



# KNOWLEDGE TO ACTION BRIEF: Recommendations to improve services for domestically sex trafficked persons

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## CONTEXT

Human trafficking is a critical human rights issue and among the fastest growing and most profitable crimes globally. In Canada, federal and provincial governments have prioritized the development of strategies to respond to human and sex trafficking, reduce its incidence, and identify its victims.<sup>1,2</sup> This work is urgent. Despite the difficulty in gathering reliable data on these largely hidden crimes, existing police-reported statistics indicate that trafficking in persons is on the rise in Canada, with Ontario recognized as a centre for domestic sex trafficking.<sup>1,3</sup> However, responses to address domestic sex trafficking vary across regions and among professions with limited and underdeveloped best practices to facilitate work with service users. As social service providers fill diverse roles in the community and are one of the groups most likely to come into contact with domestically sex trafficked persons,<sup>4,5</sup> they can provide valuable information necessary to transform the supports provided to sex trafficked persons.

## METHOD

Fifteen interviews were conducted with social service providers in Ontario between January and February 2022 (see <sup>6</sup> for more details). Fourteen open-ended questions centred on better understanding these providers' knowledge, attitudes, and practices. Interview transcripts were analyzed using a thematic qualitative analytic approach.<sup>7</sup> One key theme to emerge was 'facilitators to care', which underpin the following recommendations to improve services and supports for domestically sex trafficked persons. Recommendations, reported under two organizing categories ('Address gaps in service provision' and 'Recognize the unique needs of survivors'), are supported by one or more representative quotes.

## AUDIENCE

ADVOCATES  
SERVICE PROVIDERS  
ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERS  
FUNDERS  
POLICYMAKERS  
GOVERNMENT DECISION-MAKERS

## DEFINITIONS

**Human trafficking:**  
"Recruiting, transporting, receiving, holding, concealing, or harbouring a person...for the purpose of exploiting them"<sup>2</sup>

**Sex trafficking:**  
"Recruiting, moving, or holding victims for sexual exploitation," often characterized by intimidation and force to coerce victims to "provid[e] sexual services"<sup>8</sup>

**Domestic sex trafficking:**  
Sex trafficking occurring solely within a country's borders<sup>2</sup>

## ADDRESS GAPS IN SERVICE PROVISION

### Recommendation 1:

Jointly mobilize community, healthcare, and criminal-legal services.

*"I think collaboration is always helpful, not just for the client, but for us as service providers as well too, because we can coordinate supports, make sure we're not doing the same things ... [we can] delegate responsibilities. ... Being a united front ... can make a huge difference for the client."*

*"It [collaboration across services] allows the client to have a more holistic approach to their treatment where all the areas where they need support are being looked after and they have more people in their corner, so to speak. ... [I]t challenges the viewpoint or their worldview a little more because now instead of having one person fighting for them, it's now two, or three, or four people."*

**Impact:** Collaborative, coordinated services enable the smooth and rapid referral of sex trafficked service users to needed support; ensure a continuum of care; facilitate safety planning, knowledge sharing, and collective advocacy; and reduce barriers to access.

**Recommendation 2:** Institute local/regional case conferencing tables across the province to respond to individual sex trafficked service users' complex needs.

*"[W]e have the table [in a Northern Ontario township] ... to ensure that we have all our bases covered in the event that someone presents as being trafficked. ... [D]epending on what they [sex trafficked persons] need and what they want. So if they need mental health counselling, if they need drug or addiction counselling, if they need supportive housing, ... we would ... ensure that whatever needs they ask for are being met."*

**Impact:** Community case conferences take place at regular intervals and bring together a range of professionals to strategize ways to comprehensively support individual service users, while leveraging the capacity of multiple service organizations to share emerging knowledge and best practices and identify service gaps.

**Recommendation 3:** Service providers accompany service users to initial healthcare, social service, and related appointments.

*"[T]here's been situations ... that [at a client's] first meeting they feel better if their ... caseworker goes with them because they're a known person. [I]t can be intimidating to walk in the door by yourself of a new agency, and have to introduce yourself, and tell your story. And so, if you've got your caseworker with you and they know the agency, they can do the introductions and then we back out."*

**Impact:** Accompaniment of service providers with whom service users already have a relationship can reduce anxiety and ensure access to and advocacy within care.

**Recommendation 4:** Establish wraparound services.

*"Clients are able to come daily on a walk-in basis [to a community hub in a smaller city] and meet with mental health workers, see the clinic. ... We're just at a desk out in the open. Clients can approach us with whatever needs they might have; we're sort of present in this environment instead and available for service to clients who might need it. ... Because you're kind of immersed in their world, versus them having to come at a scheduled time to our office in a completely different environment."*

*"[The] same case worker is going to do everything. So they don't have to send them off to another department, or another person that does child care, or another person that does housing. .... When that one case worker can do everything, they really establish a good relationship. And it's based on trust because they get a fulsome look at ... all the different facets of their life and what's happening. And then that one case worker can literally kind of wrap around them, and do everything that we can using the tools in our toolbox."*

**Impact:** Integrated services, which provide the range of requisite supports that sex trafficked persons may access by one or more professionals in a single location, reduce barriers associated with referral processes and are uniquely responsive to service users' immediate concerns.

**Recommendation 5:** Offer specialized sex trafficking programming and/or supports.

*"I think that if I was aware that somebody had been sex trafficked, I would be looking for more specialized programming for them to manage and cope, and heal post-sex trafficking. ... Because I do think that is not just like, 'okay like let's go and talk to the mental health counsellor.' I do think that there's a lot more to heal from."*

**Impact:** Sex trafficking services, staffed by professionals with expertise in sex trafficking, have the capacity to appropriately and comprehensively respond to sex trafficked service users and can guide nonspecialized providers in their work and reduce revictimization.

**Recommendation 6:** Increase the availability of appropriate shelter options.

*"[W]e need to remove a lot of barriers in housing and shelter and supports. ... Transitional housing is one of the key pieces we're missing."*

*"If someone's homeless, how do you say, 'I need you to go to this employment program every day to be ready for a job' when they're worried about where they're going to sleep that night?" ... [R]ight now with the housing crisis, there isn't safe and affordable housing out there. Or what is out there is so ridiculously expensive, someone that is in receipt of social services is not going to be able to afford it."*

**Impact:** Safe and secure temporary and/or long-term housing is key to the recovery of sex trafficked persons, facilitating their ability to access and participate in other supportive programming.

## RECOGNIZE THE UNIQUE NEEDS OF SURVIVORS

**Recommendation 7:** Develop and implement sex trafficking-specific curricula, training, and practice guidelines.

*"You have to be with survivors in dark places and be comfortable sitting with them in those moments and helping them through that. There's so much trauma that comes with being trafficked. So, you need to have a background and understand trauma-informed care and anti-oppressive practices. Also being aware of your own privilege and how that can impact the work you do is important."*

**Impact:** Educational initiatives that address sex trafficking increase service providers' awareness of the issue and competence to effectively respond to service users.

**Recommendation 8:** Employ a survivor-informed approach when working with service users who may be sex trafficked.

*"[M]y priorities might look vastly different than their [sex trafficked person's] priorities. And so, I think it needs to be survivor-led and they need to identify what's most important for them. Because for some people, it might be reunit[ing] with their child, some people it might be housing, some people it might be being able to find their next fix."*

*"I will listen to what the survivors have to say before I listen to what Harvard has to say, because I really believe people who lived it should explain it."*

**Impact:** An approach that centres service users at the forefront of care is empowering and prioritizes their self-identified needs and wishes.

**Recommendation 9:** Prioritize building trust and rapport with service users being or suspected of being sex trafficked.

*"It's really taking the time to get to know somebody [a service user] and figuring out what their needs are and having those open conversations. And if somebody doesn't disclose right away, but you're suspecting it, it's keeping that line of communication open and maybe asking again in a different way. But sometimes if you suspect it, you don't necessarily need to know, you just need to keep providing that support. And you need to be able to just listen because they still need the support whether they're ready to disclose or not."*

**Impact:** Trust and rapport, which can take time to develop in the context of sex trafficking, facilitate disclosure while building the requisite foundation to address sex trafficking and its impacts.

## CONCLUSION

Across facilitators to care, social service providers pointed to a lack of **financial resources** as a unifying concern, prohibitive to their efforts to adequately serve sex trafficked service users.

*“What makes the job difficult is the lack of financial resources in our country. Without money, how do you expect providers to help these young people? What do you want me to do with them if there's no money [for example] for housing? ... [E]ven the young girls I've worked with who are survivors, because there's a lack of resources, they resort to sometimes dangerous behaviour to survive.”*

To meaningfully shift the ways in which sex trafficking is addressed, sufficient funding must be directed to domestic sex trafficking-related interventions. Social service providers, who are critical to the response to sex trafficking, have generated concrete, potentially impactful suggestions that, if appropriately resourced, could form the basis of improved services and supports for survivors; the time to act on them is now.

## REFERENCES

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