

SERVING LGBTQIA+ SURVIVORS

RECOGNIZING INEQUITY IN VULNERABILITY & ACCESS TO AFTERCARE

Human trafficking is an injustice that opposes some of the most fundamental values of the United States, and an overwhelming majority of Americans would agree with that statement. Unfortunately, we find it much more difficult to agree on how to care for survivors of trafficking, particularly survivors who are part of the LGBTQIA+ community. As a whole, LGBTQIA+ survivors face far more barriers to healing and freedom than cisgender and heterosexual survivors — an inequality that often leaves them vulnerable to re-exploitation and denies them the opportunity to access restorative care.

LGBTQIA+ people are particularly vulnerable to sex trafficking. Traffickers tend to target individuals who lack strong support networks, have experienced past violence, and are marginalized by society, which are all qualities that can often describe LGBTQIA+ people. These survivors regularly encounter the same societal attitudes in the anti-trafficking movement that made them more vulnerable to trafficking in the first place, resulting in a decided lack of access to care services and healing opportunities.

Some of the most significant challenges to finding healing and freedom for LGBTQIA+ survivors include the following:

- **Barriers to acceptance into safe house programs** — As safe house programs have become more focused on specific demographics of survivors to better support their individual needs, LGBTQIA+ survivors often find a lack of programs that will accept them. Many programs across the United States serve only cisgender, heterosexual women and girls and refuse entry to LGBTQIA+ survivors on the basis of gender identity or sexual orientation or due to a religious objection. This barrier to care occurs so regularly that many LGBTQIA+ survivors do not disclose their identity out of fear of being denied the services they need.
- **Lack of cultural competency in direct care programs** — The language, terms, and attitudes that direct care providers use can be incredibly damaging to an LGBTQIA+ survivor's sense of safety. Programs with gender-specific names, taglines, or brand language may be unintentionally signaling

to LGBTQIA+ survivors that they will not accept their identity, even if the program genuinely wants to serve them. For faith-based programs, it is critical to recognize the hurt, distrust, and even dislike that these survivors may have toward the church or religious people. Many LGBTQIA+ survivors will choose not to seek restorative care over encountering insensitive, judgmental, or unsupportive direct care providers. Since many direct care workers are not prepared to have conversations about LGBTQIA+ trafficking experiences, this is a severe barrier for many survivors.

- **No existing community space in the anti-trafficking movement** — The industry, in many of its varied segments, has not created a sense of community and solidarity that includes survivors who identify as LGBTQIA+. Unfortunately, traffickers are very skilled at manipulating this, often creating a dialogue that tells these survivors that the only place they belong is exploitation and that there is no room for them in the anti-trafficking movement. LGBTQIA+ survivors often encounter a large number of labels about their identity that can make it extremely difficult to feel seen, heard, and cared for. The LGBTQIA+ survivor voice recognized in the anti-trafficking industry rarely reflects the number of survivors who identify as part of this community.

With these challenges in mind, how can the anti-trafficking movement ensure that its advocacy and its services are equally accessible and uplifting for all survivors, regardless of their gender identity or sexual orientation? The first step must be opening up the conversation — What do LGBTQIA+ survivors experience that other survivors do not? In what ways are their individual needs not being met in safe homes? LGBTQIA+ individuals represent a disproportionately large population of people who have been trafficked, and the space in the anti-trafficking industry needs to accurately represent their voices and experiences.

These conversations will serve a secondary purpose in helping care providers develop a more holistic perspective on what a survivor of trafficking looks like. All survivors deserve care,

regardless of their background and identity. Every trafficked person deserves a chance to seek healing and have access to restorative care. By expressing and exposing the need for inclusive care in safe house programs, awareness and action can come together to create spaces for LGBTQIA+ survivors that are capable of supporting their individual needs. It is imperative that the anti-trafficking industry shifts to prioritizing the value of individuals over an idealized picture of a survivor.

Lastly, cultural competency in every area of the industry is a must. Whether a program focuses its services on LGBTQIA+ survivors or not, all service providers and direct care workers need to understand the complex challenges that these survivors can face. To truly care for them well, workers need to be trained, educated, and equipped to support all survivors.

As the anti-trafficking movement moves forward, we must take proactive steps to grow in compassion, increase our understanding of survivors' unique experiences and needs, and develop our competency in caring for them. All trafficking survivors deserve access to care. Every survivor matters.

