



# SAFETY PLANNING FOR YOUTH VICTIMS OF SEX TRAFFICKING



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Safety Plans for children and youth who have been trafficked are important in maintaining their physical, psychological, and emotional safety. In association with this, service providers and professionals working with victims of sex trafficking must also establish a safety protocol to protect staff when working with trafficking clients.

## When Should Youth Safety Assessments be Conducted?

It is important to note that safety planning is not a one-time event, but, rather, an ongoing process. As a youth's situation changes, so should his or her safety plan. Safety planning can be a part of standard case meetings with the youth. It is also important for the youth to have a safety plan in place prior to discharge. Safety planning should be conducted/assessed during initial contact with a youth survivor of SCEC or DMST, during regular case meetings with youth, and prior to discharge <sup>1</sup>.

## Imminent Danger

If there is an imminent threat to the youth's safety, call 9-1-1. Once the youth is stabilized, emergency shelter and other basic needs, such as food and housing, should be arranged at the first priority. A safety plan can be established once the youth and their needs are stabilized.

## Who Else Should be Considered in Safety Planning?

It is important to note that in SCEC and DMST situations, safety for individuals beyond just the vulnerable youth should be considered. This is especially true for individuals who are closest to the youth or for those who are assisting in intervention from a SCEC and DMST situation. The youth's family, other caretakers and support systems, and social service providers are also at risk and should take safety precautions.

Just as no two youth are the same, no two safety plans will be exactly the same. When working with a youth and non-offending family members to develop a safety plan, consider a variety of strategies for enhancing safety that are applicable to all individuals based on their situation and preferences.

## A Successful Safety Plan Will: <sup>2</sup>

- Involve the youth
- Assess current and potential risks and safety concerns
- Create strategies for avoiding or reducing the threat of harm
- Identify immediate needs and formulate interventions to meet those needs
- Discuss the youth's triggers which could jeopardize their stability
- Discuss coping mechanisms for triggers and other stressful situations to reduce vulnerability
- Outline actionable steps for a youth to take to stay safe in potentially dangerous situations

<sup>1</sup> *Safety Planning Standards for Trafficked and Enslaved Persons, Safe Horizon, 2004.*

<sup>2</sup> *Safety Planning and Prevention, National Human Trafficking Resource Center, Polaris Project, 2011.s*

## Creating a Safety Plan:

- Ask the youth what will make them feel safe, or what they need to be/feel safe.
- Consider as many scenarios as possible.
- Be very concrete. Ask the “Who?”, “What?”, “Where?”, “When?”, “Why?” and “How?” questions; however do not put undue pressure onto youth to answer all questions if they feel uncomfortable
- Ensure that the plan is realistic and caters to the individual youth
- Practice using the plan during less serious events. Evaluate with the youth afterward and update the plan, if necessary, in potentially dangerous situations

## SAFETY STRATEGIES FOR SURVIVORS LEAVING A TRAFFICKING SITUATION <sup>3</sup>

Youth may leave and return to a trafficker multiple times before leaving for good. A youth who leaves a trafficking situation may feel that they are at risk of physical harm to him/herself or to his or her family, friends, and/or other trafficked youth.

Assisting youth to plan a safety strategy for exiting a trafficking situation when they are ready will help the youth feel prepared to leave more safely. Tips for youth still in a trafficking situation may include:

- Call 911 if in immediate danger
- Plan an escape route or exit strategy and rehearse it, if possible
- Keep any important documents in preparation for an immediate departure
- Prepare a bag with any important documents/items and a change of clothes
- Contact trusted friends or relatives to notify them or ask for assistance
- Contact the National Human Trafficking Resource Center hotline (1-888-373-7888) to obtain local referrals for shelter or other social services

## SAFETY STRATEGIES FOR SURVIVORS WHO HAVE LEFT A TRAFFICKING SITUATION

Some youth may have already left the trafficking situation. It is important for youth who have exited the situation to maintain a safety strategy for themselves. Some tips for youth include:

- Vary travel habits and daily routine
- Consider taking out a protective order against the trafficker so he or she is legally prohibited from contacting the youth
- Keep cell phone charged
- Block trafficker on cell phone and on any social media
- Keep any court documents and emergency numbers with them in case of emergency
- Consider changing their username on social media and changing the image to something the trafficker won't recognize.
- If possible, avoid visiting the same places or cultural communities the trafficker frequents
- Keep and emergency cell phone at all times
- Consider changing phone numbers so the trafficker cannot call or text the youth.
- Identify trusted friends or family. If possible, work with the youth to memorize the phone number of a family member or friend.
- Inform trusted family/friends/co-workers where they are going, when they expect to arrive, and when they expect to return home.
- Identify coping strategies to prevent youth from coming vulnerable in stressful situations
- Contact the National Human Trafficking Resource Center hotline (1-888-373-7888) to obtain local referrals for shelter or other social services.

<sup>3</sup> New York State Office of Children and Family Services (2016) *Responding to Commercially Sexually Exploited and Trafficked Youth: A Handbook for Child Serving Professionals*, 23-25.

# SAFETY STRATEGIES FOR STAFF AND OTHER YOUTH

Traffickers may view service agencies as a barrier between them and the youth and make threats or show up to the service site. This can put the youth, staff, and other youth receiving services at risk. Some tips to make providing services safer for staff and other youth include:

- Make sure the agency's location is confidential, if appropriate. If possible, do not list the agency's address on its website or identify the building with signs.
- Keep case managers direct phone number or extension confidential
- Block office and cell phone numbers from being displayed when making outgoing calls
- If the youth is based in the same area as the trafficker, see the youth in a space away from this region.
- If meeting with youth in the community, meet in a public space as appropriate.
- Use rental or unmarked agency cars for youth-related travel when necessary so that vehicles cannot be traced to the organization, staff, or survivor
- If working in the community or conducting home visits, staff should tell a colleague where they are going and when to be expected back.
- Utilize law enforcement if necessary and appropriate
- Avoid publicity and media. Public attention can compromise staff and youth safety, and can hinder ongoing investigations by law enforcement

Using a trauma-informed and victim-centered approach is always important when working with victims and survivors of domestic minor sex trafficking. These suggestions for safety planning are not all-inclusive, but are meant to increase opportunities for safety and to begin discussions for agency protocol.



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