



## Unifying Trauma-Informed Practices and Voices of Survivor Leadership

*This narrative was written by a consultant for the Network funded by the TIP Office. The purpose of the Network is to engage experts, particularly those with lived experience of human trafficking, to provide expertise and input on Department of State anti-trafficking policies, strategies, and products. The author has a range of expertise related to human trafficking, marginalized communities, trauma recovery, education, mental health care, and survivor leadership.*

Over the past decade, two of the most highlighted conversations in the anti-trafficking movement have centered on the need to incorporate trauma-informed practices into anti-trafficking work and to invite survivors into leadership positions within organizations. As the anti-trafficking community has grappled with how to integrate these ideals, it often conflates them. For example, organizations will prioritize hiring a survivor as a staff member or consultant and then equate that action with becoming a fully trauma-informed entity, while failing to use a trauma-informed approach to care, which often retraumatizes individuals receiving services. This limited approach to realizing both goals causes harm, especially when those organizations then claim they are “survivor-informed” but only focus on the survivor’s story or benefits to the organization and decline to implement the survivors’ recommendations or consider their feedback. Disrespecting survivor leaders and their experiences hurts and further exploits survivors, who are key stakeholders in the anti-trafficking movement, and it ultimately perpetuates a harmful and deficient understanding of what it means to be survivor-informed. These dual harms raise the need for additional trainings to teach organizations how to properly incorporate survivor feedback and adopt a comprehensive, trauma-informed approach in practice.

Organizations must incorporate the voices of multiple survivors into their trauma-informed practices. Outlined below is a description of what it means to be both trauma- and survivor-informed, as well as recommendations on integrating both approaches as one, comprehensive effort.

### TRAUMA-INFORMED

Trauma-informed practices build upon understanding the impact of trauma not only on individuals seeking services but also on all staff members and consultants working within an organization. As such, vicarious trauma and the mental health needs of all consultants and staff members should also be prioritized, as opposed to singling out survivor leaders as the only individuals affected by trafficking or other sources of trauma. Because trauma-informed practices assume that every human being has experienced trauma of some kind, organizational structures should reflect the need for sensitivity and care surrounding all interactions and communications.

According to the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), a trauma-informed lens upholds each person as an active agent of their own recovery process, the ability of individuals to recognize symptoms of trauma in others, and the integration of a “do no harm” approach into the creation of policies, procedures, and practices. In addition, SAMHSA’s *Six Key Principles of a Trauma-Informed Approach* refers to the necessity of creating and protecting psychological and physical safety within the organization, fostering trust through transparency, providing peer support, and leveling power differences through collaboration, empowerment, and cultural humility.



## **SURVIVOR-INFORMED**

In 2013, the United States' *Federal Strategic Action Plan on Services for Victims of Human Trafficking in the United States (Plan)* identified the importance of engaging with survivors in decision-making processes as anti-trafficking leaders. Federal agencies responded by sharing plans to apply a survivor-informed approach for human trafficking. In 2015, the U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking was established to advise federal agencies on their anti-trafficking policies and programs, including on the application of this approach to their efforts. Despite the attention towards and growth in understanding of a survivor-informed approach, gaps arose in how different agencies and organizations in various settings applied it. To address these gaps, the 2017 Human Trafficking Leadership Academy fellows, organized by the Department of Health and Human Services' National Human Trafficking Training and Technical Assistance Center (NHTTAC), defined a survivor-informed practice as the "meaningful input from a diverse community of survivors at all stages of a program or project, including development, implementation and evaluation."

The integration of survivor leadership and trauma-informed practices requires inclusive interactions with survivors of all forms of human trafficking with a diversity of perspectives, such as gender, national origin, race, and sexuality. It is essential to have various survivor voices lending feedback into all areas of an organization's work. Organizations must listen to survivors and determine how best to adapt practices that honor and incorporate their input. This process includes evaluating programs and policies with humility and commitment to change wherever possible, even where those changes will be difficult to implement. It also must include supporting additional research on the brain's response to trauma and on the ways traffickers adapt their criminal enterprises to societal changes. Organizations can set themselves up for success in a manner that is adaptive—not stagnant—to meet the evolving challenges of anti-trafficking efforts by mindfully weaving together survivor-leadership and trauma-informed approaches for the collective good of all who engage in anti-trafficking spaces.

Organizations might be in different stages of understanding and implementing trauma-informed and survivor-centered processes. The following recommendations may be applicable for organizations at multiple stages of integration.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CONTINUED GROWTH IN THE INTEGRATION PROCESS**

### *Hiring Survivors and Ensuring a Trauma-informed Work Environment*

- Invite a diversity of lived experience experts to be part of organizational staffing, not only because of what they have survived but also for the professional skills and expertise they offer. When asking for the opinions and suggestions of these voices, be a conscious listener and follow through with implementing changes. Communicate updates on the progression of these changes.
- Create protocols for what all staff should do if they feel exploited by the organization or individuals within the organization.
- Recognize that trauma is not unique to an individual who identifies as a survivor leader; it has affected the entire team in distinct ways. The way survivors in leadership positions are treated should mirror the way that staff members without lived experience of human trafficking are treated, and vice versa.
- Implement intentional self-care as part of organizational culture to build resilience and help mitigate vicarious trauma, including executive leadership modeling self-care best practices and encouraging staff to engage in healthy coping skills and take care of their emotional and physical health. Organizations can also implement paid mental health days, self-care plans as part of employee reviews, and organization-wide education encompassing individual wellness.

### *Empowering Survivors in the Workplace*

- Never ask survivors in leadership, or in any other role, to share their story and never share their story for them.
- Empower survivors to outgrow the label of only a survivor. Treat them as more than the trauma they have experienced and foster their strengths so, if they desire, they could successfully run the organization or get a job in the field of their choice.
- Design opportunities for survivors in the organization to receive continuing education on leadership and professional development.

### *Establishing Administrative Processes for a Trauma-informed Workplace*

- Ensure that benefits include mental health care for all staff members, including any survivors that are hired.
- Prioritize and institutionalize survivor engagement by creating a budget line within the organization for consultations with lived experience experts.
- Compensate survivors in leadership commensurate with other leadership.
- Employ a third-party reviewer to assess the organization's integration of survivor leadership and trauma-informed approaches.

For tips on how to build a survivor-informed organization, please see the NHTTAC toolkit on this topic. If looking for more information on survivor-informed best practices, please see NHTTAC's Survivor-Informed Practice: Definition, Best Practices, and Recommendations.

