

Written Statement of

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Submitted to the

*Judiciary Committee
Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism, and Homeland Security
U.S. House of Representatives*

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Equitable Care for Survivors of Human Trafficking

This statement is submitted in response to the Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism, and Homeland Security hearing on April 27, 2022, entitled: “Oversight of Federal Efforts to Combat Human Trafficking.” Safe House Project is appreciative of the Committee’s ongoing support and interest regarding the issue of human trafficking. As a service provider, Safe House Project has seen the deep need for quality programming, industry standardization, and survivor-informed practices.

Safe House Project is a leader in the fight against human trafficking in America, training more than 200,000 people to identify trafficking, assisting more than 230 survivors in escaping their trafficking situations through exit support and emergency services, and funding the launch of more than 272 restorative care beds across the nation to support survivors of human trafficking. Safe House Project leads a national coalition of leaders in the aftercare landscape and has developed a comprehensive method of evaluating safe house programs for ethics, equity, and effectiveness.

The House Judiciary Committee has jurisdiction over the Protection and Assistance for Victims of Trafficking Grant program (22 USC 7105) administered by the DOJ’s Office for Victims of Crime. Aftercare and victim assistance is a critical element to a human trafficking survivor's ability to recover and heal from their trafficking experience. The main goals of human trafficking aftercare should be preventing re-exploitation and ensuring survivors have access to the equitable, restorative treatment they deserve to live healthy, self-sustaining lives. However, many programs in existence, those independently funded, as well as those receiving federal grant assistance, employ practices that do not respect the dignity and worth of the survivor. Some of these programs are even dangerous and unethical. Without proper aftercare, 80% of trafficking

victims will be re-victimized¹. Children who do not receive the care they need immediately following their trafficking situation cost the communities \$5.3 million over their lifetime².

There are many organizations providing aftercare services to human trafficking victims but, unfortunately, there are no nationally recognized Standards of Care in place to evaluate the quality of aftercare being offered or to hold organizations accountable. The Safe House Certification (SHC) model has created a program to fill this gap but has yet to be adopted by those agencies overseeing the grant assistance programs. SHC raises the standards of certified organizations by evaluating the quality of an aftercare program and recommending improvements based on established industry standards. In addition, it gives survivors a credible, consistent review of programs, enabling and empowering them to seek restorative care, knowing that the program has been properly vetted and is equipped to handle their restoration.

Furthermore, there is an expressed desire from residential programs seeking to serve or currently serving trafficking survivors to understand quality programming and best practices. Our experience since 2017 shows that there is a ready landscape seeking to understand and implement strategies that will create a new culture of survivor-informed care and there is an urgent need for the Office for Victims of Crime (DOJ) and Office on Trafficking in Persons (HHS-ACF) to adopt these standards to provide proper oversight to programs being funded by the federal government.

The Case for Certification

When a survivor is in an emergency situation, there is rarely time to spend researching whether an aftercare program is well equipped and effective, therefore survivors and their advocates are faced with several limitations:

- The lack of an up-to-date list of programs across the country
- The inability to properly vet a program prior to placement to ensure the program is trauma-informed, effective, and sustainable
- When the survivor has special needs, the difficulty associated with finding a program that provides specialized services
- Programs may not be knowledgeable about cultural needs or are unable to meet the survivor where they are in regard to their cultural and ethnic background

Industry-endorsed standards and guidelines aim to validate and improve operations, management, governance, sustainability, and specialized services provided by aftercare programs. An effective certification model is a pathway to improved operations and enhanced effectiveness of residential aftercare programs and, over time, these best practices will turn into standard practices for organizations serving human trafficking survivors throughout the country.

¹ Counter Trafficking Data Collaborative. Counter Trafficking Data Collaborative, <https://www.ctdatacollaborative.org>. Accessed 1 September 2021

² Fritz, Gregory K. "A National Perspective on Children's Mental Health." Hampton Roads Community Foundation. Hampton Roads Community Foundation, 15 May 2019, Norfolk

The purpose of the Safe House Certification model is to drive industry standards to improve safe house programming for trafficking survivors based on best practices and evidence-based research of industry leaders, including lived experience experts, program trainers, and service providers. It evaluates the quality of a safe house program and assists in highlighting improvements by comparing its policies and procedures to established industry standards. The SHC methodology elevates therapeutic care and residential housing as necessary services to break the cycle of victimization. Standardizing and certifying organizations based on best practices for high quality aftercare will decrease re-victimization rates.

Programs offering residential aftercare have the opportunity to create real change. Aftercare offers survivors an opportunity to be free of re-traumatization and learn to manage overwhelming trauma responses, as well as have the ability to facilitate new opportunities for survivors to move forward. An improperly managed or ineffective program can lead to survivors leaving the program early without the care they need, re-traumatization of survivors, and further exploitation.

Receiving certification demonstrates an organization's commitment to self-assessment, to improving quality of care, and to adopting new methodologies to improve the effectiveness of their program. In addition to evaluating the effectiveness of existing programs, certification allows for a better framework for new programs by establishing a standard and identifying gaps in the current continuum of care. This ensures programs are well equipped to serve a diverse population of survivors, improving mental and public health outcomes for survivors, lowering crime rates in their communities associated with trafficking, and reducing re-victimization.

Safe House Certification utilizes a comprehensive approach to evaluating programs based on a 5-category grading system:

1. Organizational Structure and Compliance
2. Residential Programming and Services
3. Governance and Executive Leadership
4. Financial Management
5. Specialized Services

Evaluating each of these 5 categories ensures that programs have all the necessary policies, procedures, and programming to:

- Operate efficiently and effectively
- Demonstrate a research-based approach to trafficking-specific survivor care
- Ensure all programmatic elements are trauma-informed
- Consult with lived experience experts to ensure all practices are survivor informed, as survivors have the foundational knowledge needed to ensure survivor needs are met
- And maintain financial and governance policies that are sustainable

Certification Implementation:

SHC is a scalable national program for residential programs serving victims of human trafficking. Organizations eligible for certification are organizations who operate full-time residential programs for international and domestic survivors of trafficking within the United

States. Organizations must be in good standing with the IRS and be able to provide documentation of all required licenses in their state. The organization must have programming specific to trafficking survivors. SHC evaluations are currently written to assess both sex and labor trafficking programs.

Organizations receive their Final Certification Report and are added to a list of certified organizations. This certification speaks to the efficacy of programs and allows government agencies to know which organizations are best suited to place survivors into their jurisdiction, and to receive federal grant assistance.

Summary of Recommendations:

Thank you for the Committee's attention to this issue. Safe House Project urges the Committee to call on the Office for Victims of Crime and the Office on Trafficking in Persons to adopt these industry standards and survivor-informed practices. This would help to improve aftercare programs for human trafficking victims and decrease re-victimization rates.

This is an opportunity to improve quality of care and equitable access for this underserved community, and to adopt new methodologies to improve the effectiveness of aftercare programs for victims of human trafficking.