

Human Trafficking Services through a Trauma-Informed Lens:

Applications for the Child Welfare Context

Briana Downey

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Human trafficking is not just a global issue but a local one as well. Adults and children are trafficked within cities as well as rural areas across the United States every day. Child welfare intersects with human trafficking through the commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC). CSEC can take many forms, including forcing a child into prostitution, child pornography, or other forms of sexual activity. It also requires a new approach to supporting youth as many victims may not believe or understand that they are the victims of a crime and are being abused.

The Contra Costa County Employment and Human Services Department has built an initiative called ‘Zero Tolerance for Human Trafficking’ adopting a coalition approach to meeting both the labor and sex trafficking issues the county faces. The county has instituted a robust infrastructure for partners to operate within while maintaining a victim-centered approach. Human trafficking victims experience complex trauma as a result of their exploitation. With this in mind, partners involve the voice of the child or adult being trafficked in decision-making for services and supports. The collaborative on the whole takes a trauma-informed approach to developing strategy and implementation resulting in better-coordinated services for those being victimized.

It is a necessity for child welfare agencies to be equipped to deal appropriately with the issue of CSEC as well as to meet this population’s unique needs. Contra Costa County’s experience

provides a number of transferable approaches for other agencies to adopt in order to develop the best services possible for child victims.

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Background

Human trafficking is a form of modern-day slavery that involves the use of force, fraud, or coercion to obtain some type of labor or commercial sex act. Human trafficking is a hidden crime as victims rarely come forward to seek help due to language barriers, fear of retribution from traffickers, fear of law enforcement or an inability to seek services due to the effects of complex trauma. Approximately 800,000 adults and children are trafficked within the United States each year. Human trafficking generates billions of dollars of profit per year, second only to drug trafficking as the most profitable illegal industry in the world.¹

One particular form of human trafficking is the commercial sexual exploitation of children. There are three primary forms of commercial sexual exploitation of children: prostitution, pornography and trafficking for sexual purposes. Other forms of commercial sexual exploitation of children include child sex tourism, child marriages and forced marriages.

It is estimated that 300,000 children are victimized in the United States annually. The commercial sexual exploitation of children and youth (CSEC) is a fundamental violation of one's human rights and can have devastating impacts on the development of a young person. Victims face violence, physical, emotional and sexual abuse, exposure to sexually transmitted diseases, and suffer from complex trauma. Three quarters of identified victims are involved with the child

¹“Trafficking in Persons Report.” *U.S. Department of State*. U.S. Department of State, June 2004 Published. 27 April 2017 Accessed.

welfare system, making the understanding of and services for sexually exploited children paramount to the work of human services agencies.²

Contra Costa County Approach

Contra Costa County's Employment & Human Services Department (EHSD) has been supporting victims of domestic violence through an agency-wide initiative since 2001 named 'Zero Tolerance for Domestic Violence'. While originally focused on the impacts of domestic violence, family violence, and elder abuse, EHSD expanded the initiative's purview to include human trafficking in 2014, naming the off-shoot initiative 'Zero Tolerance for Human Trafficking'. The initiative's expansion aims to bring more awareness of human trafficking (both labor and sex trafficking) to the public, county agencies, service providers and community organizations. Furthermore, it endeavors to provide targeted and coordinated services for those who have been victimized, with a particular focus on trauma-informed care practices.

Trauma-informed care practices are inclusive of both an organization's and individual staff member's understanding of the widespread impact of trauma on clients and the secondary impact on themselves. Becoming trauma-informed necessitates the enhancing the skills of staff and providers to recognize the signs and symptoms of trauma in clients, families, staff, and others involved within the system. It aims to heighten the awareness of staff so that they can make the distinction between a behavior and a response to trauma. It also signals them to engage more compassionately as well as inquisitively so that they can identify if the client is currently in a

² Gragg, F., Petta, I., Bernstein, H., Eisen, K., Quinn, L. "New York Prevalence Study of Commercially Sexually Exploited Children." *Office of Children and Family Services*. New York State, 18 April, 2008 Published. 27 March 2017 Accessed.

traumatizing situation. It also aims to reduce practices that may be re-traumatizing, requiring a critical eye on policy, procedure and practice³.

There are four areas of focus that the Zero Tolerance for Human Trafficking initiative focuses on: Education & Outreach, Multi-disciplinary Teams, Policy, Procedure & Data, and a Law Enforcement Investigations Task Force. Each area is comprised of champions from within the county and service provider community and is headed by a point person that liaises with an overarching Executive Team.

Education & Outreach

As understanding of the scope of human trafficking has evolved, so has the need to bring awareness to the problem in the local context. The Education and Outreach committee has created an awareness campaign aimed at providing a fundamental understanding of what human trafficking is, how to identify it, and where to find services and support. It has paired this with training on how trauma affects brain development and how behaviors social workers see and experience with a client could be a trauma response to past experiences.

The initial approach was to train professionals in the social service field as they are most likely to intersect with a trafficking victim in their day-to-day work (even if it is unbeknownst to them); working with a foster youth, an applicant for economic assistance, a domestic violence victim. The second target audience has been aimed at institutions or businesses, such as schools, churches, motel staff, taxi companies, etc. that come into regular contact with potential victims.

³ “SAMHSA’s Concept of Trauma and guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach.” *SAMHSA*. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, July 2014 Published. 13 March, 2017 Accessed.

Both social media and print media is used to reach the broader community and to provide online resources to the public at large.

Multi-Disciplinary Teams

A multi-disciplinary team (MDT) approach promotes the strengthening and optimization of a coordinated community response to victims of human trafficking. The team consists of a range of agencies including law enforcement, community service providers, the District Attorney's Office, the Public Defender's office, Probation and Child & Family Services. The MDT takes place monthly to discuss and support nominated human trafficking cases. Any member of the MDT can nominate a case. The primary focus for nominated cases' are ones that are fraught with barriers, there is a struggle to meet the victims' needs on their own, and they are seeking support from a broader network. The MDT focuses on making sure that providers understand how trauma affects client behavior and that services are client-led, strengths-based, and inclusive of the victim's own goals for progress and support.⁴

Policy, Planning & Data

Research and data are gathered and used to provide recommendations to all partner agencies for policy or practice changes. The committee is tasked with infusing a shared vocabulary and approach across agencies so that services and messaging are consistent no matter what door a client may come through. This routine maintenance ensures that policies and practice continue to align with the initiative's mission and goals. Additionally, the committee is able to support other committees to make evidence-informed decisions about structure, approaches and planning as the initiative evolves over time.

⁴ Kim, Susun. Personal Interview. 11 April 2017.

Law Enforcement Investigations Task Force

Human trafficking is widely under-reported. For those that are being trafficked, they may be isolated and not able to reach out to law enforcement, or they may fear reprisals from their trafficker should they report them. This often results in a lack of witnesses and physical evidence that is difficult to obtain. Sometimes victims are seen as complicit in a crime, rather than being victimized and coerced.

Given this, the Law Enforcement committee engages in community policing efforts working closely with local community agencies and Child and Family Services in designing and implementing prevention strategies and problem-solving measures in an effort to best serve this nebulous group and to continue to dispel myths about human trafficking victims within the law enforcement community.

Resource Allocation

These efforts are not executed on sheer will alone. EHSD's success with this initiative has been supported by a full-time coordinator of the Human Trafficking initiative. This coordinator manages the communication flow between each committee, manages the evaluation of the initiative as well as continually engages current and new partners that can support the initiative's efforts. Recently, EHSD expanded the support team to include a social media and outreach expert to develop a more robust online presence.

EHSD has utilized two funding streams to support this staffing structure. Senate Bill 968 provides resources to address domestic violence through the use of fees for marriage licenses, birth certificates and death certificates. A portion of those funds go directly to EHSD for oversight and coordination of its violence prevention and intervention services. Additionally,

EHSD has a federal grant through the Department of Justice's Office for Victims of Crime to provide coordinated services for human trafficking victims across systems and agencies.

Challenges

The Zero Tolerance for Human Trafficking initiative has been quite successful. It has built upon the structure and lessons learned from the established Domestic Violence initiative. However, there are still challenges that are notable for consideration in transferring Contra Costa County's practice to another agency and county.⁵

Transient Population

Transience is an inherent component of trafficking. Being moved from location to location is a strategy traffickers use to control their victims and evade detection. They are exploiting gaps where communication across systems and jurisdictions is poor or missing entirely. The Bay Area suffers from this greatly given its geographical layout. This makes prosecuting traffickers incredibly difficult; more importantly, it creates a discontinuity of care for victims. Victims are burdened with re-learning where to seek out help, re-establishing their case and continually navigating new systems of care, leading to confusion, gaps in services and engagement fatigue.

Leading by Coalition

The Zero Tolerance for Human Trafficking initiative is formed around a coalition structure with one paid coordinator and several partners who have generously volunteered their time to participate in each committee. The very nature of this structure requires collaboration; however, it does not require participation or follow through. It can be a struggle to reconcile the need to

⁵ Madsen, Alexandra. Personal Interview. 23 February 2017.

produce results in the short run with the equally important need to lay the groundwork for productive collaboration in the long run. Using constructive persuasion skills, building relationships, and using “flatter” management are keys to maintaining momentum and producing results. That, however, is time-consuming and does not always convert effort to outcomes.

Staff Turnover

It is a community-wide effort to meet the myriad of needs of trafficking victims. It takes champions within an organization to promote the collaboration needed to address issues that arise and provide comprehensive services to victims. Champions move on from organizations, though, taking with them the institutional memory of the connections built, innovations created and commitments made to the Zero Tolerance initiative. This can lead to inconsistent participation at committee meetings, shared decision-making, data collection and services for clients.

Data Collection

When done correctly, data analysis is a powerful tool for fine-tuning program design, advocacy, and for leveraging funding. Establishing performance measures is challenging with human trafficking; successes can be difficult to quantify. Arrests and prosecutions are challenging to make. Clients dip in and out of services utilizing multiple providers and travel across county lines making tracking difficult. Working across sectors can lead to challenges in consistent data collection and reporting. Continual training and technical assistance is needed to support service providers so that they are able to input the data correctly and in a timely way, as well as maintain the confidentiality of their clients.

Recommendations for Sonoma County

There is a plethora of rich material to draw from with Contra Costa County's Zero Tolerance initiative. Whereas the Zero Tolerance initiative takes a holistic approach that is inclusive of both labor and sex trafficking as well as adult and child victims, Sonoma County focuses on specialization where groups direct their expertise into specific areas. One such specialized area is CSEC, led mainly by child welfare staff with supporting service providers. The following recommendations distill the information gleaned from Contra Costa County to the child welfare and CSEC context in Sonoma County.

Awareness Raising

Human trafficking is a hidden crime. There is a lack of understanding of how to identify victims of human trafficking, not just by social service agencies, providers and law enforcement, but also by the victims themselves as they may not believe or understand that they are the victims of a crime. Adopting the format the Education and Outreach committee includes educating professionals, institutions and business, which can help address this issue and lead to more support for more youth. Additionally, focused training for caregivers supporting foster youth is critical. Foster youth are vulnerable to being exploited. Supporting caregivers to provide a safe and secure home will help prevent youth running away and engaging in the commercial sex trade in the first place. Partnering with schools and after-school programs is also recommended in order to help them recognize the indicators of trafficking so that they can better identify victims and seek support from child welfare and law enforcement.

Service Coordination

It is essential to ensure all service providers, county partners and law enforcement can be at the table to strategize, coordinate efforts and innovate as the needs of CSEC youth evolve. An

unfortunate consequence of Sonoma County's specialization approach with the Human Trafficking Task Force is that many of the same partners are needed in multiple meetings. As a result, key partners are often missing from the CSEC committee meetings. Adopting the holistic approach Zero Tolerance used for its MDTs would reduce meeting fatigue, therefore, making a more efficient use of each partner's time, which would contribute to more efficient use of resources and continuity of care.

Dollars & Data

It is a heavy lift by a dedicated group to meet the ever-changing and challenging needs of those affected by human trafficking. The tenacity of one person can keep the momentum going by nurturing partnerships, maintaining communication and providing the technical supports needed for those in the field. In a time of economic contraction, it is dubious to pitch investment into a dedicated staff person. However, data could be the key to unlocking dollars to expand funding for these efforts. Current statistics on human trafficking are limited nation-wide, let alone within Sonoma County lines. Currently, different service providers track information about clients in varying ways using different tools. Instituting a common data collection tool would support decision-making efforts to best serve youth locally. Furthermore, it would better position Sonoma County for grant funding to help build upon sustainable efforts and provide much needed information for human trafficking efforts nationally.

Harm Reduction

There are many concrete ideas that can be adopted to make Sonoma County's approach to serving CSEC youth more robust. However, the most profound lesson learned from Contra Costa is not represented in those concrete applications. It is what is interwoven into each agency's

philosophical approach to the work in that they have redefined what success looks like for sex trafficking victims. Harm reduction operationalizes the tenets of trauma-informed care with the recognition that people make risky choices in an effort to manage their trauma and that trauma impacts the ability to discern danger from safety. Using harm reduction as the measure of success has led to a substantial shift from aiming to remove someone from their situation entirely, to providing services, support, and time for a victim to extract themselves from their own situation (while, of course, still supporting them should they want/need to be removed immediately).⁶ Small successes are championed; reducing the number of times a youth runs away, celebrating repeated attendance or check-ins with a service provider and engagement in safety planning. The goal is to reduce the negative consequences of their current situation; to reduce their harm, not their activity.⁷

This shift would be difficult for anyone in child welfare to embrace. Safety of youth is fundamental to the work; agencies are duty-bound to stop abuse. Embracing harm reduction and promoting safety do not need to be mutually exclusive, however. Commercial sexual exploitation necessitates a different approach for supporting youth. Victims are often recruited by peers, they are lured by false ads for modeling, and they are coerced by the promise of stardom on social media sites. Often they are groomed over long periods of time creating an attachment bond to their exploiter and giving them a false sense of security in what they see as a choice of legitimate work, rather than methodical exploitation that leads to sex trafficking.⁸ Harm reduction, meeting

⁶ “What is Harm Reduction for Youth?” *Administration for Children & Families*. U.S. Department of Health & Human Services. 2012 Published. 26 April 2017 Accessed.

⁷ Burroughs, Kathryn. Phone Interview. 14 April 2017.; Frazel, Trudi. Phone Interview. 17 April 2017.

⁸ “Human Trafficking 101.” *Office of Attorney General*. State of Georgia, Date Unknown Published. Web. 21 April, 2017 Accessed.

a youth on his or her own terms and offering a safe space for a youth to access services, can help those experiencing exploitation and engaging in risky behaviors find stability and direction.

Conclusion

CSEC is a burgeoning area of focus for child welfare. As a better understanding of the issue evolves, the approach taken also needs to evolve in order to best support youth with the short- and long-term impacts the exploitation will have had on them. Contra Costa County has valuable tools to help Sonoma County optimize work with partners, engage with law enforcement, and reflect on current modes of practice. It is a project that will take strategic planning as well as internal systems change, but the efforts will strengthen the techniques utilized by the CSEC committee and child welfare staff and yield a more beneficial service delivery for youth.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Contra Costa County for being such a welcoming host, with special thanks to Mickey Williams for orienting me to the Employment and Human Services Department. Thank you to Susun Kim, Executive Director of the Family Justice Center, for sharing her time and multi-disciplinary team documents. Thank you to Trudi Frazel, CSEC Consultant for Child & Family Services, and Kathryn Burroughs, Trauma-Informed Lead for EHSD, for indulging me with informational interviews and being so informative. I would like to give special thanks to Alex Madsen, Human Trafficking Project Coordinator, for providing insights and connections to the Zero Tolerance for Human Trafficking initiative. Finally, I would like to thank my boss, Leslie Winters, for nominating me for this opportunity and providing me the time to fully immerse myself into the BASSC experience.

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