SAFE
HOUSE
PROJECT

STAFF TRAINING STANDARDS & EXPECTATIONS

CONTINUED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN ANTI-TRAFFICKING PROGRAMS

REBECCA STROBEL

LIBERTY SARKAR, SW

KATHLEEN ARNOLD, MSW

AMANDA PULLEY, MSW

SOPHIA DAI

INTRODUCTION

Over a decade ago, one author walked into her first shift at a residential safe home with nothing more than good intentions and a handful of shadowing sessions. She didn't have her bachelor's degree yet, and her "training" consisted of following another staff member around for a few days, picking up fragments of knowledge here and there. Then, suddenly, she found herself alone, the sole person responsible for a house full of trafficking survivors, each carrying their own complex trauma and needs.

Night after night, she navigated crisis situations by instinct, second-guessing every decision. When a resident had a panic attack, she offered what comfort she could, but wondered if she was saying the right things. When behavioral challenges arose, she responded as best she knew how, but feared she might be making things worse. The sporadic check-ins from a supervisor provided little guidance, leaving her to piece together her own understanding of trauma responses, triggers, and healing. She watched dedicated colleagues burn out and leave, replaced by equally well-meaning but equally unprepared new staff who would start the same cycle of trial and error all over again.

Years later, when she started at a new safe home, something remarkable happened. During her first week, she was sent to a formal trauma-informed care training. As the facilitator began explaining the neurobiological impacts of trauma, giving names to behaviors she had witnessed countless times, tears filled her eyes. She learned someone had put language to what she had spent years trying to understand on her own. The hypervigilance, the attachment difficulties, the seeming "regression", suddenly it all made sense. She wasn't witnessing character flaws or manipulation; she was seeing the predictable responses of nervous systems that had been hijacked by exploitation and abuse.

In that moment, she felt immense hope for the future; hope that no other staff member would have to feel as lost as she had, fumbling through the darkness of their own inexperience. Hope that survivors would no longer have to endure the tumultuous nature of untrained staff trying to figure it out, burning out, and being replaced by yet another well-meaning but unprepared person who would have to start from scratch. This experience ignited her passion for quality training and showed her firsthand the critical importance of shared language, evidence-based practices, and learning from those who have gone before us.

This story reflects a broader challenge across the anti-trafficking field: the gap between good intentions and adequate preparation. Many dedicated professionals enter this work with compassion and commitment but without the structured foundation necessary to provide consistent, trauma-informed care. The consequences of this gap extend beyond individual staff experiences; they directly impact survivors who depend on knowledgeable, well-prepared teams for their healing and recovery.

Anti-trafficking programs operate in a highly changeable, emotionally complex field that requires a fragile balance of flexibility, structure, and ongoing development. This requires staff teams to have a high level of preparation and competency to maintain the program's stability, but this standard can be very difficult to achieve without a comprehensive structure for ongoing training. Because survivors of human trafficking enter recovery programs with an increased need for consistency and security, every staff interaction and operational policy has the potential to either strengthen their sense of safety or undermine it. Comprehensive training and a culture of ongoing improvement and learning are essential to ensuring that every team member is prepared to meet this responsibility.

This white paper examines current challenges in staff training and professional standards across the anti-trafficking field and offers actionable, evidence-based recommendations for building sustainable, survivor-centered workforce development. Drawing from research, survivor insights, and established best practices in trauma care, this paper presents a framework that addresses the training needs of leadership, operational staff, and direct care staff.

The process of preparing and supporting staff in anti-trafficking programs is inherently complex. Programs must equip their teams with the skills necessary to respond to high-stress situations, navigate the emotional demands of trauma recovery work, and remain survivor-centered, while also providing leaders with the tools to foster healthy team dynamics and long-term staff retention. Without structured training, consistent onboarding models, and regular continuing education, programs risk creating variable staff readiness, higher turnover, and decreased survivor outcomes.

By embedding trauma-informed principles and evidence-based practices into training for all staff members, programs can create a shared foundation of knowledge and understanding. Continuing education, sourced from clinical expertise, peer-reviewed research, the insights of lived experience experts, and leaders in the anti-trafficking field, keeps teams connected to emerging best practices and innovative approaches. In this framework, training must include leadership development, as effective leaders shape organizational culture, support staff well-being, and sustain program stability.

The recommendations in this white paper outline a pathway to more consistent, high-quality survivor care by prioritizing comprehensive staff readiness, ongoing professional growth, and intentional leadership cultivation. Programs that invest in these areas will not only reduce staff burnout and turnover, but also create safer, more stable, and more empowering experiences for survivors.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

GAPS IN STAFF TRAINING & PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS

Safe house programs are on the front lines of supporting survivors of human trafficking, often operating with limited funding and growing demand for specialized services. These programs are staffed with compassionate, mission-driven teams doing extraordinary work every day. However, despite best intentions and tireless dedication, many programs face considerable challenges in maintaining consistent rhythms of professional development and ongoing training for their staff. An absence of standardized expectations for training, limited access to applicable continuing education, and a lack of funding allocated to hire licensed or highly trained professionals can all impact the quality and consistency of survivor care.

While many organizations invest in training for their frontline and direct care staff, professional development for managers and executive leadership is frequently delayed or deprioritized due to resource constraints. This may result in organizations having conflicting policies or strategies between direct care and administration teams, affecting the provision of survivor care or day-to-day operations. Without adequate training in trauma-informed supervision, team dynamics, and adaptive leadership, even the most well-intentioned leaders may struggle to support their teams effectively or keep pace with emerging best practices in the field. When management cannot meet or maintain high standards of leadership practices, the consequences may be highly damaging to the organization, including high turnover rates, low morale and emotional stability, and missed opportunities to build a culture of resilience, trust, and shared purpose within teams as a whole [1].

At the same time, many anti-trafficking programs have not implemented comprehensive onboarding processes due to the strain on their existing team members, including high caseloads and tasks due to being understaffed. The high turnover rates due to burnout and lack of well-being support often result in residential programs hiring very quickly to maintain the ratio of staff to clients, leading to rushed hiring, onboarding, and training processes.

A lack of clear onboarding models may result over time in variable levels of competency among staff members, which can magnify the stress of the entire team. In these situations, new staff may begin working with survivors before they have had enough time to build the necessary understanding of trauma-informed best practices, de-escalation processes, or the organization's policies around safe, ethical, and empowering service delivery. This can place both survivors and staff at risk of emotional disengagement, and it is a common factor in high levels of compassion fatigue, vicarious trauma, and burnout among direct care teams [2]. Without early, consistent, and systematic training in trauma-informed best practices and trafficking-specific care, team members may inadvertently escalate situations, misinterpret behaviors, or retraumatize survivors through well-meaning but improper responses [3].

Even among programs that have comprehensive onboarding processes, many have no consistent plan for continuing education. With the dynamic nature of the anti-trafficking field, where research into trauma care, neuroscience, the impact of cultural competency, and therapeutic interventions is constantly evolving, implementing and investing in ongoing training is critical. However, many survivor care programs lack the structure or resources to provide regular, evidence-based professional development to their staff. Without these opportunities, staff risk falling behind on new modalities and survivor-informed practices that could significantly enhance the quality of their care [3]. This has created a growing disparity in service quality across the field, between anti-trafficking programs, and between individual staff members in the same organization [1].

This obstacle of inadequate training structures is particularly problematic for new and growing anti-trafficking programs. Without established and readily available training frameworks or a recommended set of core competencies for new staff, many organizations are left to design ongoing training processes from scratch. These efforts may result in training that is either too narrow in focus or inconsistently applied across organizational roles, deepening gaps in understanding and unity. Some programs focus heavily on administrative or process training, but lack comprehensive education on trauma-informed care, cultural responsiveness, or clinically-appropriate behavioral supports [1] [4], while the opposite is true for others. However, both sectors of professional

[1] Stoklosa, H., Bosson, R., & Farrell, S. (2022). Human trafficking: Addressing the chiasmic training gap through a train-the-trainers model. Academic Medicine 97(11S): p S144. doi: 10.1097/ACM.0000000000004879

[2] Berberena, N.E. (2023). Exploring the relationship between role stress, compassion fatigue, and compassion satisfaction with burnout in human sex trafficking service providers. School of Psychology & Counseling, Regent University. https://www.proquest.com/openview/9dab31e43a85bf046bbbcef907edf96b/1?cbl=18750&diss=y&pq-origsite=gscholar

[3] Wakabi, B.M. (2016). Leadership style and staff retention in organizations. International Journal of Science & Research, 5(1), 412-416. https://www.ijsr.net/archive/v5i1/NOV152642.pdf

[4] Zimmerman, C., Hossain, M., & Watts, C. (2011). Human trafficking and health: A conceptual model to inform policy, intervention and research. Social Science & Medicine (1982), 73(2), 327–335. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2011.05.028

development are essential to creating and sustaining highly effective anti-trafficking programs. When either is inadequately implemented or missing from standard training processes, survivors may receive incomplete or negligent care, and the field as a whole may lose the ability to evaluate comparable outcomes or scale best practices nationally [5].

Additionally, many anti-trafficking organizations rely heavily on internal training systems. While essential for operational consistency, these systems can be limited in scope and make it difficult to keep up-to-date with national best practices and modalities. Staff who are only trained in-house may miss valuable opportunities to learn from clinical experts, peer-reviewed research, or survivor leaders offering insight into their lived expertise, their own experiences in healing services, and effective practices for direct care [6]. Without access to emerging and interdisciplinary perspectives, anti-trafficking programs risk falling into knowledge silos and depending on outdated or incomplete approaches to survivor care [7]. This can be very detrimental, as shifting or inconsistent expectations between staff members with varying levels of experience or training can make trust extremely difficult for survivors.

These training limitations among trafficking recovery programs may be compounded by limited budgets to employ licensed clinicians, mental health professionals, or medical staff with experience working with traumatized populations. Survivors often enter programs with a combination of complex psychological conditions, physical health needs, or substance use disorders [8]. In the absence of on-staff licensed providers, employees may be asked to respond to situations beyond their training, increasing the risk of becoming overwhelmed and burned out, as well as decreasing survivor safety and consistency of care [5]. Licensed professionals bring vital clinical insight, regulatory expertise, and deep therapeutic understanding to anti-trafficking programs that significantly enhance the quality and effectiveness of survivor care, making them essential members of sustainable teams.

The health of anti-trafficking organizations also depends on strong, supportive leadership and staff who are not in direct care. When leaders are not equipped with the skills and tools to build and guide resilient teams, programs are far more likely to suffer from miscommunication, high turnover rates, and unclear responsibilities and survivor outcomes [7]. In contrast, leadership development that includes trauma-informed supervision, strengths-based coaching, and relational accountability fosters healthier team dynamics and longer staff retention. When leaders model continuous learning and prioritize their own professional growth alongside their team, they lay a foundation of steady growth that strengthens the organization.

Throughout the anti-trafficking field, a lack of standardized training expectations, inconsistent availability of updated educational materials, and underinvestment in licensed staff members and leadership development hinder programs' ability to provide sustainable, effective care to survivors.

[5] Zimmerman, C., Hossain, M., & Watts, C. (2011). Human trafficking and health: A conceptual model to inform policy, intervention and research. Social Science & Medicine (1982), 73(2), 327–335. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2011.05.028

[6] Evelyn Asianab (2023). Influence of leadership styles on staff retention: A review of literature. International Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies and Innovative Research, 11(2), 26-34. doi:10.53075/Ijmsirq/6414345647747

[7] Stoklosa, H., Bosson, R., & Farrell, S. (2022). Human trafficking: Addressing the chiasmic training gap through a train-the-trainers model. Academic Medicine 97(11S): p S144. doi: 10.1097/ACM.0000000000004879

[8] Lederer, L.J. & Wetzel, C.A. (2014). The health consequences of sex trafficking and their implications for identifying victims in healthcare facilities. Annals of Health Law, 23(1). https://www.icmec.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Health-Consequences-of-Sex-Trafficking-and-Implications-for-Identifying-Victims-Lederer.pdf

THE CASE FOR HIGHER TRAINING & DEVELOPMENT STANDARDS

Trafficking recovery programs play a critical role in stabilizing and supporting trafficking survivors throughout their healing journeys, but they require clear structures and continual investment to carry out this work effectively and sustainably. Staff members are most effective when they have access to consistent training, support, and development tools, and building this capacity begins with aligning expectations and standards.

STANDARDIZED TRAINING CURRICULUM

There is a growing need across the anti-trafficking field for standardized training expectations for all employees entering direct survivor care roles. Staff often come from a diverse range of professional, educational, and personal backgrounds, and while this range of experience enriches a program's perspective, it also results in widely varying levels of readiness, understanding, and skill. Without a shared foundation in key knowledge areas, such as trauma-informed care, cultural responsiveness, de-escalation techniques, and trafficking dynamics, programs risk providing care to survivors that is inconsistent, ineffective, or unintentionally harmful [9] [10] [11].

Standardized training works to both ensure minimum competency and establish a common language and professional identity across the anti-trafficking field. Direct care staff must be able to recognize trauma responses, understand the neurobiological and behavioral impacts of trafficking, and respond with appropriate tools and empathy. A consistent training baseline ensures that all survivors, regardless of the program they enter, receive comprehensive care that is grounded in safety, respect, and evidence-based practice.

The absence of uniform training expectations and curriculum also makes accountability and quality assurance more difficult within and across trafficking recovery programs. Inadequately trained employees may begin working with survivors without knowing how to navigate disclosure protocols, conduct risk assessments, or respond safely to clinical crises. In these situations, well-intentioned but misinformed actions can quickly escalate into harmful incidents. When programs adopt standardized curriculum frameworks, they are better positioned to measure staff readiness to move into direct care roles, improve evaluation procedures for both staff and programs, and reduce the likelihood of preventable harm to survivors in care.

Since most survivors engage with multiple service providers throughout their healing journey, standardization in training helps ensure continuity of care across agencies and geographic regions. Field-wide training standards fill critical gaps in onboarding processes throughout the field and align staff practices with the complex realities of recovery from exploitation [11].

ONGOING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The anti-trafficking field changes rapidly as new response models and tools emerge, updated research and best practices are established, and service providers adapt to shifts in trafficking tactics and survivor needs. For direct care staff to remain effective, they must have access to frequently updated training and professional development opportunities.

Ongoing education equips organizations to maintain compliance with best practices and strengthens the quality and consistency of survivor care. It provides space and a framework for staff to reflect on the effectiveness of their current practices, learn from real-world case studies, and adjust their approach to direct survivor care based on the most updated research on trauma, neurobiology, therapeutic modalities, and cultural competency. Without structured opportunities for continued learning, staff may unintentionally rely on outdated techniques or adopt rigid routines that decrease their overall impact. Over time, stagnation can lead to disengagement, burnout, and disconnection from evidence-based best practices [9] [12], damaging survivor outcomes.

Research recommends a minimum of 20 hours of continuing education per year focused on trauma care, emerging best practices, and organizational stability [11] [12]. Consistency in staff development not only builds professional longevity and

[9] Stoklosa, H., Bosson, R., & Farrell, S. (2022). Human trafficking: Addressing the chiasmic training gap through a train-the-trainers model. Academic Medicine 97(11S): p S144. doi: 10.1097/ACM.0000000000004879

[10] Zimmerman, C., Hossain, M., & Watts, C. (2011). Human trafficking and health: A conceptual model to inform policy, intervention and research. Social Science & Medicine (1982), 73(2), 327–335. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2011.05.028

[11] Wakabi, B.M. (2016). Leadership style and staff retention in organizations. International Journal of Science & Research, 5(1), 412-416. https://www.ijsr.net/archive/v5i1/NOV 152642.pdf

[12] Berberena, N.E. (2023). Exploring the relationship between role stress, compassion fatigue, and compassion satisfaction with burnout in human sex trafficking service providers. School of Psychology & Counseling, Regent University. https://www.proquest.com/openview/9dab31e43a85bf046bbbcef907edf96b/1?cbl=18750&diss=y&pq-origsite=gscholar

emotional resilience — it also signals to team members that their growth and professional well-being are a priority. When staff feel supported in advancing their skills, they are more likely to remain engaged, perform at a high level, and contribute to a stable and effective care environment.

COMPREHENSIVE ONBOARDING

Staff onboarding plays a critical role in shaping the effectiveness and stability of a program. It provides new team members with a clear understanding of their responsibilities, introduces core practices and values of the program, and establishes the knowledge base and skillset necessary for professional competence. When onboarding is rushed or inconsistently applied, staff may enter direct care roles without sufficient preparation, thereby increasing the likelihood of early burnout, uncertainty, and avoidable errors that can impact both survivor safety and program integrity [13].

Additionally, inadequate preparation can directly impact survivors' ability to adjust to the program. Many survivors exit a trafficking situation in survival mode, or a state of hypervigilance, which increases their sensitivity to inconsistent behaviors, expectations, or tone from program staff. Consistent, predictable onboarding and operational practices help to minimize the trauma responses that survivors experience as they enter a new program.

A robust onboarding process should be viewed as an integrated and progressive pathway rather than a single event. Research recommends that orientation procedures for trafficking recovery programs include a minimum of 80 hours of supervised shadowing, exposure to real-time care settings, training on trauma-informed approaches, and a phased transition into direct care responsibilities [14] [15]. Staff should also receive thorough instruction on organizational policies, decision-making protocols, emergency response plans, confidentiality procedures, decision-making protocols, emergency response plans, confidentiality, and documentation practices. This structure allows new employees to build the necessary skillset, learn by example from experienced employees, ask questions in a supportive setting, and gradually adjust to the emotional intensity of the work in a supportive environment.

Comprehensive orientation approaches are extremely beneficial for organizations as well, as they are far more likely to retain

staff longer, reduce early and preventable burnout, and maintain higher standards of survivor care. These outcomes contribute to greater organizational sustainability and consistency in survivor support.

COMPETITIVE COMPENSATION

The work of licensed professionals, such as clinical social workers, trauma therapists, and mental health professionals, is essential to serving trafficking survivors, most of whom experience a combination of complex trauma histories, co-occurring mental health conditions, and chronic physical and behavioral health issues. These realities require a level of clinical support beyond the capabilities of unlicensed or generalist staff, making the roles of clinical social workers, licensed professional counselors, trauma-informed therapists, and other clinical mental health care providers essential to the stabilization and long-term healing of survivors [16].

Unfortunately, many trafficking recovery programs struggle to hire and retain these critical staff due to a lack of competitive compensation throughout the field. Private practices, hospital systems, and government-funded health systems are likely to offer higher salaries and better benefits, leaving programs unable to compete for highly qualified candidates. With limited and often restricted funding sources, programs may simply be unable to offer compensation packages that reflect the credentials, liability, and scope of practice associated with licensed clinicians [16]. This gap leads many candidates to accept roles outside of the anti-trafficking field, and results in many programs relying on unlicensed staff, interns, or peer mentors to respond to complex clinical needs that far exceed their training.

However, the work of trafficking recovery programs simply cannot continue without licensed staff members. In their absence, other employees may be asked or expected to operate outside of their scope and ability to fill the gaps, leading to greater risk of harm for survivors, the staff, and the organization as a whole. In contrast, programs that employ licensed clinicians report higher survivor retention and more stable care outcomes [16]. The regulatory expertise of these key professionals helps programs align with best practices, compliance requirements, and ethical standards, and should be prioritized throughout the field.

[13] Berberena, N.E. (2023). Exploring the relationship between role stress, compassion fatigue, and compassion satisfaction with burnout in human sex trafficking service providers. School of Psychology & Counseling, Regent University. https://www.proquest.com/openview/9dab31e43a85bf046bbbcef907edf96b/1?cbl=18750&diss=y&pq-origsite=gscholar

[14] Stoklosa, H., Bosson, R., & Farrell, S. (2022). Human trafficking: Addressing the chiasmic training gap through a train-the-trainers model. Academic Medicine 97(11S): p S144. doi: 10.1097/ACM.0000000000004879

[15] Wakabi, B.M. (2016). Leadership style and staff retention in organizations. International Journal of Science & Research, 5(1), 412-416. https://www.ijsr.net/archive/v5i1/NOV 152642.pdf

[16] Zimmerman, C., Hossain, M., & Watts, C. (2011). Human trafficking and health: A conceptual model to inform policy, intervention and research. Social Science & Medicine (1982), 73(2), 327–335. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2011.05.028

INVESTMENT IN LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Survivor outcomes are deeply influenced by the strength, cohesion, and culture of the teams providing care in trafficking recovery programs. In these high-impact, emotionally demanding work environments, team effectiveness depends heavily on the quality of leadership. Programs that prioritize leadership development are far more likely to build resilient teams with low turnover, stronger alignment to organizational values, and a greater ability to manage the challenges of survivor recovery care [17].

Beyond managing tasks, scheduling, and operations, effective leadership includes coaching, mentorship, emotional intelligence, and the ability to create a safe and supportive environment for staff. Leaders who are trained in reflective supervision and trauma-informed management strategies for direct care staff can identify early signs of overwhelm and burnout, facilitate clear communication about staff well-being, and support their teams in building competence and resilience. These practices promote trust and shared responsibility for the health of the organization, both of which are essential in maintaining program stability.

Tools like StrengthsFinder and transformational leadership models offer structured methods of improving team cohesiveness and professional development. When leaders understand the natural strengths of their team members, they can assign roles and tasks more effectively and encourage collaboration between teams with different functions [3]. These approaches also reinforce the value of shared purpose, open communication, and mutual respect in creating a working environment that supports individual growth and high-quality survivor care.

Leadership development also supports ongoing organizational learning. Leaders who focus on professional growth in their teams create intentional time for reflection, feedback, and collaborative problem-solving. By encouraging accountability and self-reflection, these teams build commitment to collective growth, thereby improving staff retention and strengthening their ability to provide excellent care to survivors.

A CULTURE OF LEARNING

One of the primary indicators of an organization's health is the culture-shaping behavior and priorities of its leaders. In trafficking recovery programs and other anti-trafficking organizations, leadership sets the tone for how learning, accountability, and professional development are valued across the team. When executives and program leaders actively pursue ongoing education, strive for continuous improvement, and apply trauma-informed approaches to their management practices, they create a culture where growth is encouraged and supported at every level [17].

Staff culture is established mainly through leadership cues, including spoken and unspoken priorities. When leaders demonstrate a commitment to learning, they reinforce the idea that professional development is not only accepted but expected. This helps to push staff to engage openly with training, feedback, and reflection, and reduces the potential for staff to perceive that their contributions or perspectives are unwanted or unvalued. An organizational culture that clearly values shared learning promotes transparency and continuous improvement across all programs and staff teams.

Teams that neglect professional development and skill building will inevitably see increasing levels of employee disengagement and limited program refinement. Organizations lacking a regular rhythm of ongoing training may fail to frame it as a deeply necessary part of providing high-quality survivor care, thereby missing critical opportunities for improvement and eroding the competency of their employees in adhering to best practices. Staff members may feel unsupported or uncertain about expectations from leadership, affecting retention rates and consistency in service delivery, both of which are strongly correlated to reduced survivor outcomes.

Programs that encourage ongoing learning at all staff levels also tend to have stronger internal communication, greater alignment with the mission and goals, and better therapeutic relationships with survivors. Modeling a learning mindset at the top of an organization is a foundational step to strengthening the capacity of the entire team to grow and create a more sustainable, adaptable system of care.

[17] Stoklosa, H., Bosson, R., & Farrell, S. (2022). Human trafficking: Addressing the chiasmic training gap through a train-the-trainers model. Academic Medicine 97(11S): p S144. doi: 10.1097/ACM.0000000000004879

STRENGTHENING STAFF TRAINING & PROFESSIONALISM

Advancing the progress of the anti-trafficking field requires intentional investment in professional training, staff development, and organizational leadership. Survivors benefit most from care environments where staff are prepared, consistent, and confident in their own competency and in the tools they bring to their work. To meet this high standard of staff readiness, programs must establish structured training pathways that are comprehensive and scalable, and grounded in the realities of survivor healing. Recommendations outlined in this section provide a roadmap to improve field-wide consistency, support staff retention, and raise the overall quality of survivor services.

ESTABLISH STAFF TRAINING STRUCTURES

To establish a shared framework of core competencies for all staff in anti-trafficking programs, organizations should implement training procedures designed to holistically equip new staff members for their roles, regardless of their background. Creating role-specific training requirements will help programs effectively standardize the onboarding process and fill gaps in experience and education between staff members.

Leadership, Administrative, & Non-Direct Care Roles

This training framework should establish minimum training standards for all staff members working in anti-trafficking programs, including those in leadership, administrative, or non-direct care, operational roles. Regardless of the likelihood of interaction with survivors, these staff members need to be equipped with fundamental knowledge of trauma-informed care, safe and empowering survivor engagement, and cultural responsiveness. This training will ensure that all employees understand the foundational principles of safety, empowerment, and emotional regulation in their daily work.

Core modules in this training framework should include [18] [19] [20]:

- Foundations of human trafficking response
- Trauma-informed care foundations and survivor-centered communication
- Cultural competency and belonging
- Impact of trauma on the brain and nervous system
- Best practices for confidentiality, ethics, and documentation
- Trauma-informed team support and recognizing burnout, vicarious trauma, and compassion fatigue
- Leadership skills, conflict resolution, strengths-based coaching, and adaptive decision-making
- Crisis communication and risk management
- Creating and maintaining boundaries with staff, clients, and work

This foundational training will equip all team members with a common language and shared understanding of survivors' experiences, helping to reduce misunderstandings, re-traumatization, and inconsistency of care. With an ongoing emphasis on operational consistency and refinement, this structure will also strengthen internal communication between teams and support frontline staff through informed decision-making and systems development.

Direct Care, Case Management, & Clinical Roles

This training framework should establish minimum training standards for all staff members working in direct care, case management, or clinical roles in trafficking recovery programs. These team members are often responsible for supporting survivors in high-stress situations and managing long-term recovery plans. This training will provide in-depth instruction on therapeutic practices, crisis de-escalation, legal navigation, and trauma-responsive communication.

Core modules in this training framework should include [20] [21] [22]:

[18] Arceneaux S. P. (2023). Education improves emergency department providers' knowledge of human trafficking. Advanced Emergency Nursing Journal, 45(2), 138–144. https://doi.org/10.1097/TME.0000000000000455

[19] Stoklosa, H., Bosson, R., & Farrell, S. (2022). Human trafficking: Addressing the chiasmic training gap through a train-the-trainers model. Academic Medicine 97(11S): p S144. doi: 10.1097/ACM.0000000000004879

[20] Wakabi, B.M. (2016). Leadership style and staff retention in organizations. International Journal of Science & Research, 5(1), 412-416. https://www.ijsr.net/archive/v5i1/NOV 152642.pdf

[21] Berberena, N.E. (2023). Exploring the relationship between role stress, compassion fatigue, and compassion satisfaction with burnout in human sex trafficking service providers. School of Psychology & Counseling, Regent University. https://www.proquest.com/openview/9dab31e43a85bf046bbbcef907edf96b/1?cbl=18750&diss=y&pq-origsite=gscholar

[22] Zimmerman, C., Hossain, M., & Watts, C. (2011). Human trafficking and health: A conceptual model to inform policy, intervention and research. Social Science & Medicine (1982), 73(2), 327–335. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2011.05.028

- Common mental health challenges experienced by survivors

- Trauma-informed care best practices in service provision

- The impact of substance use

- Attachment theory

- Child development

- Therapeutic modalities, including CBT, EMDR, Brainspotting, and DBT

- Motivational interviewing and behavior change strategies

- De-escalation techniques and crisis response

- Applied theory for trauma recovery and intervention

- Navigating legal frameworks, mandatory reporting, and survivor agency

- Risk assessment and safety planning procedures

This model addresses the extremely prevalent training gap that exists in the anti-trafficking field, where service providers frequently receive fragmented or inconsistent training that fails to meet the depth required for trauma recovery work. By offering a structured pathway for staff development, a role-segmented procedure for employee training supports the professional development of the anti-trafficking workforce and helps establish a higher standard of care across the field [23].

IMPLEMENT ROBUST, STANDARDIZED TRAINING

To ensure staff readiness, anti-trafficking organizations should adopt onboarding models grounded in trauma-informed best practices and aligned with national workforce development standards.

All staff and interns should complete a pre-service orientation prior to beginning their new job duties. This includes training in organizational policies, confidentiality practices, emergency procedures, and decision-making frameworks that support daily operations [24]. In addition to structured orientation, programs should provide a minimum of 80 hours of supervised shadowing before allowing new staff to work independently with survivors [25]. This period offers practical exposure to routines,

relationship-building patterns, and communication strategies while allowing new staff to learn by example and ask questions in a safe, supportive setting.

This orientation process should include familiarization with the program's physical location, including exits, communal areas, and safety features, as well as an overview of daily schedules and protocols. Staff should be expected to read and demonstrate understanding of program policies, discipline guidelines, de-escalation techniques, and the organizational structure [25]. This is especially important for responsive decision-making procedures and direct supervisory support.

Universally, onboarding content should reflect trauma-informed principles. Programs need to prepare their staff not only for engagement with survivors, but also for the emotional demands of the work itself. Proactive training in trafficking dynamics, power imbalances, and the neurobiological effects of trauma helps staff build empathy and understanding, reduce emotional strain, and develop the resilience necessary to remain grounded in high-stress environments [24] [25].

Following the onboarding period, all members of the organization should engage in a minimum of 20 hours of continuing education each year to support their professional growth, while ensuring staff alignment with the most up-to-date best practices in survivor and trauma care [25]. Training topics should focus on key areas for staff growth, well-being, and longevity, including information on vicarious trauma, survivor-centered communication, emotional regulation, secondary stress prevention, and culturally responsive practices [26] [27]. Professional development training should also remain responsive to staff feedback on competency and preparedness to allow the content to address knowledge gaps or stress points within their programs directly. A rhythm of comprehensive, specialized training allows staff to deepen their clinical understanding of the work, sharpen their skillsets, and evaluate their ability to implement best practices on a daily basis.

In addition to formal training, trafficking recovery programs can benefit significantly from building relationships with "gold standard" organizations in the field, which have developed proven models of excellent care and operations. All organizations in the anti-trafficking field have strengths and

[3--23] Stoklosa, H., Bosson, R., & Farrell, S. (2022). Human trafficking: Addressing the chiasmic training gap through a train-the-trainers model. Academic Medicine 97(11S): p S144. doi: 10.1097/ACM.000000000000487

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weaknesses, and collaborative relationships can help all programs refine their processes and better incorporate best practices into their daily work. Drawing on the expertise of well-respected and established programs allows organizations to learn from the best in the field and maximize the impact of their own programming.

Other ongoing, external training opportunities can play a vital role in keeping leadership and staff connected to the anti-trafficking field as a whole, such as webinars, task force participation, conferences, and professional gatherings. These settings create invaluable spaces for peer learning, relationship-building, and the exchange of real-world insights into emerging challenges and solutions in addressing human trafficking and serving survivors. The variety and speciality of peers in these gatherings can provide critical perspective for anti-trafficking organizations working with a specific scope and magnify their ability to keep their work relevant and informed by the collective strength of the field.

When robust onboarding processes are paired with extensive ongoing training, organizations will strengthen their staff's competency and effectiveness in caring for survivors, while also reducing the strain on their employees. Over time, this model will also contribute to reduced burnout and turnover rates and support a safer, more stable experience for survivors and service providers alike.

PRIORITIZE LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Sustainable, survivor-centered care in trafficking recovery programs depends on strong and adaptive leadership at every level. Programs that intentionally cultivate leadership skills across their teams are better prepared to navigate challenging situations and maintain stable, long-term impact for survivors. Leadership development strengthens the overall health of an organization, builds staff trust and engagement, and ensures that survivor care is consistently guided by qualified, mission-aligned decision-makers.

Leadership training should begin with a focus on long-term staff well-being and retention, which are significant challenges in the anti-trafficking landscape today. Leaders who are skilled in mentorship, trauma-informed supervision, and transformational leadership are far more likely to be effective in reducing employee burnout by identifying friction points in organizational policies or processes and creating space for team members to feel heard and valued. Because burnout is such a strong indicator of staff's longevity in their role [28], directly addressing these challenges has a magnified effect on staff retention.

In addition, incorporating structured opportunities for trauma-informed supervision and mentorship helps leaders to guide their teams with empathy and facilitate their professional growth, building resilience within their staff and equipping them to respond effectively to challenges. Taking the time to integrate strengths-based evaluations, such as Strengths Finder, 6 Types of Working Genius, or DISC, or personality assessments, can deepen a team's understanding of individual strengths and natural abilities, helping them develop confidence in their abilities and recognize opportunities for growth or refinement. These frameworks also support collaborative work environments where trust, communication, and mutual accountability are emphasized [29], and where staff are able to openly communicate about their needs for well-being support.

It is important to note that leadership training does not always need to be trafficking-specific to have a meaningful impact on program stability and team effectiveness. Rather, it would be detrimental to limit it only to the anti-trafficking field and ignore the valuable lessons of other sectors. Growth in the core principles, such as strategic planning, effective communication, conflict resolution, and fostering team cohesion, can strengthen leaders' ability to guide their teams in any context. Many resources are accessible to leaders in anti-trafficking organizations, like webinars, podcasts, and books on ongoing development, that can help them learn from diverse industries, critically evaluate their own operational strategy, and apply relevant insights to their programs. Leaders can also access local or virtual professional networks, which may offer opportunities for conferences or training events. These resources can help leaders expand their skill sets, remain adaptable in a highly changeable field, and cultivate strong teams.

Organization-wide leadership development requires modeling a culture of ongoing learning. When executives or managers engage in continued education, they reinforce the value of professional growth and set a tone of shared accountability throughout all teams. Managers and directors should receive regular training in areas such as conflict resolution, trauma-informed supervision, policy development, and team decision-making. These skills improve the consistency of leadership responses, reduce the potential for conflict, and build environments where all staff members feel safe, supported, and empowered in their roles [29].

In addition to day-to-day leadership demands, programs should establish structures for long-term planning and

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leadership succession. Development plans should include strategies for capacity building, mission and vision alignment over time, and the measurement of the team's impact through survivor-centered outcomes. The anti-trafficking field is continually evolving, and changes in leaders or leadership strategy are extremely common. By investing in succession planning and future leadership pipelines, organizations can position themselves to maintain their momentum through transitions and remain anchored to their mission [30].

Prioritizing leadership development helps organizations remain resilient and responsive in a field marked by complexity and emotional intensity. Equipping current and future leaders with the skills, tools, and mindset necessary to guide teams effectively will strengthen the entire field's capacity to deliver high-quality, consistent care to survivors while deeply valuing their staff and sustaining their impact.

[30] Stoklosa, H., Bosson, R., & Farrell, S. (2022). Human trafficking: Addressing the chiasmic training gap through a train-the-trainers model. Academic Medicine 97(11S): p S144. doi: 10.1097/ACM.0000000000004879

CONCLUSION

The work of trafficking recovery is deeply human and deeply complex. It calls for care grounded in expertise and delivered with empathy and knowledge, sustained by teams who are fully equipped for and supported in their roles. Across the country, programs struggle to maintain this standard of survivor care, often because of limited resources and growing demand. Without a clear pathway for improvement, survivors and staff alike will continue to encounter unstable and unsustainable healing environments. As the anti-trafficking field continues to evolve in response to survivor needs, it has become clear that its ability to support survivors is directly tied to its ability to support its workforce.

Meeting these needs for stability and sustainability requires organizations to create clear pathways for staff members to gain the skills, tools, and readiness necessary to care for survivors well through consistent onboarding processes, continued and expansive professional development, and intentional leadership. These cannot simply be administrative improvements; rather, they must be conscious investments in the safety and success of both survivors and staff. Programs that provide this structure through comprehensive support and shared expectations will develop more resilient, more responsive, and more capable teams able to deliver lasting impact.

The recommendations presented in this white paper offer a practical roadmap for progress within the anti-trafficking field. By aligning the field around shared training standards, expanding access to and support of clinical providers, and equipping leaders to grow and guide their teams, organizations can move from short-term fixes to long-term solutions. These steps will help center program development on a consistent quality of survivor care, ensuring survivors have access to empowering and trauma-informed care, no matter where they seek support along their healing journey.

Creating lasting change in this area begins with shared commitment. The next phase in development for anti-trafficking work depends on a collective effort to raise the standard of care for both trafficking survivors and staff in trafficking recovery programs. Every survivor deserves care teams that are prepared, present, and grounded in best practice. Every staff member deserves a workplace that supports their growth, competency, and well-being. With the right systems in place, both are possible.