

BEYOND SURVIVING

ETHICAL PRACTICES FOR EMPLOYING PEOPLE WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE IN SEX TRAFFICKING

“ My life experience has cost me more than any degree every could. Know my worth and know the value I offer in every arena within the anti-trafficking field. I know things that cannot be taught.

ALIA AZARIAH, SURVIVOR LEADER

The anti-trafficking field in the United States exists as a collaboration between law enforcement officers, social workers, healthcare professionals, politicians, business professionals, and, of course, survivors themselves. However, the current state of the field fails to recognize, elevate, and honor the voices and perspectives of survivors too often. This is demonstrated through continued misperceptions and stigmas about what trafficking looks like in our communities, as well as in savior complexes and rescue mindsets aimed at survivors.

In reality, survivors are uniquely equipped to lead and inform the anti-trafficking field, not despite their experiences but rather because of them. Trafficking in the U.S. is a complex, pervasive criminal enterprise that thrives in misunderstanding and ignorance. When survivor voices are not prioritized, the field loses critical context for how traffickers find vulnerabilities in their victims, maintain control, and remain hidden. Survivor leaders are key to building identification training, victim interaction procedures, restorative care practices, and emergency response policies that balance recognizing survivors' dignity and agency with providing resources appropriate to their needs and current situation. Truly, serving survivors of trafficking with excellence must, without exception, elevate the expertise of survivor leaders.

Since lived experience is so valuable to effectively combating trafficking, prioritizing the perspective of survivor leaders must become standard procedure for every organization in the field. This includes involving survivors as employees, consultants, and expert advisors in every aspect of the national continuum of care.

It's easier said than done, however, to achieve this. Many lived

experience experts report having their stories shared without permission or presented as the only type of trafficking experience by the organizations they work with. Survivors who want to become involved in anti-trafficking work may feel that their professional accomplishments and qualifications are not recognized because of the focus on their lived experience. Others may feel unqualified to become involved at all, particularly if they have not had the opportunity to pursue higher education. It is crucial for organizations in the anti-trafficking field to recognize that lived experience is worth far more to the work than education, but neither should the professional qualifications of survivors be overlooked. Again, it is easy to recognize that lived experience experts are key to the success of the anti-trafficking field, but it takes intention and a willingness to listen to truly incorporate and elevate their expertise in each aspect of the work.

This guide presents best practices for hiring people with lived experience of sex trafficking and supporting them as employees, as discussed by the panel in the Safe House Project webinar “Beyond Surviving”, which can be accessed at www.safehouseproject.org/webinars.

UNDERSTANDING TRAUMA IN THE WORKPLACE

“ I have experienced significant trauma but I have also experienced significant healing. My healing does not mean that my journey is complete. I need space to voice my own boundaries with clients and topics related to exploitation. It's a burden I choose to remain in work related to my hurt but it is still a burden. It's a sacrificial act to be a survivor in anti-trafficking work.

ALIA AZARIAH, SURVIVOR LEADER

Sex trafficking is considered one of the most destructive crimes

against an individual possible, in large part due to the complexity, severity, and comorbidity of the trauma experienced by survivors. While every trafficking experience involves a different combination of factors and types of trauma, most survivors endure physical, psychological, sexual, and interpersonal trauma with varying regularity and intensity. Many of these experiences are considered complex traumas, which result from prolonged exposure to varied and multiple events that are often invasive and involve other people. Complex trauma has wide-ranging, long-term effects and is often related to other psychological conditions.

Survivors of sex trafficking universally experience severe trauma and often over extended periods of time. The abuse endured by many survivors creates ongoing psychological challenges and commonly takes advantage of existing mental vulnerabilities. On average, survivors report experiencing 12 separate psychological issues while being trafficked and 10.5 issues even after leaving exploitation. The most frequently reported problems include depression, anxiety, nightmares, flashbacks, and intense feelings of shame. Survivors also report psychological conditions, such as bipolar, borderline personality, and dissociative identity disorders, at much higher rates than the general population. More than half of survivors suffer from PTSD, and over 40% have attempted suicide at least once.

It is crucial to understand the challenges survivors face on a daily basis before hiring and supporting them as employees or consultants. These challenges do not simply disappear once a survivor has left exploitation and reached a certain point in the healing process; rather, most survivors continue to face them throughout their lives. Lived experience experts bring a wealth of knowledge and perspective to the anti-trafficking field, but we must also recognize that their expertise came at a great cost and continues to impact them. It is the responsibility of non-survivors in the anti-trafficking field to learn to support and honor lived experience experts as they participate in and lead progress in our collective mission.

Just as each survivor's trafficking experience is different, their needs for support and recognition as lived experience experts are unique. Not all survivors want to join the work of the anti-trafficking movement, and not all want to serve as public survivor leaders. Within these groups, individual survivors need different accommodations for their past trauma. As a general rule, it is best to ask a potential employee with lived experience open-ended questions about what would support them best.

Common challenges that survivors face in the workplace include

navigating unfamiliar social relationships, facing biases about job readiness and professionalism, and handling the ongoing effects of past trauma. For example, survivors who experienced exploitation in their childhood, teenage, or young adult years may find it difficult to navigate social relationships, particularly professional relationships. These survivors may need some additional guidance on how to approach, maintain, and advance relationships with other employees, supervisors, and people in the anti-trafficking industry. Other survivors may not have the traditional education or work experiences required for certain roles but are otherwise fully capable of performing the tasks necessary. Lastly, most survivors deal with the mental, emotional, and physical effects of their past experiences on a daily basis. Some need regular periods of time during the workday set aside for medical appointments, therapy, or self-care.

Accommodation of a survivor's needs for workplace support is absolutely vital to their continued participation in the work of the anti-trafficking field. As partners in the work, non-survivors should not only be aware of the need for some additional support but also advocate for that accommodation when it is not being provided. Accommodations can include any combination of support for the effects of trauma, ongoing physical conditions or disabilities, psychological and mental health challenges, and the need for continued medical care. Again, it is important to note that each survivor faces a different mix of challenges with varying severity and deserves accommodations tailored to their unique needs.

Survivors also face the challenge of feeling triggered in the workplace, whether they are serving as survivor leaders in anti-trafficking work or employed at an unrelated company. Common workplace triggers include:

- Anxiety about potentially losing their job and being without the means to survive
- Discovering their own limits on sharing their story in a social setting
- Encountering survivors with similar experiences
- Learning to interpret criticism as safe and productive rather than dangerous and demeaning
- Being focused on a topic directly related to their own trauma
- Learning to appreciate authority
- Seeing systems of power fail vulnerable populations

It is critical to the success of the anti-trafficking field that this

challenge is faced with humility, integrity, and compassion. Learning to support and empower survivors in the workplace can be an experimental process, both for survivors and the people they work with, but it is well worth seeing through.

PREPARING TO HIRE LIVED EXPERIENCE EXPERTS

“ Don't pigeonhole what you think I am capable of. So often, organizations think that all survivors want to do or will be skilled at mentorship or direct care. Don't make these assumptions! Many of us dream of policy, administration, or marketing.

ALIA AZARIAH, SURVIVOR LEADER

For organizations that have not hired survivors before, it can seem overwhelming. While most organizations have a desire to approach the process with sensitivity and care for survivors' well-being, there are many ways in which they can cause harm.

The first step for any organization considering hiring survivors is to recognize that the process should look different than the process of hiring people without lived experience. The following points should be carefully considered on an organizational scale prior to starting the hiring process.

IS OUR ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE APPROPRIATE FOR LIVED EXPERIENCE EXPERTS?

There are many aspects of organizational culture that can impact its appropriateness, such as language, social norms, and expectations for appearances. Other questions that can help clarify whether an organization's culture, as it exists at present, is supportive and empowering for survivors include:

- **Do we need to implement language or terminology training prior to hiring a survivor?** Words have power. This is a truth well-known to survivors of human trafficking. When it comes to the language used to describe them and the crime of trafficking itself, the words we choose to use can be the difference between empowerment and real harm. Every organization in the anti-trafficking field should have regular language training sessions to ensure that the words we use are accurate and uplifting and place the blame on the perpetrators. For organizations that do not have prior experience working with survivors, this step is particularly crucial.

- **Have we established clear expectations for other employees about appropriate questions?** Many survivors do not want their lived experience to be the focus of their position or to represent their ability to perform the tasks of their role. It's important for both the leadership and the team members of an organization to understand that survivors bring value to their positions separately from their lived experience. Even for survivors in a position where their lived experience is public, personal questions about their past can come across as invasive or insensitive, or appear to negate the value of their other skills and qualifications. Establishing clear expectations for what kind of questions or comments are appropriate, as well as implementing trauma-informed language, helps the organization develop a culture that is welcoming and supportive to survivors.
- **Do we have any biases we need to address?** Many survivors encounter biases in the workplace due to their tattoos, piercings, manner of speaking, or level of traditional professionalism. While none of these qualities directly impacts an individual's ability to succeed as an employee, inherent biases against them can exist in many spaces. In your organization, carefully evaluate whether these biases exist and how you can address them prior to beginning the hiring process. This is particularly important for trafficking survivors, since they may not have had control over whether they got tattoos or piercings or were unable to attend school or higher education. In the anti-trafficking field, we will make far greater progress by disregarding what majority culture considers job readiness and professionalism in favor of integrity and understanding. Hire character, train skill.

DOES OUR ORGANIZATION NEED TO CONSULT WITH A LIVED EXPERIENCE EXPERT TO DESIGN THE HIRING PROCESS?

Every organization considering hiring survivors of sex trafficking should gather input and perspective from lived experience experts, whether they are already part of the organization or not. For organizations without prior experience working with survivors, this can mean making the effort to find a lived experience expert externally who is willing to provide insight on what the hiring process should look like. For organizations that have employees with lived experience, this can mean setting aside intentional time to ask their opinions on how to improve the hiring process. There are many potential points for a job application, interview, or position to trigger or cause harm without the organization knowing, so this step is crucial for supporting



survivors as employees from the very beginning.

- **How do we ask questions and respond in a trauma-informed way?** This is a key area for input from a lived experience expert. The words and tone an organization normally uses for employment documents or processes may be triggering or inappropriate for interactions with trafficking survivors. Make sure to have a lived experience expert thoroughly vet the language used by your organization to ensure that survivors feel comfortable, respected, and safe throughout the hiring process.

WHAT IS OUR MOTIVATION FOR HIRING OR CONSULTING WITH SURVIVORS?

Certainly, the expertise of people with lived experience is incredibly valuable to the anti-trafficking field, but there are situations in which survivors' stories have been used unethically. Survivors should always have the choice to share or not share their experiences without affecting their ability to complete the tasks associated with their employment. Again, a survivor's employment should never be dependent on their willingness to publicly share details or even disclose that they have lived experience. Many survivor leaders are willing to speak about their experiences in public contexts to raise awareness, inform public policy, or improve the anti-trafficking field, but these activities should be considered separate from their day-to-day job description.

- **Are we looking to hire a survivor with a specific story?** If your organization's answer to this question is yes, consider whether this is an appropriate preference. For example, an organization focused on combating sex trafficking could have an appropriate preference for hiring a sex trafficking survivor. Any preference for certain experiences should be directly applicable to the job description of the position. Carefully consider why your organization may have more specific preferences, as this may indicate an unethical motivation for hiring a survivor in the first place.

WHAT RESOURCES DO WE HAVE IN PLACE TO SUPPORT SURVIVORS AS EMPLOYEES?

Evaluate the types of accommodations and supportive resources your organization is able to provide to survivors if requested. These could include professionalism mentorship, flexible hours to accommodate medical needs, or dedicated time for mental health support. Consulting with a lived experience expert on the types of accommodations that are most often helpful for

survivors would be wise since the support survivors need in the workplace can vary dramatically. Make sure to have a solid understanding of what your organization is able to provide before beginning the hiring process.

COMMUNICATING EXPECTATIONS & MOTIVATIONS

“ I want to be the absolute best I have in me, and I know there are skills I didn't learn. Be straightforward with me. Teach me what I don't know. I care about this issue more than you can imagine, but the thought of losing my job is a trigger for me. The more support I get from you, the more I can serve your expectations and my own.

ALIA AZARIAH, SURVIVOR LEADER

Once an organization has evaluated its readiness to hire survivors and implemented the necessary changes, the hiring process can begin. However, supporting survivors as employees does not end once a position has been filled. There are concrete best practices to adhere to as an organization to continue supporting survivors for the duration of their time at the company and beyond.

Firstly, it is the responsibility of leadership to ensure that the tasks and expectations for the survivor's role are clear and agreed upon throughout their employment. In small organizations, most employees juggle a variety of tasks and often take on responsibilities that are not included in their job description. Nonprofit employees, in particular, are often willing to do so to further the mission of the organization. However, this can be an especially precarious habit when it comes to employees with lived experience, who are often asked to take on extra tasks related to their expertise. Over time, this practice can develop expectations for sharing their experiences publicly, even if the original position did not communicate it, or place them in triggering situations they are not prepared for. Even in busy seasons, it is important for organizations to protect the separation of a survivor's position and sharing their experiences.

It is equally critical for all employees to honor a survivor's decision to share or not share about their lived experience, both while they are employed at the organization and after they leave. Organizations as a whole should be open to a survivor's decision to share, respectful of their choice not to share, and considerate of that agency even if that individual leaves the organization.

Lastly, the importance of not hiring lived experience experts as a token measure cannot be overstated. Doing so trivializes the weight of their experiences and the challenges they face on a daily basis, while also diminishing their capabilities as employees and contributors to the organization's work.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

“ I am a person who survived trafficking. Those are experiences I can not trade even if I wanted to. However, those experiences are mine and mine alone. They may inform my work but they are not all I have to offer. If, when, and how I share them may change day by day. This is my right.

ALIA AZARIAH, SURVIVOR LEADER

The anti-trafficking field is continually developing and refining its language, strategies, and methods as we learn more about survivors' experiences and the work left to be done. Nevertheless, certain ethical standards are always applicable and helpful for every organization involved in the field. Adhering to these ethical standards concerning the involvement and leadership of survivors in our organizations will empower survivors to drive our progress and unite the field for greater impact.

- **Do not exploit survivors for fundraising or marketing purposes.** The experiences of survivors are the reason that the anti-trafficking field exists; however, it is all too common for their stories to be used unethically. Each individual survivor should have full control over when, how, and why their story is shared, including the ability to decide not to share at all. This should be true for every description of their experience – permission once does not mean permission will always be granted. While the power of a survivor's story in raising awareness and inspiring compassion is undeniable, it is critical to the health and longevity of the anti-trafficking field that we do this well as a collective. For more guidance on how to involve survivor stories in fundraising and marketing initiatives in an ethical way, consider the following sources:
 - [Empowerment or Exploitation? Ethical Engagement of Survivor Leaders in Anti-Trafficking Organizations](#), M. Elizabeth Bowman, PhD, LICSW, LCSW-C & Brittany Dunn, MBA
 - [Ethical Storytelling for Survivors](#), Safe House Project
 - [Tips for Ethical Survivor Storytelling](#), Alia Azariah

- **Remember that one survivor does not represent every experience.** Sex trafficking happens in a wide variety of places through multiple methods and affects people from every kind of background. It is impossible for a single survivor's story to encompass every experience that falls under the definition of sex trafficking. As an organization, be careful to avoid prioritizing one type of story internally or in your public initiatives. Doing so can minimize or erase awareness of other survivors' experiences, which is harmful in itself, but it can also lead to lost opportunities for identification and healing. The anti-trafficking field's mission cannot be achieved if we only focus on a certain type of trafficking experience and ignore the rest.
- **Do not minimize the trauma or experiences of a survivor because of their age or background.** Sex trafficking occurs in every kind of community and has for thousands of years. Survivors represent every generation, gender, social class, race, ethnicity, and geographic location, and each one can offer unique insight into the national landscape.
- **Treat employees with lived experience as professionals who may simply need additional support.** There are a lot of elements to consider when hiring a survivor, but be careful to avoid getting caught up in the differences between lived experience experts and non-survivor employees. As partners in this work, we must acknowledge the challenges we each face and move forward with compassion and humility.
- **Respect a survivor's autonomy in choosing to disclose or not disclose their lived experience to other individuals, including other staff members.** Each individual survivor has the right to choose to share that they are a survivor of trafficking with whomever they choose. This autonomy should be especially respected in their place of work. As a potential employer, be sure to ask how they would like to handle disclosure and support that decision – whether they choose to share or not. If they decide to disclose their lived experience, defer to their preferences in how, when, and to whom that information is shared.

Understanding what is most helpful and empowering for survivors in the workplace can be an experimental process both for survivors and the people they work with. It is critical that, as leaders in the anti-trafficking field, we learn to do it well and raise the standard for how survivors are honored in our work. As both the reason for our dedication to this field and leaders in our progress, survivors truly are essential partners in eradicating trafficking in our communities.