

# ASK AN EXPERT SERIES

## ADDRESSING THE HOUSING NEED: SUSTAINING CRITICAL SERVICES FOR VICTIMS OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING DURING A REMOTE ENVIRONMENT

Housing is an essential need for stability and to achieve one's full potential. Finding adequate and appropriate emergency, transitional, and long-term housing for victims of human trafficking is often the biggest service-related challenge support organizations face. On February 24, 2021, three experts—Karen Romero with [Freedom Network USA](#), Kris Billhardt with the [National Alliance for Safe Housing](#), and Amanda Eckhardt with [Restore USA](#)—offered insight on this topic and answered participant questions during a [live Ask an Expert webinar](#).

The Ask an Expert Series is sponsored by the Office for Victims of Crime (OVC), [Human Trafficking Capacity Building Center](#). Following are the questions and panelists' abbreviated answers.

### *Questions and Answers*

**Where should an organization providing victim services, but not currently offering housing, get started in this field of service?**

First, ground your work by listening to survivors—survivors are the experts. Think about how to engage survivors and people with lived experience, especially those who are underserved and overrepresented due to racism and other intersecting identities. Ask a survivor what they need. Where do they want to go? What service gaps is your organization able to fill in your community because of your expertise? What can survivors tell your organization about their experiences in the current systems? What opportunities are there to offer better survivor assistance?

Second, be aware of the cultural shifts within your own program as a result of moving into a new realm of service provisions. New service strategies bring new areas of expertise, whether that is housing services or a focused effort to serve victims of human trafficking. This shift can be unsettling for staff, especially in shelter-based programs. Cultivating staff investment in making the shift is extremely important; make lots of room for co-design with advocacy staff, pay attention to safety

protocols, encourage advocate feedback about how things are working, and provide clear information about what decisions advocates can make on their own, especially around flexible funding.

Third, partnerships and community engagement are essential. Early on, identify your key existing partnerships as well as those you need to cultivate. Survivors deserve a full range of services and your partners are key to ensuring access to those services.

Lastly, you are not alone. There is a growing body of knowledge and evidence about housing best practices. Request training and technical assistance, read publications, attend webinars, or seek training. The Freedom Network [Housing Project](#), the National Alliance for Safe Housing [Resource Library](#), and the [Safe Housing Partnership](#) offer many housing resources. The [Human Trafficking Capacity Building Center](#) can assist you in navigating these resources or provide coaching assistance.

### **What are the possible housing options for victims of human trafficking, especially during a pandemic?**

There are three types of housing: emergency, transitional, and independent living. These [housing options](#) connect survivors of trafficking to safe, stable, and affordable housing. It is especially important to ask survivors of trafficking about their housing desires up front when working with them.

Emergency housing typically lasts from a few nights up to 90 days with a focus on safety and stabilization. It may be a shelter that the agency owns or a partnership with other programs that specialize in homelessness, domestic violence, or mental health. Hotels are another form of emergency housing. Transitional housing lasts from 12 to 18 months. It involves communal or independent living with optional supportive services, which may include health care and economic initiatives. The goal is to support a resident to transition to permanent housing. Lastly, there is independent living or long-term housing. This is also called rapid rehousing<sup>1</sup> with flexible funding<sup>2</sup> and supportive living.

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<sup>1</sup> *Rapid re-housing is an intervention, informed by a Housing First approach, and is a critical part of a community's effective homeless crisis response system. Rapid re-housing rapidly connects families and individuals experiencing homelessness to permanent housing through a tailored package of assistance that may include the use of time-limited financial assistance and targeted supportive services.*

<sup>2</sup> *Flexible funding is financial support provided to victims of crime to address whatever barrier exists between the survivor and safe housing stability.*

The pandemic has created many challenges for housing survivors of human trafficking. The first challenge is housing availability. Shelters have reduced capacity due to COVID-19, many housing programs have shut down completely due to financial or health reasons, and survivors of trafficking are having difficulty affording apartments due to unemployment or underemployment. The second challenge is emphasizing survivor choice and autonomy while simultaneously maintaining safety and well-being for staff and residents in a communal housing facility. The third challenge is greater financial insecurity for survivors of trafficking created by this pandemic with the depressed economy resulting in unemployment and underemployment. With greater financial insecurity comes greater housing insecurity, which has led many to find [creative solutions](#) to meet the housing needs of survivors by developing in-house services or partnering with community organizations.

**What is the rights-based approach? Is an organization required to use it to receive federal funding?**

A [right-based approach](#), or human rights-based approach, places survivor priorities and experience at the center of services and decision making. A rights-based approach to housing relies on voluntary, non-judgmental assistance, with an emphasis on self-determination, centered on survivor choice. Applying a rights-based approach to housing survivors eliminates prerequisites or conditions as part of the housing. There should not be any barriers in accessing housing for survivors. A rights-based approach goes hand-in-hand with [trauma-informed care](#)<sup>3</sup>. Securing safe and stable housing helps survivors engage in other types of services they may need on their journey. A rights-based approach to housing along with [trauma-informed practices](#) help ensure survivors are not retraumatized. Currently, federal funding does not specifically require a rights-based approach, however, this is best practice and should be the standard for all programs engaging with survivors of human trafficking.

**What are the biggest barriers you see most often for survivors of human trafficking in finding housing?**

There are a lot of barriers. Economic abuse or lack of financial stability survivors have experienced puts them in poor standing in a lot of housing situations. There may be histories of eviction. There may be criminal histories which is often something landlords will screen out. People may also lack current employment at the time that they are seeking housing, and that certainly can be a barrier.

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<sup>3</sup>A *trauma-informed approach begins with understanding the physical, social, and emotional impact of trauma on the individual, as well as on the professionals who help them. Trauma-informed care includes victim-centered practices and incorporates three elements— 1. Realizing the prevalence of trauma, 2. Recognizing how trauma affects all individuals involved, and 3. Responding appropriately.*

Another potential barrier can be the systems set up to access housing. [Continuums of Care \(CoC\)](#) are a great resource for anti-trafficking providers in accessing housing programs and resources for survivors of trafficking. CoCs use a coordinated entry system required by the [U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development \(HUD\)](#). Some potential barriers can occur when assessment tools utilized in the coordinated entry system may not capture the urgency of housing for survivors of trafficking. Trafficking survivors may also experience a barrier to accessing the domestic violence and homeless services systems where trafficking survivors are not the primary population served in those shelters. Additionally, underserved populations (e.g., male survivors, LGBTQ) are often excluded from housing options even when survivors of trafficking. [Getting involved with your local CoC](#) can raise awareness of these barriers and build partnerships to identify housing options for survivors.

Meeting housing requirements can be another challenge. Landlords often require background checks, pay stubs, and rental history. For a lot of survivors, there is no rental history because the housing was provided by the trafficker. There is no work history because the traffickers exploited the survivor for labor. For undocumented survivors, the processes to seek immigration relief can take many years. While acquiring a visa, undocumented survivors are not allowed to work. It limits economic ability and the types of identity documents survivors can access. There are a lot of barriers to somebody coming out of a trafficking situation and having documentation to access housing.

### **What are tips for building partnerships with hotels that will help their staff be trauma informed and help us work collaboratively?**

Hotels have been one of Restore NYC's primary emergency housing partnerships. With this partnership, participating hotels provide complimentary hotel points to our organization. We then use these hotel points, as needed, to provide individuals with an emergency stay at a hotel at no cost to us or the individual. Collaboration is key for ensuring housing services are trauma informed. Restore NYC offers emergency housing where there is a social worker on staff at the hotel. The social worker is trained in trauma-informed care and working with those who are trafficked, which is optimal.

[The Freedom Network](#) has many resources for how to think about these housing partnerships and provides technical assistance for agencies across the United States. They also hosted a [webinar on utilizing hotels during the COVID pandemic](#) to discuss the realities of managing and creating partnerships with hotels and addressing the new challenges with the pandemic.

Transportation is also a consideration for housing. Survivors may not have access to a car and need to use public transportation. Having those options available near the hotel is important. Setting up direct billing between the hotel and the organization offers an additional layer of trauma-informed care and confidentiality. With this arrangement, the hotel does not need a name or a credit card for incidentals. The victim service provider organization simply calls the hotel and when the survivor arrives to check-in, they only need to let the hotel know they are with the organization.

The pandemic may impact the ability to create new partnerships with hotels depending on where you are located. In New York City, there are approximately 80,000 people—one in 100 residents—that are currently experiencing homelessness. Children comprise a quarter of this population and that includes those who are unsheltered and living on the streets. In New York City, individuals and families have a legal right to shelter. The city has the largest shelter population in the country and many hotels are addressing this need and not currently accessible to new partnerships.

**Have you identified any major regional differences in these issues, or perhaps different barriers for rural vs. urban populations?**

No major regional differences. Differences often have to do with the type of available housing. For example, in an urban city you may be more likely to see higher costs for rent. In some rural locations, there may be fewer housing options available and/or not as many housing programs.

**What barriers exist for service providers seeking housing for actively drug using victims of trafficking?**

Substance abuse is a huge issue, not just for obtaining housing but for maintaining housing. The [housing first approach](#) is about providing the housing first, which is foundational to the survivor being able to work on things they identify as problematic in their life, such as substance abuse. Many housing programs still exclude people who are actively using substances. In congregate living facilities, it can be problematic to have people who are actively using co-housed with people who are trying to get clean and sober. While the United States is moving toward a housing first approach which lowers barriers and would not necessarily exclude somebody who has a current active addiction, a lot of communities still struggle with how to make housing accessible to people who are actively using.

Providers should continue to serve survivors, including those using substances. Sobriety should not be a prerequisite for housing. The [Intersection of Substance Use and Housing](#) webinar hosted by the

Freedom Network offers practical examples of housing survivors who may be actively using. The National Center on Domestic Violence, Trauma, and Mental Health offers [resources on substance abuse, domestic violence, sexual assault, and other trauma](#) to support providers in their work.

**Can you speak about harm-reduction models and how they may benefit (or hinder) the healing process for survivors of human trafficking?**

Harm reduction models consider “how do we achieve safer versus safe.” It takes the survivor’s definition of safety. No program can guarantee safety, and the [National Alliance for Safe Housing](#) understands it is likely unachievable. Having housing will create more safety and stability for a survivor than not having housing.

A harm reduction approach is essential and critical in creating autonomy for survivors. First, talk about choice and allow the survivor to choose what safety and stability means to them. Second, make sure the survivor knows housing will be available to them even with a relapse. Often, substance use has been introduced in a trafficking situation and/or substances are used as a coping mechanism. Knowing about substance use and its connection to trafficking is part of a [trauma-informed response](#).

The [housing first](#) approach model enables a harm reduction strategy and low barrier approach for transitional housing. A common perception in the trafficking field is a need for crisis housing or short-term immediate housing relief. When asking survivors which type of housing they would desire or prefer, Restore NYC found eight out of ten said independent living. With the housing first approach and survivor input, Restore NYC was able to pivot and adopt a flexible funding model. This model has been critical and instrumental during the COVID-19 pandemic. Had Restore NYC not put in place interventions for independent living and readied its team in response, there may have been much greater risk for homelessness for Restore NYC clients.

**How have housing programs shifted as a result of the pandemic? Are new best practices emerging?**

In January 2021, nine anti-trafficking organizations in urban settings across the United States where trafficking is more prevalent—Seattle, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Houston, Dallas, Atlanta, Florida, Washington, D.C., and New York City—came together and published a report called [Road to Recovery](#). This report highlights emerging best practices in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Leaning into

economic empowerment is one of the report's focus areas. Economic empowerment is a critical and complementary service to housing. Think creatively about how to help someone gain employment and have opportunities for advancement in the current economy. It is important for all of us serving victims of trafficking to emphasize economic empowerment, and not just being reactive to COVID, but being proactive for the future. Economic justice includes safe, stable, sustainable housing. The [Road to Recovery](#) report is a resource for the anti-trafficking community during this time with respect to housing and economic initiatives.

### **How do you build relationships and trusts with landlords?**

It is important to remember landlords are businesspeople. They are looking at their bottom line, and they are also coming from the same kind of belief system or mythology that society at large may have about survivors and victims. Education and demystification will be a big part of your conversations with landlords as you help them understand that safe housing is a huge part of a survivor's safety plan and independence. Survivors have a huge investment in having safe and stable housing for themselves and their children, if there are children involved.

Another thing that can be helpful with landlords is to indicate, in as many ways as possible, the assistance your program will provide. Share with the landlord the support your program is going to provide to the survivor. For example, your program may provide financial support with rent assistance. If your program provides rapid rehousing, there is rent assistance funding which guarantees rent is going to be paid. Sometimes you can make arrangements with landlords where your program offers to pay any damages that might arise, or if the survivor leaves the housing unexpectedly, continue to pay rent until the housing is leased by another tenant. These are just a few ways you can work with landlords to address any of their economic concerns. Educate landlords on survivors vested interests in housing. For example, survivors are not interested in finding a housing facility just to wreck it and be displaced. It is part of their long-term goals.

The survivor's connection to a victim service program is also advantageous. It communicates to the landlord that you are going to be providing services and support and advocacy for that household. Landlords do not know that with other households. They may already be housing survivors and not necessarily know it. Your program's backing and support can make it a good experience for the survivor and the landlord. If you are new to working with landlords, consider starting with private landlords

because they may have more leeway than a large apartment manager. Approach those landlords from a place of humanity where people want to do good. It may be a business, but they also have hearts. The Freedom Network's [Partnerships with Landlords](#) document, National Alliance for Safe Housing [Resource Library](#), and the [Safe Housing Partnership](#) offer guidance on developing relationships with landlords.

**Can you address the challenges for housing youth specifically? With and without guardians.**

One challenge that comes up when we think of youth is actual age. In the runaway and homeless sphere, the term "youth" includes individuals up to age 24. The Freedom Network has found success is collaborating with runaway and homeless youth programs. Often there is an intersection and overlap with trafficked youth. It is important to identify if a young person is coming from a family and still part of that family unit. It is an additional dynamic to have the parents involved. There are going to be young people with no guardianship or may not have a family unit as they are entering services. They may be tied to other systems, including child welfare systems.

Be familiar with community partners and know their runaway and youth programs resources. Through partnerships you can give and receive referrals creating a more holistic approach for the youth victim. It is important, especially if you are a new program, to get a sense of who is already in the space, what they have been doing, and how they work with youth. Regardless of a victim's age, remember it's about survivor voice and choice. The [Housing First for Youth Survivors of Trafficking](#) webinar addresses the specialized needs of survivors of human trafficking between the ages of 13 and 24.

**Is there any specific training or curriculum related to the safety of youth while in a residential program that is not a lockdown facility?**

Although there are a number of trainings available on human trafficking and youth, including covering some topics around safety, there are few, if any, on just safety. Please email the Freedom Network at [training@freedomnetworkusa.org](mailto:training@freedomnetworkusa.org) for more information.

**Are there safety protocol trainings for shelter/congregate care staff serving victims of trafficking?**

Safety protocols may vary from program to program. The Freedom Networks webinar on [Intake and Safety Planning Process](#) explores this topic. Please email specific questions to Freedom Network at [training@freedomnetworkusa.org](mailto:training@freedomnetworkusa.org).



**Here in NYC, we face intensive barriers in finding housing or immediate shelters for survivors, especially for domestic violence and crime victims. Do you have any information of hotels in NY that we can contact for immediate shelter for survivors?**

Contact [Polaris](#) to learn about their hotel points program.

**For a domestic violence organization which does not provide direct housing, but has recently started serving survivors of trafficking, are there tools for finding housing programs/resources which do serve survivors of trafficking?**

Search for [OVC-funded housing programs](#) for victims of human trafficking to find organizations doing this work in your area. Also, connecting with your [local public housing authority](#) (PHA) is another place to access information about housing resources in your community and what providers operate them. Your PHA should also be able to provide information about your local Balance of State [COC](#), which are the governance bodies for most of the federally funded housing programs. Attending CoC meetings is a great way to learn more about the local housing/homelessness response and how it works in your area, including information about eligibility and how people can access services.

**Once a victim is rescued by law enforcement, does the victim service provider need to administer a COVID test or does the shelter typically take on that responsibility?**

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website offers guidance documents on testing, like this one on Investigating and [Responding to COVID-19 Cases at Homeless Service Provider Sites](#). Check with your local or state health department for additional guidance in your area.

**There aren't any dedicated shelters or other housing programs for trafficking victims in our community, so we've been exploring starting our own. Do you have any advice on getting started?**

Understanding the need and what already exists in your community is an important first step. The majority of survivors of human trafficking usually prefer independent living verses transitional

housing through shelters, so a rental assistance program may be an option. Independent living also provides the most options such as housing location and size. Consider talking to the partners in the area, connect with other anti-trafficking programs, and ask for input on the housing need in your area. Prior to starting a housing program, be familiar with the types of needed staff and expenses associated with starting a housing program, especially for shelter and congregate setting

programs. Finally, it is critical to have staff trained in working with survivors of human trafficking. The [Addressing Housing for Victims of Human Trafficking](#) document explores this topic as well as the [Understanding Human Trafficking](#) training offered by OVC TTAC.

**Has there been any advocacy/legislative push to adapt or get rid of the coordinated entry models or the barriers that they put in place?**

[CoCs](#) are a great resource for the anti-trafficking community; however, the assessments have historically centered on individuals experiencing homelessness more broadly and not survivors of human trafficking. A July 2020 report on [Assessing for and Appropriately Responding to the Housing Needs of Domestic and Sexual Violence Survivors: A Decision Tree as an Alternative to a Scoresheet](#) from the Safe Housing Partnerships and the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence explores a scoring tool to quickly provide housing for individuals and families with immediate needs. There has been advocacy to not use assessments like the Vulnerability Index – Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Prescreen Tool (VI-SPDAT) in housing for survivors of human trafficking. These assessment tools were not made with the needs of survivors of trafficking in mind. It is also important to keep in mind that the [Violence Against Women Act](#) and [Family Violence and Prevention Services Act](#) prohibit victim service providers from entering information into housing management information systems (HMIS), requiring the use of a comparable database to share aggregate non-identifiable data.

**How does housing address young victims who were trafficked and then become recruiters for the trafficker? What safety mechanisms are in place to ensure victims in recovery do not get pulled back into that life? Is there a specific way to address survivors pulled into recruiting others?**

Victims becoming recruiters is a common misconception around human trafficking and housing. Although survivors may recruit others, this does not mean it will happen, and it is not common. Recruiting can happen anywhere; it is not limited to housing or shelters. If there is a concern

around someone feeling uncomfortable with interactions with another resident, it is helpful for there to be ways to get feedback and for residents to be able to communicate with staff members. Learn more about [how trauma affects victims of trafficking](#) and [how to apply a trauma-informed approach](#) in your organization.

**How are safety contracts used to set trafficking victims up to fail? People who use drugs are often unable to access services or made to sign safety contracts mandating abstinence to obtain housing.**

Requiring survivors to sign safety contracts as a condition of their housing is not a best practice for several reasons. Eligibility requirements such as abstinence create barriers to services and are not aligned with a [housing first](#) approach. Substance abuse can be used as a coping mechanism for trauma. In addition, some traffickers use addiction to substances as a way to control victims. “Screening in” to housing rather than “screening out” allows survivors to establish a safe foundation from tackling as addictions and other issues the survivor may identify as they set their own goals. Denying someone admission into a housing program based on prerequisites only further endangers a survivor of human trafficking, who is left to enact whatever survival strategies are available.

Mandates and requirements are also not trauma-informed; “choice and voice” is key to countering the loss of agency survivors experience when under a harm-doer or trafficker’s control. Requirements and mandates may also feel reminiscent of the trafficker’s or harm-doer’s control tactics and can be triggering and undermining of the survivor’s trust that the program has their best interest at heart. Remember: the survivor is the expert and is in the best position to assess their risks and decide what will keep them safer. Safety planning should be voluntary, survivor-driven, and trauma-informed.

**Do you have any suggestions on how to encourage community support and interest in helping survivors of trafficking without encouraging methods that might stigmatize, criminalize, or retraumatize victims?**

*[In our area, coalition organizers discussed using juvenile probation officers/detention facilities for housing survivors of human trafficking temporarily. As a trauma therapist this concerns me.]*

Law enforcement agencies have long been aware of trafficking activity in their jurisdictions and have seen the damage it does to human dignity, safety, and well-being. They have been eager partners in anti-trafficking task forces and are reliant on survivor advocates to amplify their understanding of the issues beyond a criminal justice orientation. When viewed through a trauma-informed lens, strategies that are survivor-sensitive can be co-created, discussing who is best positioned to provide services. Where survivors are sheltered and housed should be part of that conversation. Criminal justice staff and facilities represent systems perceived as punitive by human trafficking survivors and can work against a survivor-centered response. OVC’s [Human Trafficking Task Force e-Guide](#) offers guidance on supporting victims, using a trauma-informed approach, and comprehensive victim services.

**As a new church with a passion to serve those experiencing human trafficking, how can we get involved in this issue without a lot of funding?**

There are many ways that your church can get involved without a lot of funding. Providing volunteers, providing meeting space, providing temporary shelter, and assisting with drives to collect emergency food/clothing/personal care items are just a few. Before jumping in, it is important to begin by collaborating with others, especially those in the survivor advocacy field. Through partnering with others, you can identify the ways in which you can best support local efforts. Contact your local victim service provider; if you are unsure who they are, you can find out what providers exist in your community by contacting your state's Domestic and Sexual Violence Coalition. Is there a [human trafficking task force](#) in your area? Local law enforcement is likely to know if one exists in your area.

**What can be accomplished for survivors who are not lease-ready?**

With a [housing first](#) approach, everyone is housing ready. But the reality is affordable housing is often in short supply, and landlords may be reticent to rent to people who cannot demonstrate the means to pay rent, who have an eviction record or a criminal record, or who have rent or utility debts. Survivors who are not successful in obtaining private market housing can benefit from programs helping with rent assistance, credit repair, and other tools allowing them to work on the issues that contributed to their housing crisis. Reach out and connect to your community partners in both the victim service and homeless/housing fields to understand available community resources, how survivors can access them, and how you can partner with other providers to pair housing assistance with advocacy and support. Additionally, the Freedom Network's [Survivor Reentry Project](#) works on vacatur of convictions related to a survivor's trafficking experience, removing a common barrier for obtaining housing.

**How do you handle security deposits with hotel rooms? Have you had any issues with them? What happens if damage is done?**

When working with hotels to provide temporary housing for survivors, it is always a good idea to arrive at an understanding about these kinds of arrangements ahead of time and to develop a written contract so that both the program and the hotel are very clear about how things will work. Sometimes programs arrange for the hotel to bill them monthly, while others may pay more frequently, or upon registering each guest. To demonstrate their commitment to a partnership with hotels, many programs do include an agreement to pay for any damages that may occur to the unit. In every case, it is more likely that "issues" will arise if things have not been discussed ahead of time.

**If we are sheltering youth in hotels, how do we minimize risk (e.g., multiple adults in and out of room, potential substance abuse)?**

Individuals housed in a hotel must be 18 or older. Upfront and revisited safety planning, periodic check-ins at agreed upon times by the survivor, setting guidelines regarding the safety expectations for self and others can help from a broad perspective. Also, identifying who to contact when in need and healthy coping options on a more frequent basis (daily during the first few days instead of once and done) can provide support upfront. Also, survivor-led support that is peer-based can help promote success. Having staff on site at the hotel to provide services can also help minimize risks.

**One of our biggest barriers is obtaining housing for elders/seniors. Due to fixed income, inability to obtain employment, disability, health issues, and senior housing programs being a one to five-year waitlist, we have noticed seniors are being underserved. What are some practices or programs you have developed to meet the senior population need?**

One possible resource is The [Spring Alliance](#) whose mission is to create a network of regional elder abuse shelters and other similar service models with close working relationships, shared resources and technical assistance, common standards of excellence, and a vibrant community of support. The Spring Alliance also [offers guidance](#) on creating elder abuse shelter in communities. The [Weinberg Center](#) for Elder Justice's report titled [Shelter: The Missing Link in a Coordinated Community Response](#) explores the need for shelter for older victims. This [article](#) discusses the unique challenges seniors face.

### *Additional Information*

Contact the Human Trafficking Capacity Building Center at [contact@ovc-htcbc.org](mailto:contact@ovc-htcbc.org) or 1-844-682-0411.