

# ASK AN EXPERT SERIES

## HUMAN TRAFFICKING AND VULNERABLE POPULATIONS

While there is no defining characteristic of a human trafficking victim, traffickers often target victims' vulnerabilities such as lack of social support networks, financial or housing insecurity, or language differences. Some of the most vulnerable populations in the U.S. include communities of color, lesbian, gay, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, asexual (LGBTQIA) individuals, individuals with disabilities, undocumented immigrants, runaway and homeless youth, low-income individuals, and individuals from American Indian and Native communities. On August 25, 2021, experts with [Ujima, Inc.](#), [Ayuda](#), and the [Human Trafficking Capacity Building Center](#) 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 abbreviated answers provided by the panel of experts during the discussion. In addition, responses have been provided to questions that were not addressed during the webinar. Editor's notes are included in a few areas to provide additional information not stated by the panelists.

### **Vulnerable populations do not fit into one simple category for services. How can a small organization be effective in supporting such a broad spectrum of needs?**

There is no one size fits all approach to serving human trafficking survivors. Here are three things small organizations can do to support a broad spectrum of victim needs. First, **build an internal awareness** around the ways in which trafficking survivors may intersect and overlap vulnerabilities like intimate partner violence, substance abuse, poverty, and other issue areas like homelessness and immigration status. Understanding these intersections brings greater awareness about the additional barriers a survivor might have in accessing services. Second, **assess internal capacity**. Think about what your organization can offer human trafficking survivors. What limitations are there in doing this work? A part of assessing your internal capacity is identifying gaps and thinking through, "Who aren't we serving?" "Are we able to offer comparable services to distinct populations like male survivors, survivors with

disabilities, survivors with limited English proficiency?" If the answer is no, identify who can provide these services or support in your community; what partners can you connect to, who can offer these services? If you can offer high quality comparable services, it may be time to conduct outreach within those underserved populations, so they are aware of your services. Third, **consider your community**. While mapping out your internal capacity, you may see the demographics of your current clients are not reflective of vulnerable populations in your community. In these situations, think about "What barriers exist that are preventing them from accessing services?" Is it language? Is it accessibility? And then think through, "What partners are locally rooted in those communities?" and "How can we bring them on to create a more coordinated response?"

Finally, **be culturally responsive in your approach**. Adapt your services to meet the needs of vulnerable populations across different cultures, whether that is in-house or through partners. A large part of applying cultural humility is knowing populations are not homogenous. So, even within communities, there are a diverse set of needs. When thinking about how best to serve a community, position that framework as an ever-learning process, requiring you to be reflexive and adaptive as you learn.

### **What are some of the common barriers survivors of human trafficking face when accessing services?**

Human trafficking victims face a lot of barriers when trying to access services. One of those barriers is language access. When a limited English proficient (LEP) individual or a deaf individual becomes a victim of crime, that individual needs language support through the entire recovery process in order to be able to succeed and thrive. The recovery process might include services such as crisis intervention, case management, counseling, transitional housing, and advocacy. And in order for these services to be effective, victims must be able to access them in their own language.

One reason why victims of crime may not request assistance from victim services organizations is uncertainty about accessing services in their own language. Part of that could be the fact that when they walk in through the door, they do not see anyone speaking their language or a lot of the signage or materials are in English and not in their own language. Below, are three ways victim service providers can make their services accessible.

First, **create a budget line item to pay for interpretation and translation services**. One of the questions Ayuda receives often is, “how much money should our program or our organization set aside for interpretation and translation?” Look at [Census data](#) to determine the LEP or deaf population in your area. Your organization might already collect information about your clients and the languages that they use to communicate. Research translation services in your area. Ask how much they charge per hour or per document. Use all of this data to determine a cost estimate. As the year goes by, adjust the budget depending on the LEP population that comes to your organization. Second, **establish relationships to make services accessible to victims of crime**. In Washington D.C., and in Maryland, several non-profits have access to Ayuda's interpreter banks. There are agencies all over the nation that provide similar services. Third, **create a language access plan for your organization**, so staff have clear instructions on what to do when an LEP individual comes walking in through the door. Determine a plan for when you cannot find an interpreter, or you cannot translate a document. Is there another agency that you can go to? Is there a volunteer willing to offer their time for those services? Maybe in your organization, you have the budget to hire more bilingual staff to meet that language gap.

In summary, three ways to address language access are: (1) create a line item for your budget for language access, (2) establish relationships with agencies in your area, and (3) create a language access plan.

Editor’s Note: Victims of human trafficking, and in particular, more vulnerable victims face a wide range of barriers to seeking and accessing services. Some of the barriers are external and may include but are not limited to systemic-barriers, historical oppression, threats from their trafficker, physical barriers, geographical isolation, lack of transportation, etc. Many victims also face internalized barriers including shame and embarrassment, not believing that services can or will help, fear of law enforcement or other first responders, or not self-identifying as a victim in the first place. It is important for service providers to be aware of the multitude of barriers faced by human trafficking victims to seeking services and work to eliminate as many barriers as possible.

### **What is it that makes one individual more vulnerable than another one to human trafficking?**

When we think about the image of trafficking survivors, who is left out of the conversation? Consider the contexts and systemic and social barriers or influences that put certain communities at higher rates

of violence than others. For instance, when folks talk about young black girls being trafficked, often the supposed negligence of black parents where blame is placed instead of focusing on the systemic barriers that have set up parents to not be able to be home with their children. Do parents have to work multiple jobs? Do parents have to work very long hours? What is happening where there might only be one parent in the home? It may be because of community violence or mass incarceration or many other things. Look at other influences that are creating gaps. The adultification of young black girls or the "school to prison pipeline" is impacting our girls. They are finding themselves out on the street. We need to talk about colorism. Understanding the different layers of violence that a black girl or black woman might experience and how that ties into intimate partner violence or domestic violence or sexual assault or trafficking.

**If language services are not available, is there any reason we should not use family members or friends of a victim to provide interpretation?**

Not all bilingual individuals are interpreters. Interpretation is a very specific skill, especially for legal and criminal matters. It requires not only the basic level of knowledge of interpretation, but an extra level of training to know about client-attorney privilege, maintaining confidentiality, and providing trauma informed interpretation. Another reason to not use family members, friends, or children is because there is no way to know a person's intentions with the client; you do not want to place the victim in an uncomfortable position. In some cases, the client's abuser may be interpreting for the victim of crime. You can assume that an abuser's interpretation is biased. For some languages and in some areas, it is extremely difficult to find a qualified, trained interpreter. Due to the pandemic, many interpretation services are now available remotely. So even if you cannot access in-person interpretation in your community, you can still access a trained interpreter remotely.

Editor's Note: The Vera Institute of Justice created the Translating Justice Initiative to develop a comprehensive language access curriculum addressing the training needs of crime victim service providers around language access for people with LEP and people who are Deaf and hard of hearing. The curriculum is available in webinar format at [Translating Justice Webinar Series - Center for Reaching Victims](#).

**How can we gain or acquire cultural competency within our judicial system, i.e., law enforcement, solicitors, judges, criminal investigative lawyers, and advocacy centers? From a study by Polaris Project, traffickers tend to traffic vulnerable persons of their own culture or ethnicity.**

Partnerships are vital when doing this work. Setting an intentional time and space for these conversations. Offering human trafficking training that includes clues to look for, questions to ask potential victims, or ways to be trauma informed can make a difference. Ask to join a ride along with police officers to sit, observe, and offer feedback. Connect with hospital-based programs to share information about human trafficking. Engage; have a conversation. Explore possible scenarios so when a need for services arises at 2:00 AM, the responder knows available options. Change will not come about overnight. Build the relationship over time by sharing perspectives and experiences.

Editor's Note: National advocacy organizations within the criminal justice system that have cultural humility resources include but are not limited to the [International Association of Chiefs of Police](#), [Center for Court Innovation](#), and [National Center for State Courts](#).

**What type of resources are available to help adapt our trafficking services for victims with various types of disabilities?**

With the deaf community, ask some initial questions such as, "What is your preferred method of communication?" "Is American Sign Language your first language?" "Have you ever been a victim of a crime?" "Are you a minor?" Ask these supplemental questions to determine how to staff the assignment. When serving any victim of crime, meet the survivor where they are with their needs and accommodate those needs as best as you can.

Editor's Note: The Supporting Crime Victims with Disabilities toolkit was designed by the Vera Institute of Justice to provide comprehensive and culturally responsive informational and educational resources, tools, videos, and examples of best practices for law enforcement, forensic interviewers, victim advocates, and others to prepare them to effectively respond to victims of crime with disabilities across the lifespan. The toolkit is available at [Supporting Crime Victims with Disabilities Online Training Toolkit - Center for Reaching Victims](#). Additionally, the International Organization for Adolescents, in collaboration with the National Human Trafficking and Disabilities Working Group, created a series of

targeted education, training and outreach materials, and tools for organizations serving trafficking youth, youth with disabilities, and at-risk youth.

**Each agency can do a lot to build its own capacity, but when that has its limit, how can partnerships help an agency better serve and reach victims of human trafficking?**

Partnerships are essential because no one organization can do it all; human trafficking victim services intersect with many organizations in a community. Relationship building is key. The more partnerships your organization has, the more services and choices you are able to offer survivors. Partnerships come in various sizes. They can be small, big, informal, formal, within your local community, or from across regional boundaries. Think outside of the box when you are considering partnerships and look at survivor services more from a continuum of care perspective. Consider what a survivor needs from direct crisis intervention to long-term supportive services.

Consider which partners can address those needs and provide survivors with a really diverse range of services. Safely leaving a trafficking situation is just the beginning. Healing and support services are long-term and lifelong. Partner with community-based organizations, culturally specific organizations, and survivor led organizations to help you think through and shape what some of those needs are and how to address them for survivors.

**Is there a central number for family members to call if they suspect a situation like that is happening with their loved one? What signs should family members look for?**

If you suspect a family member may be in a human trafficking situation, call the Human Trafficking Hotline at 1-888-373-7888, send an email to [help@humantraffickinghotline.org](mailto:help@humantraffickinghotline.org), or text HELP to 233733 (BEFREE). You can also do a live chat at [humantraffickinghotline.org](https://humantraffickinghotline.org). Confidential support is available 24 hours a day, every day of the week.

In most cases, a possible adult victim will be contacted and asked if they want to engage with support or law enforcement services. Consider getting resources to share with the possible human trafficking victim to let them know what services are available to support their healing journey.

Editor's Note: The National Human Trafficking Hotline website also offers a wealth of information on human trafficking such as statistical data, links to training and technical assistance, and other resources including a document to help professions, family members, friends, and victims to recognize the signs of human trafficking: [Recognizing the Signs | National Human Trafficking Hotline](#).

### **What are some local or national resources we can access to assist us in reaching the most vulnerable populations in our community?**

The [Human Trafficking Capacity Building Center](#) is a free, national resource available to help any organization start, sustain, or grow their anti-trafficking efforts. Ayuda is a language access resource in the DC metropolitan area. If a human trafficking victim comes in through the door at Ayuda, and they are LEP or deaf, Ayuda arranges interpretation either in person onsite at a physical location or remotely over the phone through a video conferencing platform.

Editor's Note: There continues to be large gaps in services for victims of crime, particularly among our most vulnerable populations. These vary by community, and may include but are not limited to children, persons with disabilities, historically marginalized communities, individuals with LEP, older adults, men of color, women and girls of color, formerly incarcerated individuals, and LGBTQIA individuals. Specific resources that can be helpful will also vary. The [National Resource Center on Reaching Victims](#) is a one-stop shop where victim service providers, culturally specific organizations, criminal justice professionals, and policymakers may get information and expert guidance to enhance their capacity to identify, reach, and serve victims, especially those from more vulnerable populations and underserved communities.

### **How does someone get started providing services for vulnerable populations?**

One place to start is with the Human Trafficking Capacity Building Center. They can assist thinking through that process of where to begin and work through key considerations your organization may have. On a local level, connect to organizations—whether that is through your local task force or local domestic violence center or shelter—to see what anti-trafficking services are currently being provided in your community. Then coordinate your organization's response so services are not duplicated. Domestic violence shelters typically see a lot of trafficking survivors, even if the survivor is not self-identifying.

Coordinate with other local organizations and find out how you can help expand and enhance survivor services.

### **Are there any OVC suggested practices for community outreach?**

Make sure your outreach materials are translated into languages other than English, that your office forms are translated, and that your website is translated (if possible or at least a few pages with the most traffic). With vulnerable populations, outreach can happen through word of mouth. For example, someone goes to an organization, they get served in their own language and then they go back to their communities and say, "Hey, go to that organization, because when I went there, they found me an interpreter. I was able to ask my questions. I was able to get the services that I needed." Outreach can also happen through the dissemination of written materials and flyers, through website content or social media. Also, make sure to show up in community; be in community with people. Whether it is eating food, walking up and down the streets, sitting at the park, build relationships with community elders. Invest in what community members have to say so they will hear what you have to say. Project TRUST's [Human Trafficking Outreach Toolkit](#) provides background information on trauma-informed outreach and methods to increase outreach effectiveness and inclusivity.

### **Please provide a definition of outreach.**

Editor's Note: Outreach, in this discussion, is the activity of promoting services to any population that might not otherwise have access to those services. It can happen in a wide variety of formats including word of mouth, written materials, social media, videos, formal referrals, etc.

### **Could someone provide reputable resources on human trafficking data and trends? I have recently learned that the Federal Bureau of Investigation was given a grant to better provide detailed data regarding human trafficking - doesn't anyone know anything about this?**

Everyone is hungry for better data. At Ujima, there is a research and evaluation work group [creating fact sheets](#), updating resources, gathering stories, and sharing anecdotal experiences. Ayuda uses a lot of Census data and yearly reports on crime statistics with a variety of different data points. Additionally, client stories and data gathered through some of Ayuda's non-profit partners offer insight.



Editor's Note: To learn more, watch the [Ask an Expert: Human Trafficking Data webinar](#) on this topic. The [Using Data to Assist Human Trafficking Victims](#) and [Collecting Data to Better Understand Human Trafficking](#) one pagers offer ways to use data to understand trafficking in your community.

### **What about the Victim Services Volunteer who's there on scene? Do we need an additional interpreter if we're fluent in the language they use?**

For one-on-one meetings with LEP clients a bilingual service provider fluent in the client's preferred language is sufficient. However, in group meetings with the service provider, LEP client, and monolingual English speakers, Ayuda highly recommends the use of professional, qualified, interpreters.

Interpretation is a skill that requires extensive training and experience. The bilingual service provider may lack the training and experience necessary to interpret between their client and the monolingual English speakers. In addition, the bilingual service provider can become overburdened by their dual role of being both the service provider and the interpreter. This can ultimately impact the service provider's ability to effectively serve their client.

### **Is anyone working with Homeland Security's Center on Human Trafficking?**

The [Department of Homeland Security \(DHS\) Center for Countering Human Trafficking \(CCHT\)](#) officially launched in September 2020. Overseeing the DHS mission to combat human trafficking and the importation of goods produced with forced labor, the CCHT is staffed with personnel from 16 DHS components and headquarters offices, including special agents, victim support specialists, and intelligence research specialists.

The CCHT processes all [Continued Presence](#) applications for federal, state, and local law enforcement nationwide. In the earliest stages of an investigation, Continued Presence is the best vehicle for federal, state and local law enforcement to obtain temporary and quick legal immigration protection for trafficking victims. This combination of protections stabilizes victims, restores self-sufficiency, and improves their ability to assist law enforcement.

**I'm a legal aid attorney and thought a client might be in a labor trafficking situation. She did not think she was (a man had induced her into a caretaker relationship with him and did not pay her, asked her to deposit her social security checks in his account, bought property in both their names, it then became**

**violent, he threatened her life if she left or called the police, tried to restrict her movements/social interactions, sexually assaulted her, tried to start a romantic relationship with her). Does this sound like trafficking to you? Would I refer her case to a prosecutor?**

Editor's Note: Our response assumes that your client is an adult and not a minor.

Many victims of human trafficking do not recognize what is happening to them as human trafficking or see themselves as a victim. CAST's OVC-funded [Comprehensive Legal Training and Technical Assistance \(TTA\) Program](#) offers free support to attorneys and social service providers assisting trafficking survivors with legal needs: you may join their weekly legal working group calls or requested individualized technical assistance for your case. You may want to refer your client directly to a local anti-human trafficking or sexual assault advocate / service provider, if available, who can assist your client and who may be able to offer additional safety planning with your client. Ultimately, it is important to ensure that your client has a choice in whatever interactions they have with law enforcement, prosecutor's and any other first responder or service provider.

**What suggestions would you have for noticing trafficking signs with boys and girls within gang activity?**

The OJP-funded [National Gang Center](#) has a webinar [Gangs and Human Trafficking](#) which focuses on the nature of gang involvement in human trafficking; indicators of victimization, challenges in investigation and prosecution, along with some potential solutions and resources.

Because of the network structure that is present in gang-related trafficking, youth survivors may be loyal to their gangs and will not self-identify as being trafficked and the term 'victim' to describe their situation may feel disempowering. Gangs often meet the basic needs of people they are victimizing which causes survivors to feel indebted to their traffickers. As victim service providers, mirror the language of the youth you are serving especially in describing their traffickers and trafficking situation. It is important to build non-judgmental trust with youth who may be vulnerable to gang-related trafficking. Utilizing schools or recreational activities as an entry point to engage and build trust with vulnerable youth can be an effective strategy.

**From my understanding there is not any funding available for new organizations. Is that true?**

OVC administers the largest source of federal funding available to address human trafficking victim

services as authorized under the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000 (TVPA). Applicant eligibility may vary by grant program solicitation. You can review [types of funding](#), a list of [current OVC grantees](#), (including the amount, service provided, location, etc.), and a [description of the grants available at any given time via the OVC website](#). OVC offers [Grants 101](#), a step-by-step tutorial on the complete grants process, and [other helpful links and tips for grant applicants](#). Finally, you may want to reach out to your Victim of Crime Act (VOCA) state administrating agency for information about funding that may be available through your state's [VOCA Victim Assistance Formula Program](#).

The Human Trafficking Capacity Building Center offers numerous resources within our [resource library](#) on [grant funding](#) including grant proposal tips, an overview of the grant application process, webinars on best practices, and more. The [Center](#) also offers general grant application guidance, best practices, and answers your questions about the process during open office hours with topical experts. [Sign up](#) for an individual 15-minute slot on during open office hours first Thursday of each month between 2:00 p.m. and 3:00 p.m. eastern. The Center also offers one-on-one, 90-minute coaching sessions with a subject matter expert to discuss program development requests and cohort sessions. To request an intake for a coaching session, please email [contact@ovhtcbc.org](mailto:contact@ovhtcbc.org).

Lastly, funding may also be available from other federal, state, local, or private funding sources. In addition to federal grant opportunities, two grant announcement websites to review are [GrantWatch](#) and [Instrumentl](#). [Grantmakers.io](#) shares information on foundations and their grantmaking efforts.

**Some of these services are connected to some type of law enforcements offices like district attorneys' offices. Do you think it is a good idea to relocate agencies servicing this community away from law enforcements offices?**

There are many different models of service delivery for victims of human trafficking. Examples include stand-alone community-based victim services, system-based victim assistance programs within law enforcement and/or prosecution agencies, services offered through a collaborative human trafficking taskforce model, or co-located services such as those found in a Family Justice Center Model of service delivery. An approach to service delivery that works in one community may not work in another.

OVC's "Achieving Excellence: Model Standards for Serving Victims and Survivors of Crime, [OVC Model Standards](#), offers recommendations for guidelines, policies, and procedures for promoting excellence in the delivery of victim services regardless of the type of victim served or the approach to service provision.

### *Additional Information*

Contact the Human Trafficking Capacity Building Center at [contact@ovc-htcbc.org](mailto:contact@ovc-htcbc.org) or 1-844-6820411.