



TALKING CIRCLE: HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN TRIBAL COMMUNITIES

QUESTION AND ANSWER SUMMARY

Human trafficking impacts tribal people more than most of us realize with traffickers preying on vulnerabilities such as jurisdiction, prosecution, and limited resources. On January 27, 2021, three panelists shared their experience working with tribal communities and answered participant questions during a Talking Circle titled “[Human Trafficking in Tribal Communities](#).” Discussion topics included risk factors for trafficking, barriers to addressing trafficking on tribal lands, and needed services to aid the spiritual, mental, physical, and emotional wellbeing of trafficked tribal members or relatives.

The Talking Circle webinar series is hosted by the Office for Victims of Crime (OVC), [Human Trafficking Capacity Building Center](#). This document includes questions and abbreviated answers provided by the panel of experts during the discussion.

What are the potential signs a relative or community member may be a victim of human trafficking?

This is a complicated question. People will rarely call themselves a victim of trafficking. This language is not how they would describe things. [Signs of trafficking](#) can be subtle or confusing in part because of the parallels with domestic violence. Common signs for both can include the individual not having access to paperwork, not talking much about how they earn money, seeming elusive about details of their relationship, etc. It can also be hard to tell if force, fraud, or coercion is happening, or if someone is choosing to do something like willingly having sex in exchange for money or drugs. Further, addiction and other factors can also make it complicated to tell from the outside if someone is a victim of human trafficking. Movement or being on a circuit can also make it harder to spot. This will also look different across the lifespan. The trafficking of a teen looks different than a 35-year-old woman. Both scenarios look different than for an elder victim.

What is important is when you start to feel that intuition or something telling you this is not right, engage in



genuine conversation and focus on the relationship with that person. It may be trafficking; it may not be. But providing a connection and support is important.

[OVC's Faces of Human Trafficking](#) series includes videos, posters, and fact sheets for outreach and education. OVC also provides free, online training on [Understanding Human Trafficking](#), offering foundational learning on trauma-informed and victim-centered approaches to human trafficking. [SOAR training](#) from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services supports training medical and behavioral health providers on the signs of human trafficking.

What types of services do victims of human trafficking need to aid in their spiritual, mental, physical, and emotional wellbeing?

Support. Positive support from the very first disclosure paves the way for the survivor's journey from both within the family and resources outside of the family. Coordinate with the local (tribal) victim services program so victims can receive culturally considerate healing—burning cedar or sage and having traditional tea available to drink—if desired. Service providers can also consider supporting the families of trafficking victims. The tribalresourcetool.org is a searchable directory of services available for all American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) survivors of crime and abuse in Indian Country. Regarding hospital services, no bills should be accumulated. Determine if there are medical resources available for victims of human trafficking. If not, are there support services that provide additional resources to deter expenses? Some jurisdictions have started services for suspects.

How do you start a conversation with stakeholders and service providers around human trafficking awareness and messaging?

Addressing human trafficking means knowing you are going down a long, dark, and bumpy road. Start addressing it one step at a time. In other words, take action. [Learn human trafficking language](#). Begin to identify the problem. Get to know the players, or stakeholders, and go to work. Make prevention a focus. The conversation will vary by stakeholder. Start the conversation on this topic with tribal leaders, social service providers, Indian Child Welfare Act workers, tribal urban centers, and most importantly tribal communities to build awareness of human trafficking. One of the best prevention methods is education about the myths and impacts of human trafficking. We need to take action to protect our people and tribal lands from this crime. Our culture is one of the best ways to help our people start the healing process.



Native lands have unique jurisdictional issues. How can jurisdiction impact the response to human trafficking?

There are [574 federally recognized tribes](#). Each tribe has their own sovereignty or jurisdiction in terms of criminal codes. As a police detective working for 17 years within the state of Arizona, Tyesha Wood's first human trafficking case involved a minor being auctioned off of Facebook Live for drugs. Both the minor and the suspect resided within the tribal community where she worked as a police detective. The incident occurred within the boundaries of the tribal community. Because the victim and suspect were both Native in this case, tribal and federal charges could have been pursued. As a tribal police officer for Arizona (see [a list of Arizona tribes](#)), she was certified in tribal, state, and federal jurisdictions, which means she could bring a case to any of those courts. This example is specific to Arizona and may not be the case for all of Indian Country.

Alaska is a Public Law 280 state. There are numerous mixed jurisdictions in a Public Law 280 state (see [Alaska tribes by region](#)). Alaska State Police have the primary jurisdiction. Occasionally, tribes work with municipal police. In Alaska, jurisdiction on a human trafficking case is decided by a task force of people. The [Alaska State Troopers](#) are working with the [Alaska Federal Bureau of Investigation](#) who in turn are working with prosecutors and Alaska state of law. When a tribe in Alaska reaches out, they are dialing 911 and getting connected with Alaska State Troopers. This is how they get involved with jurisdiction and then the case gets passed up from there.

Also note that while [Victims for Justice](#)—an organization providing services in Alaska—is doing good work, there are not many other victim services on the ground in Alaska. Our Alaska State Troopers have extremely limited victim services. In some cases, it is often not until federal partners are involved that we see victim services. So that limits the victim services support to just those federal cases whether they are getting any victim services at all. Thinking about how survivors receive continuity in care when their case is transferred from local to tribal to federal prosecution is crucial. It is important to connect the survivor with an advocate to be that voice and support to the survivor even if the prosecution may be confusing with jurisdiction. Making sure survivor needs are the top priority is something to be attuned to in these cases.

There are so many variables when it comes to jurisdictional issues—knowing who the victim is, who the offender is, and also where the crime occurred—recognizing the importance of partnerships between the



tribe, tribal law enforcement, sheriffs, child protective services, tribal courts, federal courts, and community-based advocacy people. Being able to bring these pieces together to focus on the survivor needs will have lasting impacts on the survivor and their pathway to healing and justice.

Jurisdiction is confusing. How do we support Indigenous people who have been transported across borders (USA and Canada)? What resources are available to them and/or their families?

As a starting point, reach out to your [district](#) of the Office of the United States Attorneys. United States Attorney Offices deal with these sorts of issues and many provide tribal liaisons and victim advocates.

Could you recommend strategies for non-native police officers to establish trust with native victims of human trafficking?

Start with a conversation. Talk with tribal police or police officers working on Tribal Nations. Understand the origin stories, the kinship stories that exist in tribal communities. Native American's love to joke and eat. If you work in a tribal community, learn about that community. What are their values and culture? In terms of interviewing, understand the thought process may be different in a tribal community. Everything is not linear. For example, an officer responding to a fight in progress between two sisters will want to talk to the reporting party. The officer wants to hear what happened at that moment. However, grandma or mom may tell the officer about when the sister brought a new boyfriend home six months ago because that is when the issues started for them. Be patient. Listen to that story; develop that relationship and trust.

Look for people in the community who have tribal relationships and are willing to help. People are willing to have conversations because partnerships are so important. Learn the history and culture of the tribal community. Participate in community meetings. It is the little things that can show a community you care and want to be part of answering those hard questions. Get involved and go the extra mile; take a personal interest in working with victims of human trafficking, regularly checking back in to keep the lines of communication open with the family.

What role does/can the Bureau of Indian Affairs play in addressing human trafficking in tribes?

The Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) law enforcement has increased their training opportunities to include investigations and response specific to human trafficking. According to a [2019 article](#) by U.S. BIA Indian Police Academy Director Steve Juneau (2019), “the academy is constantly updating curriculum with the latest courses focusing on human trafficking, missing person investigations, opioid enforcement, and peer



support programs.” BIA also has a [victim service program](#) for victims located in Indian Country offering direct services to victims including crisis intervention, referrals and information for mental and emotional health, and other types of specialized responses, emergency services and transportation, and follow up for additional assistance. Additionally, the BIA Victim Assistance Program can facilitate an explanation of the investigative process, provide court accompaniment, and support as needed. Contact [BIA Justice Services and Districts](#) in your area to request assistance.

In an urban setting, how do you encourage law enforcement, first responders, and other agencies to identify tribal individuals in a respectful and appropriate way in order to provide them with the best available services?

Addressing cultural differences and similarities is a good practice for public safety officials. Encourage positive communication between public safety and tribal individuals, engage in “cultural awareness” classes specific to Native Americans. However, if these classes are not be available, communities can consider building their own educational programs. Tribal communities can share their own cultural coloring books, stories, and arts to educate non-tribal populations. Being actively involved in this type of education, can help close these gaps with our (Tribal Nations) initiatives, ideas, and concepts.

Public safety officials interested in learning more can contact tribal community groups and programs in their jurisdiction. Most larger cities and state governments have an appointed “Tribal Liaison” or [state committees and commissions on Indian Affairs](#) program that would be a good place to start to learn more about the Indigenous populations in your jurisdictions.

Is there a different way to handle human trafficking in an urban area as opposed to a more rural area?

Survivors of human trafficking need similar support whether they are in an urban, rural, or tribal community. Survivors need comprehensive service options available to them from people who know about human trafficking and needs specific to AI/AN.

Community context must be considered when developing services and responding to the needs of victims and survivors. While urban, tribal, and rural communities all can benefit from cross-training, collaboration, and relationship building, how it is done will look different. In geographically distanced communities, such as a large reservation or rural area, meetings may need to rotate locations or allow for virtual options. In urban areas, streamlining or grouping the broad number of human trafficking services providers may be



helpful to coordinate communication. Regardless of setting, this coordination is important for many reasons, especially regarding jurisdictional complexity in criminal legal proceedings.

In both urban and rural communities, it is important for law enforcement and service providers to build relationships to combat human trafficking. If you suspect trafficking or have a client who is a victim of trafficking, contact local, state, and federal law enforcement. Law enforcement will put you in contact with victim services personnel who will help identify service providers for those clients wishing to exit human trafficking. In rural Alaska, reach out to the clinics and regional medical and behavioral health directors to see what services are available in their agencies. In addition, reach out to the [Alaska State Troopers](#) and the [Alaska Department of Law Human Trafficking Task Force](#) for more support and information.

Education, outreach, and relationship building are also important for both rural and urban service providers. [The Human Trafficking Capacity Building Center](#), funded by OVC, works with tribes to start, sustain, or grow their human trafficking programs. The Center can help tribes navigate human trafficking resources like the [SOAR training](#) to support training medical and behavioral health providers, [advocacy curriculum](#), and [funding](#) to support victims of crime in tribal communities.

Lastly, most AI/AN people do not live on the reservation and may not have ready access to culturally based programs. If your community does not have local options for healing or support for AI/AN survivors, form connections with tribes or with nearby cities that may be hubs for urban Indian people. The cultural connection is important; and many urban Indians can feel invisible in their urban communities. Regardless of where you are located, it is important to have people who are trained on human trafficking and connected to people doing this work across your state or across the country.

How would you suggest advocates locate culturally specific resources that we are not currently aware of?

[Tribal coalitions](#) can be a great connection point. Victim service providers in urban areas may contact AI/AN people from various tribal communities with different ceremonies. These connection points can help with intertribal communication and also understanding what culturally specific resources may be available. Identify opportunities to learn about your local tribes in your area. Identify training around cultural humility for advocates and program staff to attend. The National Indigenous Women's Resource Center's [resource library](#) offers webinars, special collections, videos, toolkits and more, including this [Special Collection: Cultural Competency/Humility and Ally-Building in Indian Country](#).



For areas without large Native communities, where can we source some of these cultural comfort items?

Families are a good source for cultural items. In Alaska, associations focused on health and social services associations can also be a good source to connect to cultural heritage. Be mindful when purchasing items online to be sure it is coming from an indigenous source. Ask your client about what cultural items they seek or creating opportunities for clients to create (or use) their own cultural item if possible. Contact the [Substance Abuse Mental Health Service Administration \(SAMHSA\) Tribal Technical Assistance Center](#) for opportunities to learn about historical trauma and cultural humility training opportunities to best serve AI/AN clients' connection to cultural practices.

I find myself getting frustrated with the focus on human trafficking from the law enforcement perspective rather than from a victim services/survivor services perspective. What strategies have you used (if you have) to shift from the mindset of “put all traffickers in jail” to “let’s tackle the issues at the root of the problem – racial justice, income equality, housing, etc.”?

Currently, the U.S. law enforcement system is set up to investigate and put into motion accountability and healing for those impacted by the crime. Systemic oppression and its influences continue to plague tribal communities, making them highly susceptible to human trafficking. The system response to how youth are criminalized for common coping responses to trauma such as running away, substance abuse, and crimes the victim is forced to commit by the trafficker must be acknowledged along with the overrepresentation of people of color and Tribal Nations within the criminal justice system.

Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and the trafficking of Indigenous people has occurred since fur trappers arrived and the number of victims has steadily increased since 1492. Back then, within the tribal community, our people were quick at reaching accountability of the offender and healing of the victim. This type of harm was rare given our values, beliefs, ceremonies, and customs of the clan, band, and tribe. The unspoken law was fiercely adhered to individually and by the community.

Overall, since the early 1970s, U.S. victim service providers have received federal funding to provide trauma-informed, victim centered services and social change work which includes racial justice, income equality, housing, sexism, etc. Culturally and tribal-specific victim service providers since 1985 have brought up time and again that our “identity” our cultural ways are important. For more than 25 years, tribal



victim service providers have been fighting our way to the table, voicing our opinions, and making many, many recommendations to change the U.S. template. Today, U.S. systems have [multidisciplinary teams](#), [tribal coalitions](#), [domestic violence and sexual assault councils](#), [tribal and state task forces](#) to address Missing or Murdered AI/AN, [human trafficking taskforces](#), [sexual assault response teams](#), and [coordinated community response teams](#). For the most part, these teams focus on successful compliance with court, child protection, probation, etc. Racial justice, meaningful autonomy, culturally specific services, trauma-informed care, and even income equality might be brought up as an agency specific project.

Like the old saying goes, it takes a village to raise a child; this is true and works great as long as all the villagers have similar values, beliefs, goals, and accountability not just for the one child but ever mindful of the next seven generations. Which also means the systems exist for and with us as Tribal Nations, if working meaningfully (trauma-informed, culturally specific) for the benefit of the community they serve, these systems blend together, working with the villagers towards similar values, beliefs, goals, and accountability for the next seven generations. Tribal Nations have always worked toward that vision; we were born of this land, and we are still here. True meaningful allies, though they are few, have been excellent in partnership, working side-by-side, venting, strategizing, educating, training, eating and above all, laughing. Join us on our journey. It will not be easy. People are counting on us.

Addressing the root causes of crime, focusing on healing and justice, can perhaps result in different outcomes in our communities. Most assuredly, no offenders would equal no victims of crime.

What about training law enforcement and first responders on the reservations about MMIW and human trafficking? What trainings are provided?

There are a number of trainings for law enforcement and first responders about the issues of human trafficking and Missing or Murdered Indigenous Persons. The Department of Homeland Security's [Blue Campaign](#) provides free training on human trafficking. Other private, non-profit organizations also provide training. For Missing or Murdered AI/AN, the Department of Justice and Operation Lady Justice are partnering to present free law enforcement training. Check the [Operation Lady Justice website](#) for offerings and [resources](#). The National Indigenous Women's Resource Center has a [MMIW toolkit for families](#).

Are there any good curricula for prevention?

[A 2020 report](#) titled "Culture as a Protective Factor in Preventing Trafficking among Native Youth" provides



foundational knowledge of the historical context and the continued impact on Indigenous communities today and identifies unique vulnerabilities, assets, and strengths found in Indigenous communities and culture as a means of preventing trafficking among all Indigenous youth.

On February 1, 2021, the U.S. Department of Justice published the first of two issues of the [Department of Justice Journal of Federal Law and Practice](#) dedicated to the topics of missing or murdered AI/AN. There are many articles in this edition, which examine the role of law enforcement, prevention, culture, and medical treatment for victims.

How can tribes organize to be proactive in responding when our kids go missing/abducted? When they are being targeted, groomed, and friended through social media to the point that our kids are willing to leave their home to meet up with these perpetrators and then end up being abducted/human trafficked?

In Alaska, tribes involved in the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Persons (MMIP) pilot project identified a need for education, outreach, and prevention. Specifically, they have identified these areas of need—

- Recognizing and avoiding threats from social media.
- Offering safe travel education including leaving an itinerary and photos and planning for the unexpected including—
 - Identifying alternative places to stay,
 - Keeping emergency money in another secure spot, and
 - Keeping emergency and personal contacts in a place other than cell phone.
- Being aware of stranger danger practices.
- Avoiding publicizing travel plans.
- Being aware of substance and alcohol dangers and the increased risk in new urban settings.

Alaska participating MMIP pilot sites have also identified a need to—

- Renovate, purchase, and build temporary and new housing to support domestic violence and other displaced families and individuals.
- Provide food bank sort of programs and to promote regional food box programs for displaced families and individuals due to violence.
- Address substance and alcohol abuse including prevention, intervention, and treatment wrap-around service goals.
- Provide support for stakeholders and service providers to participate in local, regional, and



Alaska State historical trauma awareness.

Are there any resources for people who have been trafficked as children (on native land) but are now adults, and are trying to heal from their abuse?

Unfortunately, addressing trafficking within Tribal Nations is fairly new. Some tribes have departments or programs (including mental health professionals or peer groups) to assist adults molested or sexually assaulted as children. Local sex offender treatment programs with skilled staff and experience assisting victims of sex crimes may also offer assistance in aiding impacted Tribal Nation families. Tribal-specific healing ceremonies exist for all harms, such as returning or welcoming home ceremonies to offer healing from boarding schools. Community-based victim advocates can assist with various levels of trauma and healing paths. [Indian Health Services](#) can offer individuals mental health services. There are also tribal-specific experts and spiritual healers to assist with harms. Check with your community-based advocate, as they may have a list for those service providers within your community.

Contact StrongHearts Native Helpline at 1-844-7NATIVE (762-8483). StrongHearts Native Helpline is a safe domestic, dating, and sexual violence helpline for American Indians and Alaska Natives, offering culturally appropriate support and advocacy daily from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. central time.

[The Tribal Resource Tool](#) is searchable directory to find local tribal service providers.

Additional Information

Contact the Human Trafficking Capacity Building Center at contact@ovc-htcbc.org or 1-844-682-0411.

