be placed in unsafe environments where abuse goes undetected. Failure to protect unaccompanied children can result in continued cycles of exploitation—placing additional strain on child welfare, legal, and healthcare systems, and undermining the nation’s responsibility to safeguard vulnerable populations.

Sources:

McConnell, M. (2023, January 18). *Major victory for immigrant workers in the US*. Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/01/18/major-victory-immigrant-workers-us>; Yee, M. (2017, August 30). States can help protect immigrant workers from exploitation. *Georgetown Journal on Poverty Law & Policy*. <https://www.law.georgetown.edu/poverty-journal/blog/states-can-help-protect-immigrant-workers-from-exploitation>; Immigration Forum. (2025, March 11). *Unaccompanied alien children—2025 Update*. <https://immigrationforum.org/article/unaccompanied-alien-children-ucs-or-uacs-2025-update>

⁶² United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. (2019, May). *Children as smuggled migrants and victims of trafficking*. E4J University Module Series: Trafficking in Persons & Smuggling of Migrants. <https://www.unodc.org/e4j/en/tip-and-som/module-12/key-issues/children-on-the-move-smuggling-and-trafficking.html>

⁶³ National Immigration Forum. (2020). *Fact sheet: Unaccompanied migrant children (UACs)*. <https://immigrationforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Fact-Sheet-Unaccompanied-Migrant-Children.pdf> (citing Seghetti, L. M. (2014). *Border security: Immigration inspections at ports of entry* (CRS Report No. R43628). Congressional Research Service. <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/homesecc/R43628.pdf>)

⁶⁴ U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement. (2025, June 5). *DHS initiative uncovers widespread abuse, exploitation of unaccompanied kids placed with previously improperly vetted sponsors*. <https://www.ice.gov/news/releases/dhs-initiative-uncovers-widespread-abuse-exploitation-unaccompanied-kids-placed>

Since its inception, the Council has advocated for increased awareness about and stronger protections against labor trafficking. Since 2021, annual reports have increasingly emphasized the exploitation of immigrant workers on visas such as H-1B and H-2A. In 2021, the Council recommended that State enhance outreach and education around visa application processes to ensure that applicants understand their rights and responsibilities.⁶⁵ In 2022, the Council urged State's Bureau of Consular Affairs to include information about the Crime Victims' Rights Act in the "Know Your Rights" pamphlet distributed to non-immigrant visa applicants.⁶⁶

In 2023, the Council offered a series of detailed recommendations to federal agencies aimed at preventing and identifying labor trafficking linked to temporary work visas.⁶⁷ These included enhancing audits of visa applications to detect falsified information, creating a shared database among DOL, DHS, and State, and conducting in-depth audits of employers and visa sponsors. The Council also called for physical inspections of businesses in high-risk industries—such as agriculture, hospitality, and food processing—where temporary workers are frequently employed and vulnerable to abuse.

The Council has also made several targeted recommendations to protect unaccompanied children from trafficking and exploitation, recognizing their heightened vulnerability as a root cause of human trafficking. The Council has urged Congress to amend the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) by removing the requirement to prove "force, fraud, or coercion" in child labor trafficking cases to acknowledge that children cannot meaningfully consent to exploitation.⁶⁸ We have also emphasized the need for survivor-informed training and materials tailored to unaccompanied and transition-age youth. To prevent exploitation post-release, the Council called for stronger sponsor vetting, expanded case management and legal services, and improved interagency coordination among HHS, DHS, DOJ, DOL, and child welfare systems.⁶⁹

Challenges in Applying for T and U Visas Also Increase Individuals' Risk of Re-Exploitation

Applying for a T visa (for victims of human trafficking) or a U visa (for victims of certain crimes) is a complex and emotionally taxing process. Victims must meet a high legal standard to prove they experienced trafficking, often without access to police reports, medical records, or witnesses. Many are re-traumatized by having to recount their experiences in detail, while also navigating a system that may misclassify their abuse or fail to recognize labor trafficking. Cooperation with law enforcement is typically required, yet many victims fear retaliation or mistrust authorities due to past experiences. Language barriers, community stigmas, and the emotional toll of trauma further complicate the process.

The systems that process these visa requests are also burdened by long wait times, complex paperwork, and limited access to legal support. T visa processing can take months or years, while U visa applicants may wait a decade due to annual caps.^{70,71} During this time, many live in legal limbo, unable to work or access services. Even after approval, survivors face hurdles in adjusting

⁶⁵ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2021). *Annual report 2021*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

⁶⁶ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2022). *Annual report 2022*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

⁶⁷ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2023). *Annual report 2023*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

⁶⁸ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2023). *Annual report 2023*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

⁶⁹ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2023). *Annual report 2023*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

⁷⁰ U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. (n.d.). *Check case processing times*. <https://egov.uscis.gov/processing-times>

⁷¹ Serving Immigrants. (2024, October 31). *T visa processing time explained: Analysis and key factors*. <https://www.servingimmigrants.com/t-visa-processing-time>

their status. These challenges not only delay justice and stability for survivors but also leaves them vulnerable to further exploitation.

Based on this and the Council’s past recommendations on T and U visas from its 2020 and 2023 reports, we urge PITF agencies to continue to make efforts to accelerate the Bona Fide Determination (BFD) process for T visa applicants to ensure timely access to protection and work authorization and to audit U visa applications to detect and eliminate fraudulent claims, helping genuine victims—especially those with BFD status—receive faster relief.

Sources:

U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2020). *Annual report 2020*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>; U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2023). *Annual report 2023*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

Based on the above section, we applaud the Council’s prior focus on immigration-related issues. We urge PITF agencies to recognize that survivors continue to hold vital priorities that must not be overlooked. Even when immediate action is not possible, engaging in thoughtful reflection is crucial for honoring survivors’ perspectives and needs. With this in mind, we offer the following points for consideration that reiterate or build upon the Council’s 2021, 2023, and 2024 reports:^{72,73,74}

- **Enhance the visa application review process** to detect and prevent fraudulent submissions (see the Council’s 2023 report).
- **Expand outreach and educational messaging related to labor trafficking, especially directed to temporary work visa applicants** to ensure they understand their rights and responsibilities (see 2021 report).
- **Increase the frequency of audits** and conduct unannounced inspections of employers and visa sponsors (see 2023 report).
- **Improve interagency coordination** to streamline oversight and data sharing to prevent human trafficking among temporary visa holders (see 2021 and 2023 reports).
- **Engage state agencies** to support coordination efforts and expand field audits and compliance visits (see 2023 report).
- **Prioritize oversight in high-risk industries** such as restaurants, motels, nail salons, agricultural farms, poultry farms, and meat processing facilities (see 2023 report).
- **Encourage Congress to reform visa sponsorship rules** to allow immigrant workers greater flexibility to change employers without jeopardizing their legal status.
- **Urge Congress to revise the TVPA** by removing the requirement to prove “force, fraud, or coercion” in cases of child labor trafficking (see 2023 report).
- **Continue to strengthen the vetting process** for sponsors of unaccompanied children to ensure safe and appropriate placements (see 2023 report).
- **Use consistent follow-up protocols** to check on the welfare of all minors released from the HHS’s Office of Refugee Resettlement (see 2023 and 2024 reports).

⁷² U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2021). *Annual report 2021*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

⁷³ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2023). *Annual report 2023*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

⁷⁴ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2024). *Annual report 2024*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

Reflecting on and Addressing Continuums of Care



INTRODUCTION

A continuum of care refers to services provided to people before, during, and after experiences of violence and exploitation, including human trafficking. It's important to note that such services are not always available or accessible. Continuum of care service includes prevention, intervention (e.g., crisis and immediate aftercare), and long-term care. While the continuum of care is meant to support survivors, it can also cause harm. When receiving services, survivors are often prompted to disclose detailed information about their experience to determine the care needed, but that information can be misused. Some organizations use “client success stories” to market services or raise money without the survivor’s full consent or understanding of how the information was to be used. Below, we examine the human trafficking continuum of care by assessing healthcare, disability, education, economic empowerment, digital communication and tools, services, and prevention to reflect on the last 10 years of Council recommendations on this topic, as well as highlight what is working and where opportunities for improvement remain. The goal of continuum of care services should be to support survivors in their journeys toward healing and thriving.

Trafficking is not a single moment of harm, but a cumulative experience often shaped by the root causes of trafficking (e.g., systemic violence, discrimination, social neglect) (see page 11). There is often a conflation between understanding the trafficking crime itself and grasping the complex dynamics faced by affected individuals and communities. This misconception leads to the erroneous belief that all survivors share identical root causes and therefore also share the same care needs or that these causes and care needs remain static. The continuum of care required to support survivors cannot rely on a single approach, service, or pathway. It must prevent re-exploitation, offer multiple pathways to recovery, and remove barriers rooted in policy, stigma, bias, criminalization, and restrictive eligibility requirements. The following section explores how the continuum of care has evolved over the last 10 years of Council efforts and envisions a future grounded in research, implementation, and proven success.

REFLECTIONS

Healthcare

In 2023, the World Health Organization published a scoping review of research on human trafficking, the majority of which came from the United States.⁷⁵ The research showed that people who have experienced trafficking often suffer short- and long-term adverse health consequences from trafficking and related circumstances, and they often seek care from health systems, particularly emergency departments and urgent care centers. For example, female sex trafficking survivors reported seeking healthcare for services like sexually transmitted infections and HIV testing, reproductive healthcare, support for unintended pregnancies, trauma-related services, and chronic disease management.

Survivors trafficked as domestic workers accessed care for physical injuries and respiratory illnesses. Healthcare settings are a prime location to identify and assist victims; however, health systems require guidance, support, and resources from agencies like HHS to ensure trauma-informed, patient-centered, and culturally responsive services are delivered.⁷⁶

In the last 10 years, the Council has made a series of evolving recommendations to HHS related to the health and well-being of survivors. These recommendations reflect a shift from foundational guidance to more targeted efforts. Early recommendations, for example, focused on establishing comprehensive services for all survivors, developing standardized screening tools with survivor input, and initiating interagency collaboration. HHS's Office on Trafficking in Persons (HHS/OTIP) responded by engaging with the Council on housing initiatives and screening protocols, laying the groundwork for more nuanced interventions.

As the years progressed, the Council's recommendations became more focused on addressing the needs, health, and well-being of specific populations, including labor trafficking victims, boys and men, 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals, Indigenous communities, and people with disabilities. Recommendations emphasized the protection of children and youth, including those in foster care or who experience homelessness. HHS responded by tailoring funding opportunities, training programs, and technical assistance to better serve these groups. HHS/OTIP also began to develop the Anti-Trafficking Information Management System to capture more data and improve performance monitoring. HHS also implemented efforts to support survivors, including access to medical, mental health, and substance use services.

There was also a notable shift toward empowering survivors—not just as consultants, but as leaders and decision-makers. This included support for survivor-led organizations, inclusion of survivors in grantmaking processes, and leadership development programs like the Human Trafficking Leadership Academy (HTLA) and the Anti-Trafficking Leadership, Innovation, and Sustainability (ATLIS) Project. More recently, the Council's emphasis shifted to data-driven approaches and public awareness not only about what human trafficking is, but also survivors' health and well-being needs—including access to family-centered or whole family services.



Healthcare is the provision of medical and supportive services to prevent illness, treat health conditions, and promote overall well-being. It includes medical and behavioral health services delivered through systems such as hospitals, clinics, and community-based programs. For people experiencing human trafficking, healthcare is essential both for prevention education and treatment for injuries, chronic illnesses, mental health disorders (e.g., PTSD, anxiety, and depression), and reproductive health issues. Access to patient-centered, trauma-informed, culturally sensitive care can provide critical physical and psychological support, connect survivors to safety and recovery services, and improve long-term health and wellbeing.

⁷⁵ World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe. (2023). *Addressing human trafficking through health systems: A scoping review*. <https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/366280/9789289058827-eng.pdf>

⁷⁶ Geller, P., Murphy, L.T., Stoklosa, H., Bartovic, J., Halldorsson, H., Wolf, M., & Aguirre, I.Y. (2023). *Health workers are in a unique position to help identify human trafficking*. *BMJ* 2023, 382, 1745. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.p1745>

HHS advanced its data collection capabilities and integrated trafficking indicators into youth homelessness programs. Public awareness efforts also matured, with a focus on youth outreach and collaboration with survivor leaders and marketing experts.

Overall, this progression reflects a deepening commitment to survivor-centered, evidence-based, and person- and whole family-focused strategies in the federal response to human trafficking. Moving forward, we recommend PITF agencies continue to implement these efforts, relaunch programs like the HTLA or ATLIS Project, and consider how to continue implementing healthcare-specific recommendations from the 2023 and 2024 reports (see below for examples).^{77,78} We urge PITF agencies to recognize that survivors continue to hold vital priorities that must not be overlooked. Even when immediate action is not possible, engaging in thoughtful reflection is crucial for honoring survivors' perspectives and needs.

- **Work with communities and individuals in an open, respectful, and meaningful way when conducting research that uses federal funding**, and ensure they understand how the research will be used (2023 report).
- **Increase research, funding, and programming** specific to survivors of trafficking impacted by a traumatic brain injury (2023 report).
- **Ensure accountability in law enforcement responses** and access to justice in rural communities (2023 report).
- **Improve access to services for Alaska Native communities**, ensuring that support is provided to build capacity and infrastructure and that services are funded, sustained, equitable, and culturally responsive. Additionally, seek to prevent the exclusion of survivors with substance use or mental health experiences and eliminate racism and discrimination in service provision (2024 report).
- **Collaborate with Tribes and Indigenous and rural communities** to develop and implement culturally specific and language-accessible prevention and protection strategies (2024 report).
- **Increase outreach to community partners** to provide essential and targeted services to Tribal and rural communities, as well as education and awareness training about human trafficking (2024 report).
- **Improve efforts to recognize and develop support for survivors of forced criminality**, which may include (1) stronger training for government employees on the dynamics and signs of forced criminality, (2) policy and protocol review for whether forced criminality and survivors of forced criminality are acknowledged in validated screening tools and services, and (3) inclusion of forced criminality representation in public awareness and education campaigns (2024 report).
- **Develop and implement comprehensive strategies to address substance use and mental health coercion** in sex trafficking, domestic violence, sexual assault, and labor trafficking (2024 report).

Disability

In the 2024 annual report, the Council noted that disability is a natural and common part of human diversity.⁷⁹ That same year, State said that “the intersection between disability and human trafficking can be cyclical. On the one hand, persons with disabilities are more likely to be targeted by traffickers; on the other hand, the experience of being trafficked can lead to or exacerbate existing disabilities through physical injuries or emotional trauma that in turn could heighten vulnerability.”⁸⁰

⁷⁷ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2023). *Annual report 2023*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

⁷⁸ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2024). *Annual report 2024*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

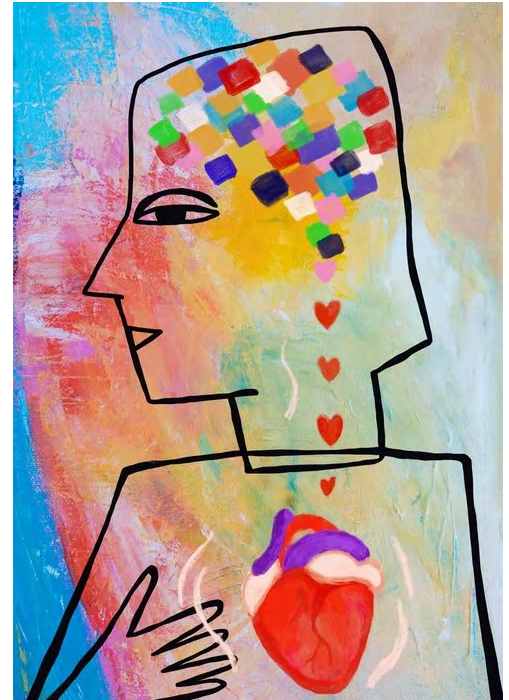
⁷⁹ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2024). *Annual report 2024*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

⁸⁰ U.S. Department of State, Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons. (2024). *Nothing about us without us: Human trafficking and persons with disabilities*. https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/24-02934-TIP_Factsheet-Persons-with-Disabilities-Section-508-Accessible-8.16.2024.pdf

Disability is a condition that affects a person's ability to participate in certain activities. A disability may be visible, such as a physical limitation, or invisible and stem from a mental, neurological, or chronic condition. As outlined in the Council's 2023 report, traffickers may target individuals with disabilities because they are vulnerable, and/or victims of human trafficking may develop disabilities from abuse at the hands of their traffickers.⁸¹ For many, disabilities may not be immediately apparent and can emerge over time. Yet, there are often inadequate resources or support systems in place to help survivors adapt or manage these conditions.

Traffickers often exploit vulnerabilities, such as socioeconomic challenges and social and rehabilitative needs, to gain control over victims, sometimes targeting them specifically for their access to public benefits like Supplemental Security Income and Social Security Disability Insurance.^{82,83} Dependency on caregivers, communication challenges, and social isolation further increase the risk. In some cases, traffickers pose as romantic partners or trusted figures to manipulate and isolate victims, which can make it difficult for individuals with disabilities to recognize abuse or seek help, reinforcing cycles of exploitation.⁸⁴ According to an analysis using 2021 data from the National Human Trafficking Hotline, 13% of victims in 2021 had a known intellectual/developmental disability or mental or physical health concern immediately before or at the time they experienced human trafficking.^{85,86}

Foreign national survivors, especially those who are alone and without family in the United States, often lack the social, community, and relational support needed for daily living, making it difficult to access basic care.⁸⁷



istock images/stellalevi

Disabilities can significantly impact survivors of human trafficking, often compounding the challenges they already face and carry unexpected and burdensome expenses.⁸⁸ Survivors with invisible disabilities often face additional barriers, such as being unable to find appropriate care in their communities.⁸⁹ Survivors with physical disabilities may have to travel to other states or raise funds for essential adaptive equipment. Many survivors worry about aging without access to life-saving medications or the financial means to support their health and long-term well-being.

⁸¹ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2023). *Annual report 2023*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

⁸² Jagoe, C., Toh, P.Y.N., & Wylie, G. (2022). Disability and the risk of vulnerability to human trafficking: An analysis of case law. *Journal of Human Trafficking*, 11(2), 220–234. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23322705.2022.2111507>

⁸³ Polaris Project. (2018, August 15). *Individuals with disabilities may face increased risk of human trafficking*. <https://polarisproject.org/blog/2018/08/individuals-with-disabilities-may-face-increased-risk-of-human-trafficking>

⁸⁴ Jagoe, C., Toh, P.Y.N., & Wylie, G. (2022). Disability and the risk of vulnerability to human trafficking: An analysis of case law. *Journal of Human Trafficking*, 11(2), 220–234. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23322705.2022.2111507>

⁸⁵ Polaris Project. (2021). *Polaris analysis of 2021 data from the National Human Trafficking Hotline*. <https://polarisproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Polaris-Analysis-of-2021-Data-from-the-National-Human-Trafficking-Hotline.pdf>

⁸⁶ Polaris Project. (n.d.). *National Human Trafficking Hotline*. <https://humantraffickinghotline.org/en>

⁸⁷ U.S. Committee for Refugees and Migrants & Project TRUST. (2021). *Trauma-informed case management with foreign national children and youth survivors of trafficking*. <https://refugees.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Trauma-Informed-Care-Toolkit.pdf>

⁸⁸ United Nations Human Rights Council & Duke Law International Human Rights Clinic. (2025). *Briefing paper: Trafficking in persons and the rights of persons with disabilities*. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/policy-briefs/briefing-paper-trafficking-persons-and-rights-persons-disabilities>

⁸⁹ Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. (2024). *Invisible victims: The nexus between disabilities and trafficking in human beings*. <https://www.osce.org/cthb/568150>

In the last 10 years, the Council’s recommendations relating to individuals with disabilities have reflected a growing recognition of the unique barriers faced by these individuals in the context of human trafficking. Early recommendations emphasized the need for agencies to demonstrate their capacity to serve special populations, including those with disabilities, by addressing mobility, language, and social support challenges. For example, in the Council’s 2017 report, it called upon agencies to “require (grant) applicants to demonstrate their capacity to serve special populations and reduce barriers to access created by mobility issues, disabilities, language, or reduced social and familial supports.”⁹⁰ In response to this and other related recommendations, HHS developed a range of resources relating to human trafficking and individuals with disabilities, including on-topic webinars and resources on using interpreters. This foundational step acknowledges that individuals with disabilities are often underserved and face systemic barriers to accessing services, particularly in crisis or recovery situations.

Over time, recommendations shifted toward integrating accessibility into broader service delivery systems. This includes promoting inclusive housing programs, such as those that serve individuals with disabilities, and ensuring access to mental and physical healthcare. These recommendations aimed to reduce administrative burdens and improve the responsiveness of services to the needs of survivors with disabilities. Additionally, there was a focus on data collection and evaluation to identify service gaps and ensure disability-related needs were addressed. In the Council’s 2023 report, it advocated for deeper survivor engagement—encouraging agencies to treat survivors, including those with disabilities, as consultants and experts.⁹¹ In 2023, the Council also called for increased research and programming specific to survivors with traumatic brain injuries and those affected by the opioid crisis, which disproportionately impacts individuals with disabilities. Overall, the last 10 years of recommendations reflect a call for more holistic approaches that support all survivors’ access to the services and support they need.

Based on the above section, we applaud the Council’s prior focus on disability-related issues. We urge PITF agencies to recognize that survivors continue to hold vital priorities that must not be overlooked. Even when immediate action is not possible, engaging in thoughtful reflection is crucial for honoring survivors’ perspectives and needs. With this in mind, we offer the following points for consideration:

- Building upon the 2019 report, **collect data** from federally funded service providers relating to human trafficking survivors who also have disabilities to help better understand how disabilities may increase risk factors to experiencing exploitation, but also to help identify needed crisis and long-term victim support services.⁹²
- **Promote information sharing** between agencies and among grantees on promising practices to provide services to human trafficking survivors with disabilities.
- **Involve survivors with disabilities** (both visible and invisible) in efforts to inform prevention and victim services policy and programs.
- Building upon the 2024 report, **increase training and awareness** for federally funded service providers to help reverse the stigma and barriers faced by many survivors with disabilities when seeking help, support, and services.⁹³

⁹⁰ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2017). *Annual report 2017*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

⁹¹ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2023). *Annual report 2023*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

⁹² U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2019). *Annual report 2019*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

⁹³ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2024). *Annual report 2024*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

- **Support victim service grants** that identify and address the specific and unique needs of survivors with disabilities, as well as those with access and functional needs, such as assistance with daily living activities, equipment use, and long-term healthcare needs.⁹⁴
- Building upon the 2019 report, **support access to tailored education, job, and career support services for survivors of human trafficking—including those who have disabilities** to help them successfully re-enter and succeed in the workforce (see also page 41).⁹⁵

Education

Access to education is one of the most powerful tools in the fight against human trafficking because it empowers individuals, transforms communities, and drives improvement.

 **Education is more than the transfer of knowledge, it is a tool of power, freedom and healing. It equips individuals and communities with the information, critical thinking, and confidence needed to challenge injustice, prevent harm, and avoid re-exploitation.**

When we speak about education in this report, it is multifaceted. It refers not only to increasing understanding and awareness of human trafficking, but it also relates to ensuring survivors have access to educational support services and professional education to acquire new skills—creating opportunities that allow them to heal and achieve independence and autonomy. Education is critical to:

- Prevent trafficking, raise community awareness and empathy, and dismantle biases and myths related to the complex crime of human trafficking.
- Ensure service providers, law enforcement, and policy and program staff understand how to combat human trafficking in trauma- and survivor-informed ways.
- Help survivors adapt their existing skills and acquire new ones to pursue careers that support their healing and financial independence (see also page 41).

Looking back at the last 10 years of Council reports, education—in each of its forms noted above—has been a core topic and priority for the Council every year:

- **Education, Prevention and Awareness:** There has been a consistent emphasis in past Council reports on the importance of education and awareness in combating human trafficking, eliminating myths and calling attention to biases (see pages 16 and 21). This includes public awareness campaigns; training for law enforcement, service providers, and agencies; and community outreach to prevent trafficking and identify victims. Past reports have also stressed the importance of making educational materials available and accessible to all communities, as well as through technology and social media. We also recognize the effort of many PITF agencies to increase awareness and understanding of human trafficking, including DHS's Blue Campaign, Know2Protect campaign, Project iGuardian, as well as HHS's Look Beneath the Surface campaign.^{96,97,98}

⁹⁴ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2017). *Annual report 2017*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

⁹⁵ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2019). *Annual report 2019*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

⁹⁶ U.S. Department of Homeland Security. (n.d.). *Know2Protect*. <https://www.dhs.gov/know2protect>

⁹⁷ U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement. (n.d.). *Project iGuardian*. <https://www.ice.gov/about-ice/hsi/iguardian>

⁹⁸ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. (2025, March 27). *Look beneath the surface*. <https://acf.gov/otip/education-training/lbs>



- **Education for Service Providers and Federal Agencies:** The Council has stressed in reports the ongoing need for education and training among service providers and government agencies to ensure that services are tailored to the specific needs of trafficking survivors. This will ensure service providers are equipped with the latest knowledge, skills, training, and resources to support and work with trafficking survivors effectively. Agencies working with foreign national survivors should also receive training on T and U Visas, continued presence, and the rights and unique needs of immigrant survivors.
- **Partner with Survivors:** The Council has also stressed the importance of partnering with survivor leaders to create or enhance training, services, and programs that impact survivors. For example, we recognize HHS's efforts to create the Stop, Observe, Ask, Respond (SOAR) to Health and Wellness Training Program, which builds the capacity of service providers to identify and respond to trafficking and offers a wealth of training for health and human service professionals, including SOAR for individuals, SOAR Online, SOAR for Organizations, and SOAR for Communities.⁹⁹ We also recognize DHS's Blue Campaign's training to federal agencies, especially for law enforcement.
- **Education for Survivors:** Rebuilding after experiencing human trafficking is an incredibly difficult and lifelong journey—one that not all survivors are able to achieve without strong, sustained support. The trauma of trafficking leaves lasting impacts, including physical, mental, financial, and emotional health challenges. Survivors need and deserve comprehensive support and access to meaningful educational opportunities to truly heal and move forward. This may include, as was discussed in the Council's 2021 report, providing access to education, scholarships, internships, technical or vocational training, higher education, and employment opportunities.¹⁰⁰ These are not luxuries; they are essential tools for achieving financial independence and restoring human dignity.

⁹⁹ U.S. Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. (2025, September 19). *SOAR Online: SOAR to Health and Wellness training module*. <https://acf.gov/otip/training-technical-assistance/soar-health-and-wellness>

¹⁰⁰ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2021). *Annual report 2021*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

Over time, the Council's recommendations relating to education have evolved into holistic strategies—addressing not only urgent needs like survivor services and law enforcement training but also long-term prevention through education and awareness. This includes meaningful involvement of survivor leaders in shaping programs and policies. This multifaceted strategy builds a stronger, more compassionate framework—one that protects vulnerable populations and truly supports survivors in reclaiming their lives. Based on the above section, we applaud the Council's prior focus on education. We urge PITF agencies to recognize that survivors continue to hold vital priorities that must not be overlooked. Even when immediate action is not possible, engaging in thoughtful reflection is crucial for honoring survivors' perspectives and needs. With this in mind, we offer the following points for consideration:

- **Invest in long-term prevention through inclusive education and awareness campaigns** by supporting robust, sustained public education efforts that reach communities most at risk of experiencing trafficking. As discussed in the 2016 report, these campaigns should be informed and co-created by survivors, with fair compensation for their expertise, to ensure messaging reflects the diverse realities of trafficking experiences (see also page 16).¹⁰¹ Awareness campaigns should also emphasize that trafficking occurs within the United States and to U.S. citizens and should work to humanize survivors by reducing stigma and increasing public understanding of the issue's complexity.
- Building upon the 2016 and 2019 reports, **provide advanced, trauma-informed training for federal grantees and agency staff** to equip service providers and federal personnel with specialized training that goes beyond basic human trafficking awareness.^{102,103} This should include education on the neuroscience of trauma, its effects on brain development and behavior, and how trauma manifests in survivors. Training should also focus on building trust and rapport, effective communication strategies, and fostering meaningful engagement with survivors in a way that respects their rights, compensates them fairly, and supports their healing and empowerment journey. Finally, training should also focus on survivors' rights to benefits and services, including individuals with Continued Presence status, T, or U visas (see also page 29).
- Building upon the 2021 and 2023 reports, **enhance survivor reintegration through comprehensive educational opportunities** by ensuring survivors of trafficking, including those with disabilities, have access to a full spectrum of opportunities that support long-term stability and independence.^{104,105} This includes education, scholarships, internships, vocational and job skills training, entrepreneurship pathways, financial literacy, and both personal and professional development. It also includes opportunities to access rapid credit recovery services for both adults and youth survivors seeking educational opportunities, as well as support and information about accessing financial aid. Federal investments in these areas—such as grants and career development programs—are essential to helping survivors rebuild their lives with dignity and economic security (see also page 41).

¹⁰¹ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2016). *Annual report 2016*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

¹⁰² U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2016). *Annual report 2016*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

¹⁰³ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2019). *Annual report 2019*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

¹⁰⁴ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2021). *Annual report 2021*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

¹⁰⁵ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2023). *Annual report 2023*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

- **Encourage federally funded victim service grantees to help survivors access essential benefits** while pursuing an education, including technical or higher education, by identifying and implementing strategies to ensure that trafficking survivors who are enrolled in full- or part-time educational programs can continue to receive critical support such as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, and Medicaid, education grants, and scholarships. Maintaining access to these benefits is vital to reducing barriers to education and promoting long-term recovery and financial independence.

Economic Empowerment

Economic empowerment is critical for survivors as many continue to face significant barriers to financial stability, including damaged credit histories from financial exploitation, employment gaps, lack of formal education or job skills, legal barriers from criminal records related to their exploitation, and ongoing trauma-related challenges that affect their ability to maintain economic and financial stability. The intersection of these challenges with systemic inequalities creates compounding barriers that require comprehensive, culturally responsive economic empowerment approaches that include access to legal services such as vacatur and post-conviction relief to remove criminal record obstacles. Furthermore, without adequate and equitable economic support, survivors remain at risk for re-exploitation, as systemic economic instability and inequitable structures can create conditions that push individuals back into harmful situations or expose them to exploiters who capitalize on those vulnerabilities (see also page 27).



Economic empowerment is a journey and transformative process of elevating beyond exploitation toward greater autonomy, choice, and stability. It encompasses the development of skills, resources, and access needed to advance one's economic well-being and align opportunities with one's authentic self and vision. As both a preventative and healing approach, economic empowerment addresses the structural and economic conditions that allow exploitation to occur, creating equitable pathways to achieve financial literacy, financial stability, education, and professional growth and development. Strengthened systems that are inclusive and accessible serve as powerful safeguards, expanding opportunity and promoting collective advancement. By cultivating capacity and self-determined choice, economic empowerment moves individuals and communities beyond survival toward thriving, purpose, and sustainable economic freedom, while actively interrupting cycles of systemic disadvantage and exploitation.

Looking back at the last decade of Council reports, economic empowerment has been a consistent priority, with the Council's approach evolving from broad recommendations to increasingly specific, evidence-based strategies:

- **Worker Protection and Labor Rights Enforcement:** The Council's earliest economic empowerment recommendations focused on fundamental protections, with the 2017 report recommending that "DOL continue to enforce the laws within its jurisdiction to protect vulnerable workers and to continue to refer potential trafficking cases to the appropriate authorities."¹⁰⁶ This established the foundation that economic empowerment must begin with ensuring basic labor protections for all vulnerable populations, including those on temporary and working visas who face heightened vulnerabilities due to their immigration status.

¹⁰⁶ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2017). *Annual report 2017*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

- **Survivor Leadership and Economic Capacity Building:** Beginning in 2019, the Council shifted toward recognizing survivors as economic leaders and experts whose leadership must be fairly compensated with comprehensive benefits, not token participation.¹⁰⁷ The Council recommended that “DOJ, HHS, USAID, and DOS support increased capacity building for survivor-led organizations within and outside the United States so that survivor-led organizations will be able to compete on an even playing field for federal grant opportunities.” This shift was important as it acknowledges survivors as capable economic leaders who deserve investment in organizational capacity building and comprehensive compensation packages—including adequate wages, medical care, paid time off, and professional development—that reflect their expertise and professional contributions rather than positioning them merely as beneficiaries of services.
- **Comprehensive Workforce Development and Skills Training:** By 2020, the Council’s recommendations had evolved to encompass holistic workforce development, calling for “DOL/Employment and Training Administration to collaborate with the Council or other survivor consultants to develop and/or support occupational and skills-based workforce training for human trafficking survivors.”¹⁰⁸ The Council also recommended that “SPOG Grantmaking Committee agencies design and implement grants that not only provide victim services but offer long-term skill development, financial literacy, job readiness, and education opportunities for victims and survivors,” recognizing that economic empowerment requires comprehensive support beyond immediate crisis intervention.
- **Economic Justice and Systemic Approaches:** The Council’s 2021 recommendations expanded to address systemic barriers, recommending that “DOJ, HHS, DOL, and DOC promote employment and economic empowerment opportunities, including entrepreneurship opportunities for human trafficking survivors, by increasing awareness of existing employment and training opportunities and by training American Job Center and employment program staff on working with human trafficking survivors.”¹⁰⁹ This recommendation highlighted that economic empowerment requires both individual support and systems change to make existing resources accessible to survivors.
- **Restorative Economic Programming:** By 2022, the Council called for a holistic approach, recommending that “PITF agencies should prioritize grant-making to trauma-informed victim service providers that facilitate restoration through funding educational scholarships, including postgraduate studies, business internships, job placement, mental health services, and addiction recovery programs.”¹¹⁰ This comprehensive approach recognized that true economic empowerment requires addressing trauma, mental health, and education as interconnected elements of long-term recovery and financial stability, while ensuring that economic opportunities lead to sustainable income and career advancement rather than temporary or low-wage positions. The Council’s emphasis on restoration moved beyond placing survivors in any available work—such as gig work or craft-based activities that may not provide living wages—toward creating pathways to professional development, skill advancement, and careers that offer both immediate financial stability and long-term growth potential.

¹⁰⁷ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2019). *Annual report 2019*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

¹⁰⁸ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2020). *Annual report 2020*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

¹⁰⁹ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2021). *Annual report 2021*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

¹¹⁰ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2022). *Annual report 2022*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>



Based on the above section, we applaud the Council's prior focus on economic empowerment. We urge PITF agencies to recognize that survivors continue to hold vital priorities that must not be overlooked. Even when immediate action is not possible, engaging in thoughtful reflection is crucial for honoring survivors' perspectives and needs. With this in mind, we offer the following points for consideration:

- **Implement Comprehensive Survivor Economic Leadership Programs** by expanding beyond the Council's 2019 recommendations for survivor-led organizational capacity building to create formal pathways for survivors to lead federal economic empowerment initiatives, including survivor-led entrepreneurship programs and peer mentorship networks that leverage survivors' expertise in economic recovery.¹¹¹
- **Establish Coordinated Economic Empowerment Systems** by expanding beyond the Council's 2021 report call for American Job Center training to create a comprehensive, seamless referral network between federal agencies and community partners that eliminates the fragmented service delivery survivors currently face when seeking economic support.¹¹² This coordinated approach should:
 - **Use collective impact models** that establish shared accountability systems across federal agencies, state workforce boards, and community-based organizations to ensure survivors experience a consistent flow of services from crisis intervention through long-term career development, with coordinated case management that follows survivors across multiple service providers.
 - **Encourage mandatory coordination requirements** for all federally funded grantees offering employment services to establish formal partnerships and referral protocols with local community-based organizations, survivor-led organizations, and other economic empowerment providers to create a robust network of opportunities rather than isolated programs.

¹¹¹ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2019). *Annual report 2019*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

¹¹² U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2021). *Annual report 2021*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

- **Support integrated data systems** that allow authorized service providers to track survivor progress across multiple programs while maintaining confidentiality, ensuring that survivors don't have to repeatedly share their trauma history or restart their economic empowerment journey when transitioning between services.
- **Support regional economic empowerment hubs** that serve as central coordination points where survivors can access comprehensive assessments and be connected to the full spectrum of available resources—from emergency financial assistance and housing support to legal services including vacatur and post-conviction relief, job training, educational opportunities, and entrepreneurship programs—through a single-entry point. This systematic approach would transform the current patchwork of disconnected services into a cohesive network that supports survivors through their entire economic recovery journey, building on the Council's vision for improved workforce system accessibility while addressing the coordination gaps and legal barriers that currently prevent survivors from accessing the full range of available federal and community resources.
- **Encourage Trauma-Informed Economic Programming Standards** by implementing the Council's vision for trauma-informed services across all federally funded economic empowerment programming, including specific protocols for accommodating trauma responses in job training, educational settings, and workplace environments. Building upon the 2019 report, this should include encouraging more survivor-led organizations to apply for federal funding by establishing priority scoring criteria for survivor-led projects in funding announcements and providing targeted training and technical assistance to newly funded survivor-led organizations to support their understanding of grant administration requirements, compliance procedures, and reporting expectations that may be unfamiliar to grassroots organizations.¹¹³
- **Support the Development of Economic Programming Standards** by convening federal, state, and local experts alongside lived experience professionals to design foundational standards for economic empowerment programming that ensure consistent, comprehensive support for survivors nationwide. These standards should establish minimum program components and quality benchmarks that include financial literacy programming, emergency financial assistance, career readiness support, skills-based professional development training, educational scholarship support, federal guidance for survivor compensation, and wraparound service coordination:
 - **Financial literacy programming** that addresses credit repair, banking access, budgeting, and debt management, specifically tailored to address financial exploitation experienced during trafficking.
 - **Emergency financial assistance** protocols that provide immediate cash support while survivors transition to stable employment and housing.
 - **Career readiness support**, including resume development, interview preparation, job search assistance, and professional wardrobe programs.
 - **Skills-based professional development training** in high-demand sectors that offer sustainable wages and career advancement opportunities.
 - **Educational scholarship support** for vocational training, professional certification programs, and postsecondary education opportunities that lead to economic independence.

¹¹³ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2019). *Annual report 2019*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

- **Federal guidance on fair and ethical compensation** rates for survivor leaders, lived experience experts, and subject matter experts that reflects their specialized knowledge, professional qualifications, policy expertise, research skills, program development capabilities, and unique insights that inform effective anti-trafficking strategies. These rates should also account for the additional emotional weight and aftercare support required when survivors engage in federal consulting work, recognizing that comprehensive compensation must address both their professional contributions and the holistic support needed to sustain their meaningful participation in federal initiatives.
- **Wraparound service coordination** to ensure economic programming is integrated with trauma-informed mental health services, housing assistance, and childcare support to address barriers that prevent survivors from maintaining employment and educational commitments. This coordination should extend to federally funded programs engaging survivors as consultants, providing comprehensive compensation packages including healthcare stipends, paid time off, and other benefits, which is particularly important given many survivors' reliance on gig work that lacks traditional employment benefits. Federal programs should standardize practices recognizing survivor expertise through fair compensation and access to essential benefits like medical care, mental health support, professional development, childcare assistance, transportation support, flexible scheduling, and technology resources for remote participation.
- **Create Economic Empowerment Measurement Systems** that track long-term survivor economic outcomes beyond initial job placement, building on the Council's emphasis on sustainable financial security rather than short-term employment to ensure federal investments achieve lasting economic independence for survivors.
- **Expand Educational and Professional Development Opportunities** by fully implementing the Council's 2022 recommendations for educational scholarships and postgraduate studies, creating dedicated pathways for survivors to access higher education, professional certification programs, and advanced training that lead to careers with livable wages and advancement opportunities.¹¹⁴
 - Recognizing survivors as complete individuals with diverse talents and interests beyond their exploitation experiences, educational pathways must support authentic self-development across all fields—arts, sciences, technology, healthcare, and beyond. Critical to this approach is establishing **business education and entrepreneurship development programs** that acknowledge survivors' inherent skills in strategic thinking, adaptability, and resourcefulness. These capabilities, often developed during exploitation, should be recognized and redirected toward legitimate business ventures through comprehensive business education, seed funding opportunities, microloans for survivor-owned businesses, and business incubator programs. By providing frameworks to translate survival skills into professional contexts and offering mentorship networks that connect survivors with diverse industry professionals, these programs enable survivors to develop as their full, thriving, authentic selves while building economic independence and contributing their unique talents to their communities.
- **Develop and Maintain Targeted Economic Support for Underserved Populations** by implementing the Council's 2019 report recommendations to "provide incentives to potential grantees to offer services to underserved populations," ensuring that economic empowerment programming specifically addresses the unique barriers faced by members of communities with vulnerabilities to trafficking.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2022). *Annual report 2022*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

¹¹⁵ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2019). *Annual report 2019*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

- **Strengthen Public-Private Economic Partnerships** by expanding federal efforts to engage private sector employers in survivor economic empowerment, building on the Council's 2021 report recommendations to create innovative partnerships that provide both employment opportunities and support for survivor-led businesses.¹¹⁶
- **Establish Economic Empowerment Research and Evaluation** to assess the effectiveness of different economic empowerment approaches, building the evidence base for what works in survivor economic recovery and ensuring that federal programming is continuously improved based on outcome data and survivor feedback.

Digital Communication and Tools

The global response to COVID-19 further accelerated an already rapid adoption of digital communication and tools in almost every aspect of our daily lives.¹¹⁷ AI and digital communications have revolutionized our work and how we engage, particularly in our social and economic endeavors. The misuse of digital communication tools is central to the modus operandi of trafficking networks nationally and internationally, and has simultaneously enabled traffickers to achieve greater efficiencies in their real-time criminal activities.^{118,119} Digital communications and tools, including AI systems and virtual currencies, pose both great challenges and opportunities to prevent, investigate, and prosecute traffickers, and empower vulnerable and marginalized groups and communities at risk of experiencing trafficking.

Digital communication is the virtual exchange of information and encompasses a range of channels including social media, the web, and other tools. Digital communication transcends borders and can connect individuals and groups around the globe. The existence and general accessibility of digital communication platforms and tools can be leveraged to proliferate trafficking operations, as well as distort victim realities through the spread of misinformation. The digital landscape has led to development of tools like cryptocurrency that enable transactions via computer networks instead of a government or bank, and thus provide an anonymous, unmonitored option for transactions related to human trafficking. Conversely, the development and rapid surge in use of AI has the potential to aid law enforcement in identifying criminal networks by analyzing data to identify patterns of human trafficking.

Traffickers often exploit digital communication and tools to advertise their “services” and facilitate payment, taking advantage of the anonymity and reach offered by social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. These platforms are commonly used to recruit victims through deceptive job offers, romantic manipulation, or modeling opportunities.¹²⁰ Traffickers use dating apps, encrypted messaging, and online ads to recruit and exploit victims. The 2024 U.S. Trafficking in Persons report highlights that digital tools have amplified the reach and speed of trafficking.¹²¹ According to an analysis of 2020 trends by Polaris, there was

¹¹⁶ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2021). *Annual report 2021*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

¹¹⁷ De, R., Pandey, N., & Pal, A., (2020). Impact of digital surge during COVID-19 pandemic: A viewpoint on research and practice. *International Journal of Information Management*, 55. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2020.102171>

¹¹⁸ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. (2021). *Global report on trafficking in persons 2020, chapter V: Traffickers use of the internet*. https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tip/2021/GLOTiP_2020_Chapter5.pdf

¹¹⁹ Inter-agency Coordination Group Against Trafficking in Persons. (2019). *Human trafficking and technology: Trends, challenges and opportunities*. <https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/report/human-trafficking-and-technology-trends-challenges-and-opportunities/Human-trafficking-and-technology-trends-challenges-and-opportunities-WEB...-1.pdf>

¹²⁰ Hope Against Trafficking. (2025, March 22). *Human trafficking and social media: A modern tool for exploitation*. <https://www.hopeagainsttrafficking.org/human-trafficking-and-social-media-a-modern-tool-for-exploitation>

¹²¹ U.S. Department of State, Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons. (2024). *Trafficking in persons report*. https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/TIP-Report-2024_Introduction_V10_508-accessible_2.13.2025.pdf

a 125% increase in recruitment via Facebook and 95% via Instagram.^{122,123} Traffickers also use encrypted messaging apps and online marketplaces, including the dark web, to discreetly promote illicit services.¹²⁴ To receive payments, they often rely on cryptocurrencies and peer-to-peer mobile payment systems, which make transactions harder to trace and help launder proceeds across borders.¹²⁵ Kiosks in convenience stores are sometimes used to convert cash into virtual currencies, further obscuring the money trail.¹²⁶ This digital shift has made trafficking more scalable and harder to detect, posing new challenges for law enforcement and victim support organizations. The rapid pace of digital evolution has contributed to law enforcement's inability to keep pace with traffickers.

Over the past 10 years, the Council has alluded to digital communication and tools in several reports. The Council's related recommendations evolved from general awareness and training initiatives to sophisticated, tech-driven strategies aimed at combating human trafficking. Early reports emphasized trauma-informed outreach, survivor engagement, and interagency collaboration. More recent recommendations from 2022–2024 highlight the importance of leveraging AI, predictive analytics, and public-private partnerships to identify and address child sexual abuse material (CSAM), understand the impact of AI-generated content, and prevent trafficking among vulnerable populations, including Black women and girls. These shifts reflect a growing recognition of the role digital communication and tools can play in both prevention and victim support.

In parallel, the federal government has made tangible progress in operationalizing these goals. The launch of DHS's Center for Countering Human Trafficking marked a significant milestone—it is the first integrated federal center dedicated to supporting investigations, intelligence analysis, outreach, training, and victim assistance. Additionally, the National Human Trafficking Hotline has harnessed AI to analyze hotline data, enabling the identification of trafficking patterns and trends that inform both policy and enforcement.¹²⁷ These developments underscore the trend of integrating AI and digital communications and tools into national anti-trafficking strategies, aligning with the Council's evolving recommendations.

We believe a whole-of-government approach is necessary to combat traffickers' use of digital communications and tools. We applaud the Council's prior focus on technology. We urge PITF agencies to recognize that survivors continue to hold vital priorities that must not be overlooked. Even when immediate action is not possible, engaging in thoughtful reflection is crucial for honoring survivors' perspectives and needs. With this in mind, we offer the following points for consideration:

- Building on the 2022 report, **invest in capacity building to leverage the potential use of AI and digital communication** to detect and disrupt trafficking networks within statutory or other restrictions regarding the use of these tools.¹²⁸ These technologies can enable real-time monitoring of victim transport and accommodations, offering faster, more cost effective, and scalable solutions than traditional methods. AI-powered systems can analyze vast datasets to identify suspicious travel patterns, financial transactions, and coded language in online advertisements—key indicators of trafficking activity. While these tools enhance investigative capabilities, their deployment must be approached with caution and

¹²² Polaris Project. (2020). *Analysis of 2020 National Human Trafficking Hotline data*. <https://polarisproject.org/2020-us-national-human-trafficking-hotline-statistics>

¹²³ Polaris Project. (n.d.). *Polaris Project*. <https://polarisproject.org>

¹²⁴ U.S. Government Accountability Office. (2022). *Trafficking: Use of online marketplaces and virtual currencies in drug and human trafficking*. <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-22-105101>

¹²⁵ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. (2021, October 14). *Good use and abuse: The role of technology in human trafficking*. <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/human-trafficking/Webstories2021/the-role-of-technology-in-human-trafficking.html>

¹²⁶ U.S. Government Accountability Office. (2022). *Trafficking: Use of online marketplaces and virtual currencies in drug and human trafficking*. <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-22-105101>

¹²⁷ Polaris Project. (2023). *Annual report 2022*. https://polarisproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Polaris_AR-2022_Final-Web.pdf

¹²⁸ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2022). *Annual report 2022*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

within applicable laws and regulatory requirements. Training should explore ethical concerns such as algorithmic bias, data privacy, and the risk of misidentification, which require robust safeguards. Transparency, accountability, and human oversight are essential to ensure AI systems uphold human rights and maintain public trust.

- **Invest in education, research, and training for anti-trafficking grantees and stakeholders.** As previously described, digital communication and tools offer powerful capabilities to detect, disrupt, and prevent trafficking networks, but require skill and adherence to ethical standards. Providing education and training via grants ensures that information about the safe and ethical use of these tools is shared across the human trafficking prevention and response community.
- **Explore public/private partnerships to assess existing policies and regulations regarding the use of AI and other digital tools.** With the backing of private sector expertise, innovative tools can be developed to monitor and regulate job advertisement platforms—key channels often exploited by traffickers to recruit and advertise victims. For example, federal labor inspectors must be equipped with advanced training in data analytics and digital forensics to identify and flag suspicious online content. This includes scraping and analyzing job postings that may serve as fronts for trafficking operations.
- **Increase understanding and monitoring of virtual currencies.** As noted by the U.S. Government Accountability Office, the use of virtual currency such as crypto has increased due to its relative anonymity and easy payment process.¹²⁹ PITF agencies must continue to broaden their understanding of how traffickers are leveraging virtual currencies through online marketplaces like the dark web.

Implementing these recommendations, which touch upon detection, identification, investigation, prosecution, victim support, and empowerment, requires a collaborative effort involving law enforcement, technology companies, nongovernmental organizations, and even the public. While AI and digital tools offer great opportunity to combat trafficking, achieving our goals requires sustained private sector partnerships and funding.

Services

For a survivor, access to the right service at the right moment can mean the difference between life and death, freedom and re-trafficking, hope and despair. Services are not abstract concepts. They are lifelines that sustain people in their most vulnerable moments and shape their path to healing.



¹²⁹ U.S. Government Accountability Office. (2022, February 24). As virtual currency use in human and drug trafficking increases, so do the challenges for federal law enforcement. <https://www.gao.gov/blog/virtual-currency-use-human-and-drug-trafficking-increases-so-do-challenges-federal-law-enforcement>

When we talk about systems of care, we are talking about the services survivors can access now. For someone actively experiencing trafficking, nothing is more critical than life-saving support: safety, healing, legal and medical care, and resources that not only help them escape but also build long-term stability.



Services encompass a comprehensive, survivor-defined continuum of care that supports individuals from crisis through long-term healing and empowerment. These services go beyond immediate safety and stabilization to include trauma-informed medical and mental healthcare, legal advocacy, housing, education, substance use support, economic empowerment, justice-related reentry and community reintegration. Effective service provision is survivor-led, culturally rooted, and designed to address the systemic violence, discrimination, and neglect that often underpin trafficking experiences. It also prioritizes prevention of re-exploitation, removes barriers such as transportation and eligibility restrictions, and offers multiple, flexible pathways to recovery, safety, healing, and support. True services are not transactional but transformational, standing with survivors as they reclaim power, pursue justice, and define healing on their own terms.

Service access is especially urgent because the systems survivors encounter often determine whether they can rebuild their lives or remain vulnerable to further exploitation. Survivors face complex and intersecting barriers such as a lack of documentation and economic opportunities, limited access to housing and healthcare, and having a criminal record. Meeting these challenges requires holistic, survivor-centered solutions. As federal agencies implement the Council's recommendations, there is an unprecedented opportunity to reimagine services not merely as crisis response but as survivor-defined pathways to lasting empowerment.

From its first report, the Council has consistently centered services as a critical component of its work. The evolution of the Council's recommendations on services for survivors of human trafficking reflects a deepening understanding of survivors' needs and a growing commitment to the complexities of individuals' experiences, how they are perceived, their community connections, and long-term support needs. Early recommendations emphasize the importance of providing comprehensive services across federal agencies (such as DOJ, HHS, DOS, and DOL), including housing, legal aid, and healthcare. These foundational suggestions focus on establishing basic infrastructure and access to services, particularly for, as the Council called it, "underserved populations,"¹³⁰ and begin to highlight the importance of survivor input and what the Council referred to as "culturally competent" care.

Later recommendations reflect a holistic and intersectional approach, acknowledging the complex realities survivors face. These include calls for trauma-informed, multi-generation (family-centered) services; support for survivors impacted by substance use, mental health experiences, and forced criminality; and targeted outreach to marginalized communities such as 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals, Indigenous populations, and Black women and girls. The Council also emphasizes the need for data-driven strategies, improved screening tools, and coordinated interagency efforts to ensure services are both accessible and effective.

Overall, the evolution of Council recommendations demonstrate a growing focus on how services are conceptualized—not just as immediate interventions—but as long-term, survivor-defined pathways to healing and empowerment. The Council increasingly advocated for services that are equitable, inclusive, and rooted in justice, with a strong emphasis on prevention, community engagement, and systemic change.

¹³⁰ In 2019 and 2020, one of the Council's working committees was called the "Underserved Populations" committee, which focused on increasing knowledge and services for individuals with disabilities, 2SLGBTQIA+ populations, Indigenous populations, men and boys, and labor trafficking victims.

Highlighting Progress and Advancing the Work: Promising Practices Resource

In its 2017 report, the Council recommended that the SPOG Grantmaking Committee develop a resource related to promising practices for identifying and highlighting effective anti-trafficking programs across the federal government.¹³¹ This recommendation emphasized the need for “survivor-informed, trauma-specific, and culturally responsive approaches,” along with tools for evaluating survivor-specific services and outcomes.

Since then, the SPOG Grantmaking Committee has made notable progress. Building on the 2012 *Promising Practices: A Review of U.S. Government-Funded Anti-Trafficking in Persons Programs*, the Committee released an updated compendium that reflects over a decade of learning and collaboration.¹³² This resource incorporates input from the Council, State’s Human Trafficking Expert Consultant Network, and federal grantmaking agencies. It highlights programs addressing prevention, protection, prosecution, and partnerships globally and serves as a starting point for testing and refining approaches within diverse communities.

Despite significant progress in expanding services for survivors of human trafficking, critical gaps remain that hinder access, safety, and long-term recovery and healing. These gaps reflect large challenges and underscore the need for a more coordinated, survivor-centered, and community-responsive approach. Addressing these areas is essential to ensure that services not only meet immediate needs but also provide sustained pathways to safety, healing, and empowerment.

Based on the above section, we applaud the Council’s prior focus on services. We urge PITF agencies to recognize that survivors continue to hold vital priorities that must not be overlooked. Even when immediate action is not possible, engaging in thoughtful reflection is crucial for honoring survivors’ perspectives and needs. With this in mind, we offer the following points for consideration:

- **Services for all Victim Populations:** Programs continue to overlook the unique needs of certain populations of survivors whose needs often differ from those of more commonly identified victim populations. This results in significant gaps in outreach, engagement, and tailored support for survivors who often face distinct forms of stigma, invisibility in public discourse, and limited availability of services that recognize their experiences. Building upon the 2016 and 2019 reports, agencies must take urgent action to expand research, develop trauma-informed programs, and build capacity across service providers to meet the specific needs of such survivors. It is critical to ensure that all victims and survivors have equitable access to safety, healing, and long-term support, and that outreach efforts actively challenge harmful stereotypes that prevent them from being identified as victims, reporting their victimization, or seeking help.
- **Support Research on What Works:** Dedicate funding and resources for independent, high-quality evaluations of anti-trafficking programs to strengthen the evidence base.

¹³¹ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2017). *Annual report 2017*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

¹³² Senior Policy Operating Group Grantmaking Committee. (2023). *Promising practices: A review of U.S. government-funded anti-trafficking in persons programs*. <https://2021-2025.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/2023-Promising-Practice-Resource-508-compliance-Accessible-8.31.2023.pdf>

- **Update and Disseminate Promising Practices:** Building upon the 2017 report, biennially update and expand the Promising Practices compendium to reflect evolving knowledge, innovations, and survivor-defined measures of success.¹³³
- **Enhanced Coordination Across Agencies:** Fragmented service systems leave survivors navigating complex and disconnected supports. Federal partners must strengthen interagency collaboration, streamline referrals, and ensure that survivors experience care as a seamless system rather than isolated interventions.
- **Specialized Services for Survivors with Complex Needs:** Building upon the 2024 report, not many programs are equipped to support survivors impacted by substance use, mental health experiences, or forced criminality, whether these issues occur individually or intersect in complex ways.¹³⁴ Services should address these realities with trauma-specific care, harm reduction approaches, and non-punitive policies that recognize natural survival responses.
- **Consider Structural Barriers:** Building on the 2024 report, policies such as documentation requirements and eligibility restrictions, especially for non-citizens and individuals without legal status/documentation, as well as the criminalization of survival behaviors, continue to exclude survivors from vital services.¹³⁵ Federal agencies should work to remove these barriers through policy change and flexible program design.

Survivors of human trafficking deserve more than fragmented systems and temporary relief. They deserve services that recognize their full humanity, honor their resilience, and meet their complex needs—immediately and over the long term. This is not only a moral imperative but also a test of our collective commitment to justice. The Council’s vision is clear: a future where every survivor—regardless of age, background, or circumstance—has quick access to a comprehensive network of supports that sustain safety, healing, and empowerment. To realize this vision, PITF agencies must act with urgency and coordination; close the persistent gaps that leave survivors vulnerable and targeted; and invest in survivor-led innovations that transform lives and communities.

Prevention

Prevention has been a core focus of the Council’s anti-trafficking efforts since its inception. Effective prevention is grounded in evidence-based curricula and resources that build knowledge, shift attitudes, and empower youth and adults with the skills to reduce their risk of trafficking. For children in particular, the responsibility to prevent exploitation lies with the systems and communities that support them. It is important to target high-risk environments, such as congregate care settings for youth, and ensure that prevention strategies are community responsive, trauma-informed, and survivor-informed. Prevention continues to be a priority today in the anti-trafficking movement. It has evolved to embrace multi-level frameworks that address individuals, relationships, communities, and systems—recognizing that sustainable prevention requires systemic change, outreach, and long-term investment in education, mental health, and community resilience.

Prevention is a comprehensive, systemic approach designed to disrupt the conditions and structures that enable exploitation. It aims to reduce risk factors and encourage intervention before harm occurs. As outlined in the Council’s 2024 report, prevention efforts are structured across three levels: primary prevention focuses on stopping the initial perpetration of violence; secondary

¹³³ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2017). *Annual report 2017*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

¹³⁴ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2024). *Annual report 2024*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

¹³⁵ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2024). *Annual report 2024*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>



prevention addresses the immediate needs of those who have already experienced harm; and tertiary prevention involves building long-term systems of care to prevent re-exploitation. This framework underscores that prevention strategies are not limited to individual acts—they also involve addressing root causes and challenging the policies and institutions that perpetuate vulnerability. Effective strategies include increasing public awareness, addressing harmful societal attitudes, and enhancing the capacity of individuals and communities to recognize, resist, and recover from exploitation.

In the last 10 years, the Council’s focus on prevention has emphasized a broad, systemic approach to preventing human trafficking, with a strong focus on addressing root causes (see pages 11), increasing public awareness, and enhancing systemic accountability. Early recommendations prioritized expanding investigations in high-risk labor sectors, eliminating barriers to employment assistance, and collaborating with survivors to inform outreach and prevention strategies. These efforts reflect a foundational understanding that prevention must begin with identifying vulnerabilities in labor markets, immigration systems, and public awareness gaps. For example, in the Council’s 2019 report, it called upon HHS to engage lived experience experts to support child welfare professionals through training to help prevent trafficking among children.¹³⁶ Since then, HHS has undertaken a broad range of initiatives to address human trafficking among children and youth in foster care. These efforts include policy guidance, training programs, and peer learning webinars focused on prevention and system responses.

Over time, the Council’s recommendations have evolved along with the movement to reflect an intersectional understanding of prevention. In later years, the Council emphasized the importance of community strategies, lived experience-led initiatives, and the use of technology and data to anticipate trafficking patterns. The Council also began to address systemic inequities—such as racial injustice, generational trauma, and the criminalization of victims—that contribute to individuals’ vulnerability to trafficking or re-traumatization. This shows our collective and growing understanding that effective prevention must go beyond surface-level interventions and tackle the structural conditions that enable exploitation. For example, in the Council’s 2024 report, it called upon PITF agencies to identify and change policies and practices that may unintentionally increase the risk of trafficking based on HHS’s Human Trafficking Prevention Framework, which provided an evidence-based list of community and society risk factors for both perpetration and victimization of trafficking.^{137,138}

The Council has also increasingly called for interagency collaboration and community engagement, highlighting the need for coordinated, multi-sectoral prevention responses. The Council has urged federal agencies to share resources, align their efforts, and support grassroots organizations that serve marginalized populations. The Council has called for the inclusion of restorative justice, mental health support, and survivor-informed education programs to promote long-term, sustainable prevention strategies that empower communities and individuals. This progression reflects the changing landscape that values survivor leadership as a central pillar of trafficking prevention. Based on the above section, we applaud the Council’s prior focus on prevention. We urge PITF agencies to recognize that survivors continue to hold vital priorities that must not be overlooked. Even when immediate action is not possible, engaging in thoughtful reflection is crucial for honoring survivors’ perspectives and needs. With this in mind, we offer the following points for consideration:

¹³⁶ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2019). *Annual report 2019*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

¹³⁷ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2024). *Annual report 2024*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

¹³⁸ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2024). *National human trafficking prevention framework: A public health approach to preventing human trafficking*. https://primarynewssource.org/wp-content/uploads/HHS-Human-Trafficking-Prevention-Framework_Final.pdf

- Building upon the 2024 report, **continue to develop and provide training on prevention strategies to relevant federal, state, and local direct service and law enforcement professionals** with a particular focus on children and adults who touch systems that may make them most vulnerable to human trafficking, such as foster care, the runaway and homeless youth, domestic violence, and immigration systems (see also pages 25).¹³⁹
- **Support funding for prevention** by embedding evidence-based, age-appropriate education into school curricula and investing in survivor-informed, community-led programs tailored to vulnerable populations. Agencies should also enhance data collection and research to guide effective interventions, while fostering stronger collaboration across agencies and with private sector partners.
- **Support evidence-informed strategies**, which include mechanisms for measuring the effectiveness of prevention programs. Without clear metrics or evaluation frameworks, it's difficult to assess impact or scale successful models.
- **Support engagement with the private sector**, especially in technology (see pages 46), hospitality, and agriculture—not just for enforcement, but for co-developing prevention strategies, ethical labor practices, and consumer education tools.

Conclusion

As we mark a decade since the creation of the U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking, we commemorate and continue to be inspired by all who fight for freedom. We honor the invaluable contributions of each Council member—those whose lived experiences and professional expertise have shaped actionable, survivor-centered recommendations to PITF agencies. These recommendations address systemic injustices and re-exploitation and promote justice, healing, and self-sufficiency for survivors. We extend our deep gratitude to federal partners for their efforts to implement these changes. Human trafficking remains a persistent threat, but through collaboration among government entities, community-based agencies, Tribal organizations, and survivor-led organizations, we reaffirm our shared responsibility to combat this crime. The Council is committed to ensuring that no one else endures the horrors we have survived—and that those who do can rebuild their lives. We are humans helping humans; let's keep pushing forward in our fight together. In collaboration, we can create a better world, free of human trafficking for present and future generations.

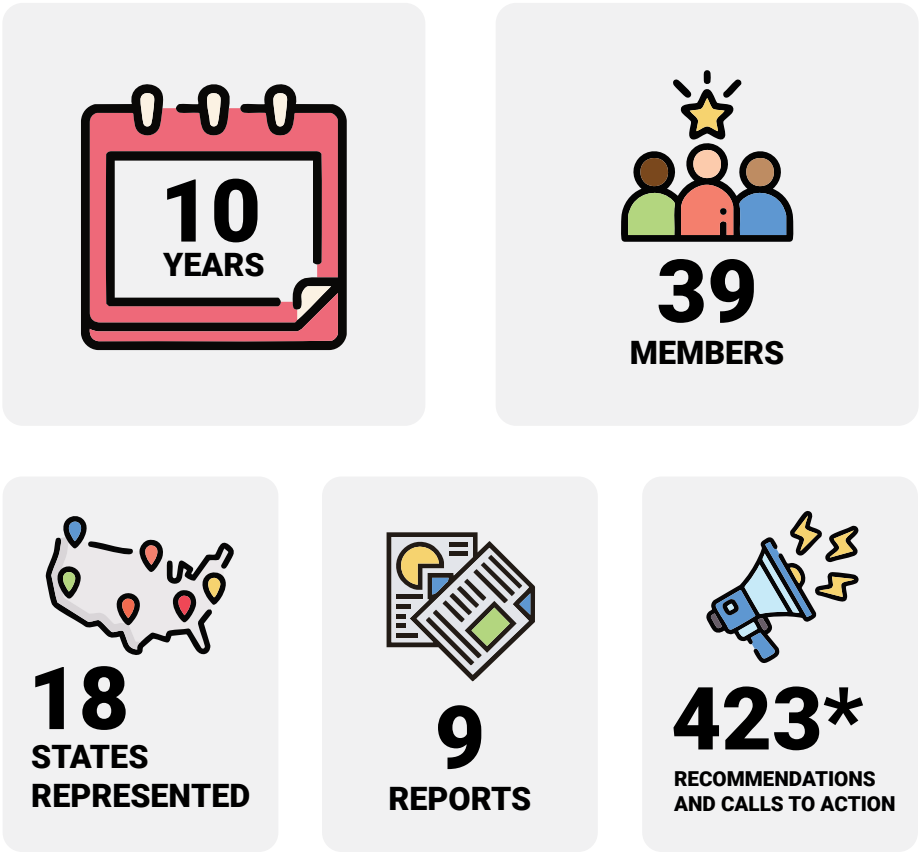
¹³⁹ U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. (2024). *Annual report 2024*. <https://www.state.gov/reports-office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/>

Appendix A: Celebrating 10 Years of the U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking

OVERVIEW

Members of the Council are survivors of human trafficking and reflect the diverse backgrounds of survivors of trafficking, including survivors of sex and labor trafficking, survivors who are U.S. citizens, and survivors who are immigrants lawfully in the United States. Over the years, a growing number of members have been men, 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals, and labor trafficking survivors.

COUNCIL BY THE NUMBERS



*This number reflects recommendations, sub-recommendations, and calls to action from the Council’s 10 years of reports, including the 2025 annual report’s considerations for reflection.

CURRENT COUNCIL MEMBERS



131

**YEARS OF COMBINED
ANTI-TRAFFICKING
EXPERIENCE**



55

**STATES/TERRITORIES
OF ANTI-TRAFFICKING
WORK**



28

**DEGREES, PROFESSIONAL
LICENSES, AND
CERTIFICATES**



ALL

**ARE PUBLISHED AUTHORS
AND/OR RECOGNIZED
SPEAKERS/TRAINERS**

WE ARE...



COUNCIL IMPACT HIGHLIGHTS



U.S. Department of Defense

- For more than a decade, DOD has collaborated with lived experience experts to improve strategic plans, trainings, technical assistance, and awareness materials.



U.S. Department of Education

- ED published *Human Trafficking in America's Schools: How Schools Can Combat Human Trafficking in Partnership With People With Lived Experience*, which describes ways schools can partner effectively with people with lived experience.



U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

- In 2023, HHS published a thorough review of its efforts to implement Council recommendations, including those relating to services, underserved populations, engaging survivors, and coordinating with other PITF agencies.
- In 2024, HHS conducted a formative evaluation of the Demonstration Grants to Strengthen the Response to Victims of Human Trafficking in Native Communities, highlighting connections between substance use, mental health, homelessness, and sex trafficking with experiences of domestic violence, Missing and Murdered Indigenous People, and human trafficking.



U.S. Department of Homeland Security

- In 2023 and 2024, DHS launched a Native American campaign and outreach materials and released a toolkit and webinar specific to the Tribal gaming and hospitality industries. It also led or participated in over 20 Tribal events to educate and share information on law enforcement resources and the indicators of human trafficking.
- From 2023 to 2024, DHS worked closely with DOJ to develop recommendations to enhance victim identification and responses by U.S. Government personnel.



U.S. Department of the Interior

- In 2021, DOI created a cold case unit, which became the Missing and Murdered Unit. The unit has expanded significantly, with 38 special agent positions, its own Victim Services Unit, and evidence technicians, command, and support staff.
- In 2024, DOI partnered with DOJ to deliver training focused on first responses to violent crime, targeting law enforcement officers and victim specialists who work in rural and remote environments responding to human trafficking, sexual assault, crimes against children, domestic violence, and other violent crimes.



U.S. Department of Justice

- DOJ leads the Forced Labor Initiative, an interagency steering group of federal investigation and prosecution partners who assess forced labor threats, identify actionable leads and indicators of potential forced labor violations, initiate criminal investigations and prosecutions, and provide specialized expertise to investigate and prosecute labor trafficking.
- DOJ conducts trainings focused on financial investigations in human trafficking cases and uses federally forfeited assets to compensate victims. DOJ has also mandated that all employees participate in training on victims' rights and trauma-informed best practices.



U.S. Department of Labor

- DOL has increased its engagement with local human trafficking task forces, increased referrals of labor trafficking cases for further investigations, and helped enhance federal forced labor prosecutions by providing expertise on labor exploitation and child labor.
- In 2023, DOL expanded its delegated U and T visa certification authority to include the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, providing DOL with a critical tool for protecting and empowering workers to report federal labor law violations.

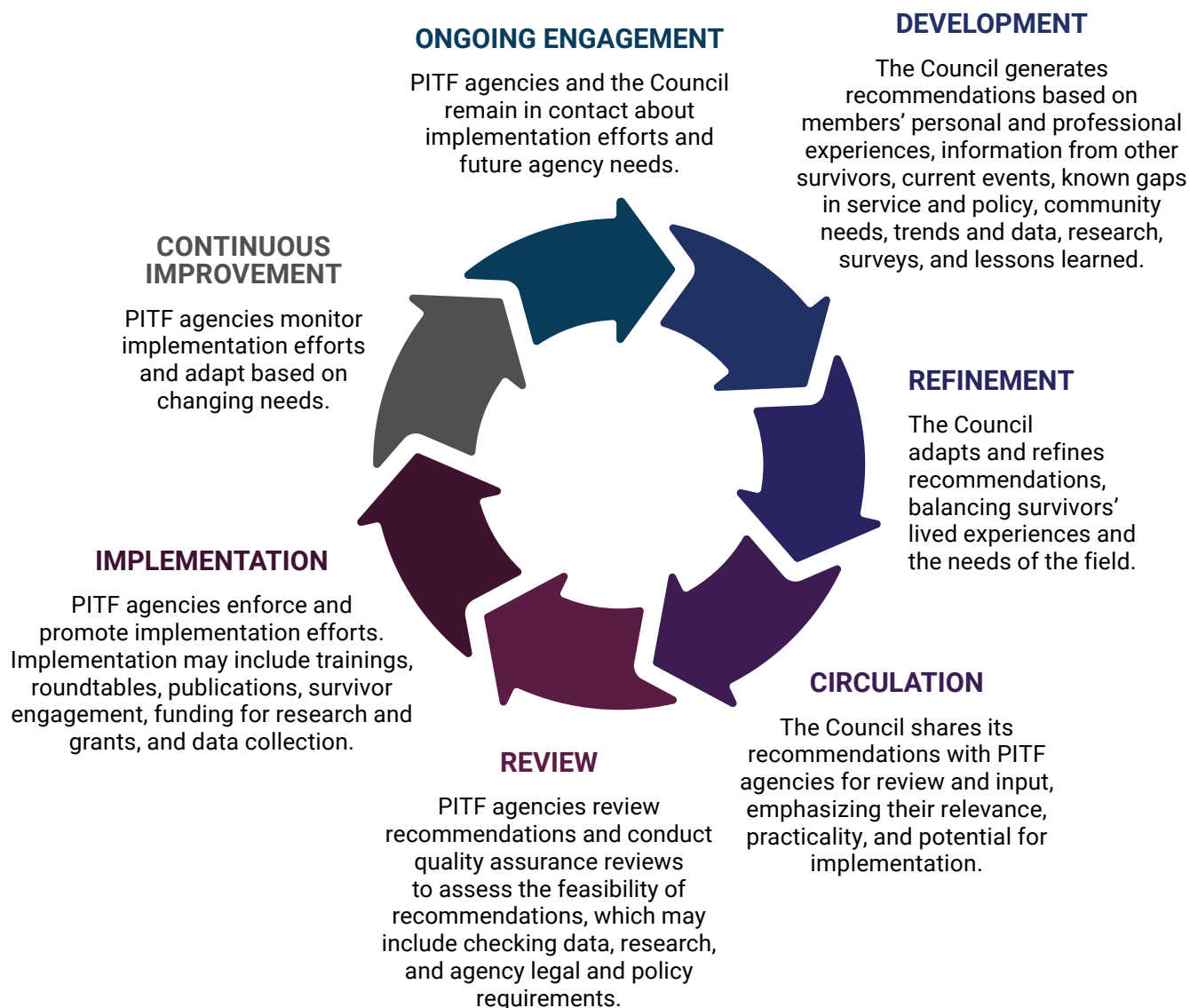


U.S. Department of State

- In 2025, State released an updated version of the Wilberforce "Know Your Rights" pamphlet to increase accessibility and add more resources, including the Crime Victims' Rights Act.
- State has done extensive messaging on visa fraud, including providing outreach toolkits to overseas posts and creating posters to be displayed in all visa waiting rooms.

HOW COUNCIL RECOMMENDATIONS ARE DEVELOPED AND OUR VISION FOR IMPLEMENTATION

The Council embraces a forward-thinking, survivor-centered strategy for implementing its recommendations. In reflecting on this year's report, we aim to present this approach with greater clarity. Every Council recommendation is grounded in lived expertise, thoughtfully refined, and carefully evaluated for practical impact before being submitted for federal agency review. Implementation may involve targeted training sessions, informative publications, active survivor engagement, and thorough data collection. Progress should be monitored continually, ensuring agencies can respond swiftly to emerging challenges and maintain open communication with the Council. Through this dynamic, collaborative process, the Council strives to secure lasting and meaningful progress in the nation's efforts to combat human trafficking—while encouraging wider support and stronger collective action in the decade ahead.





U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking

Designed by ICF

December 2025