

Sex Trafficking and Safe Harbors

TIPS FOR WORKING WITH VICTIMS/SURVIVORS

The goal of Safe Harbors and any anti-trafficking effort is to be victim-centered. This involves understanding the dynamics of sex trafficking so you can better understand victim behavior and meet them where they are in the process. If we can understand why victims may act a certain way, we can better meet their needs and engage them in the process of achieving justice. The following are some tips to keep in mind when working with victims/survivors:

- Victims may not look like a typical “victim.”
- Look closely: victims will be both adults and children.
- Learning that a woman has been in prostitution should create a presumption that she is a trafficking victim.
- You may encounter victims in contexts other than prostitution or sex trafficking.
- Victims have learned not to trust, so know that even when you try to help, trust is neither automatic nor immediate.
- Victims may lie to you. This is a survival tool, but it should not deter you from helping them.
- Victims will not usually self-identify:
 - They do not understand that they are victims of sex trafficking.
 - They are unwilling to disclose that they are victims of sex trafficking.
 - They may not use the same language you use to describe their situation.

LISTEN TO VICTIMS/SURVIVORS

We can achieve a more victim-centered response by listening to victims and learning about victim-needs from the victims themselves. The following information was shared by women working with Breaking Free in response to the question: *What would you like system professionals and service providers to know?*

- Think about things from our point of view. Never ever say you “understand,” because you haven’t been there. But still, try to put yourself in our shoes.
- Language counts. The words you use make a difference. Calling us “prostitutes” hurts us.
- Kindness and empathy go a long way. Even if we appear high, angry, homeless, or dressed a certain way – don’t make assumptions; showing you care lets us know we can come to you for help.
- We might/will probably screw up again. There are lots of things that push us back into the life. Give us many chances. At some point, we will hit rock bottom, and we will need your help.
- We are good at reading people. We have to be. So we can tell if you really want to help us because you care, or if you’re just saying you want to help us so we can help your case.
- We know things. Sometimes we might want to tell you. A lot of times we won’t, at least not right away.
- We know more than you do about this life.
- We don’t want to be out there doing what we’re doing. You have to understand that. We’re just doing this for survival; we’re homeless or we just need some way to keep going.
- We may act “hard,” but we have to have that “wall” up for survival. Deep down we know we need help.
- Most of us didn’t get rescued as little girls. That doesn’t mean we don’t need your help now as adults.
- We need more housing.
- We need more information about your services, and we need it to be in places where we can see it (public restrooms, bus stops, shelters, clinics, etc.)
- We have experienced more fear than you can ever imagine. Putting our pimp away doesn’t always get rid of that fear.
- We are good mothers. Give us multiple chances, give us the tools, give us time to get our lives together. Sometimes the only thing worth fighting for is our kids – they’re the reason we get out. When you take away our kids, you take away our reason to fight.
- Listen to us. You may be “educated” and “professionals,” but even with your good intentions, you don’t know how things work in reality.
- Don’t just ask us for our “stories” – we are not on display! You need our input and feedback, so give us ways to be involved and have a voice before you start passing laws.