

Guidelines for Trafficking Survivor Engagement in Systems Change Efforts

In recent years, the anti-trafficking movement has increasingly centered the voices and experiences of survivors when designing and implementing programs and services and advocating for systemic change. However, as critical as this development is, trafficking survivor engagement must be done in an intentional, empowering, meaningful, and equitable manner, and approached in a spirit of partnership; otherwise, practitioners risk their efforts feeling tokenistic, exploitative, and even re-traumatizing. This document provides some guiding principles for practitioners who would like to collaborate with survivors in a trauma-informed, mutually beneficial and supportive way.ⁱ

- 1. Engage diverse survivors at all stages of the work, including program design, implementation and evaluation.** Survivors with a wide range of identities and experiences should be at the table in a variety of roles and levels of engagement, including leadership and management, and throughout the process. This starts with decision-making about which sources of funding to pursue and what types of services or initiatives would have the greatest positive impact, and continues through determinations regarding how to effectively implement projects and assess their effectiveness.ⁱⁱ
- 2. Ensure clarity about the ‘ask’ so survivors can make fully informed decisions about whether to participate.** Discuss with each survivor what exactly you are (and are not) requesting of them in order to develop a shared understanding of the partnership, including what their participation will look like, how their input and suggestions will and will not be utilized (and why), and what is and is not possible in the work together. Will the survivor be asked to share their story? Will they be participating in meetings or an Advisory Board, designing and/or co-facilitating a training for practitioners or community members, or testifying before a legislative body? Will they be providing support to people who are currently experiencing trafficking as a paid employee or volunteer? Will they be engaging with traditional and/or social media? Make sure that the survivor’s participation feels substantive and meaningful, and is central to your efforts.
- 3. Provide (prompt) compensation for the survivor’s time at a rate comparable to your consultant or Subject Matter Expert rate.** This is necessary to convey a full measure of respect and appreciation for the survivor’s time and potential vulnerability in participating, and to honor the unique knowledge and expertise they will be contributing to your efforts. In addition,

compensation ensures that participation is financially feasible for survivors, especially when it's in the form of cash or a stipend.

4. **Talk with the survivor in advance about how they would like to be introduced** in terms of their name, gender pronouns and role in the project, as well as whether they would like to be identified as a survivor to others, and if so, what language they prefer, such as survivor-leader or lived experience expert. Also provide survivors with complete agency in deciding when and how their name, image and story are publicized or shared, and do not utilize their name, image and/or story without first securing written consent. In addition, talk with each survivor about any accessibility needs related to language, technology and/or disability, and address these consistently and promptly.
5. **If the survivor is being asked to discuss their trafficking experience, establish clarity beforehand** about the specific purpose and goals; how much detail will be expected, how long they will have to speak, and who the audience will be; whether photos or video will be taken; and whether people will be able to ask questions. In addition, arrange opportunities for one-on-one emotional support beforehand, while telling the story (as needed), immediately afterward, and in the following week in case of any emotional distress or other trauma reactions that arise. Provide compensation for any time spent utilizing these emotional support resources.
6. **Provide individualized opportunities for professional development.** Survivors are more than their lived experience and likely have many different types of skills and knowledge to offer. Have a conversation with each survivor to identify training, peer supports, mentorship, accommodations, benefits, and other resources that can strengthen their contributions to your project as well as their professional growth and skill development more generally. Consider partnering with an educational

institution to offer internships and/or educational credit to survivors for their participation in your project.

7. **Create mechanisms for survivors to provide ongoing feedback about their experience with the collaboration.** Did they feel empowered, respected, and adequately informed? Did they have the support and resources they needed? How did their involvement contribute to, or impede, their well-being? What suggestions do they have for future survivor engagement?

Survivors are the experts in this work and their contributions are integral to our success at preventing trafficking and facilitating safety and healing for individuals and communities.

- i. We also recommend assessing the extent to which your practice is survivor-informed using this tool developed by survivor leaders: https://nhhtac.acf.hhs.gov/htla_self_guided_assessment_tool.pdf.
- ii. For more detailed guidance on engaging survivors in specific stages of program design and development and supporting survivors in paid staff roles, we recommend this resource: [Toolkit for Building Survivor-Informed Organizations \(hhs.gov\)](#).

For More Information

To learn more on trafficking survivor engagement and leadership, and to access the Project HEAL adult and youth curricula and other survivor leadership materials, please visit us at [Human Trafficking | Center for Justice Innovation](#) or email us at dvinfos@innovatingjustice.org.

This product is supported by grant number 2019-VT-BX-K014, awarded by the Office for Victims of Crime, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this product are those of the contributors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.