



SAFE HOUSE
PROJECT

Safe House Project Policy Spotlight

Translate emerging federal and state legislation into practical implications for anti-trafficking professionals

Modernizing the National Response to Human Trafficking
Addressing Critical Gaps Through a Coordinated, Real-Time Identification and Reporting Infrastructure

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Policy Brief

Executive Summary

Human trafficking remains a persistent and evolving threat across the United States, yet victim identification continues to be one of the most significant gaps in the national response. Despite sustained federal investment and bipartisan legislative action, including the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) and its reauthorizations, many victims are not recognized or connected to services when they interact with public-facing systems such as law enforcement, healthcare, education, and community organizations.

While multidisciplinary models such as the U.S. Department of Justice Office for Victims of Crime's Enhanced Collaborative Model (ECM) Task Forces have strengthened coordination after victims are identified, persistent challenges remain at the front end, specifically in how trafficking is detected, reported, and routed to appropriate partners. These challenges are compounded by continued reliance on reporting systems that do not fully reflect how individuals safely seek help, as well as the increasing complexity of trafficking cases that span jurisdictions and require coordinated, real-time response.

Recent bipartisan legislative efforts, including the [Enhancing Detection of Human Trafficking Act](#) and the [Trafficking Survivors Relief Act](#), reflect a growing national priority to strengthen victim identification and cross-system coordination. However, without modernization of reporting and referral infrastructure, these policy advances will not achieve their full impact.

This brief recommends a coordinated federal and state approach to modernize trafficking identification and reporting. At the federal level, targeted investment would strengthen ECM by addressing gaps in identification, reporting coordination, and referral systems. At the state level, multi-channel reporting and coordination approaches can expand access, improve real-time routing of information, and strengthen connections between frontline professionals, law enforcement, and service providers.

Together, these efforts support a more interoperable and responsive system across the full continuum of response from initial identification to coordinated investigation and victim support. When implemented alongside appropriate safeguards, staffing, and trauma-informed services, modernization is expected to improve victim identification, enhance coordination, and strengthen outcomes for survivors.

Problem Statement

Human trafficking victims in the United States continue to be significantly under-identified and underserved, despite sustained federal, state, and local investment in anti-trafficking efforts. Victims frequently interact with law enforcement, healthcare providers, educators, and community-based organizations without being recognized or connected to appropriate, trauma-informed services. This persistent identification gap remains one of the most critical barriers to both victim recovery and effective public safety outcomes.

A central driver of this gap is the continued reliance on single-channel reporting and communication systems that do not reflect how victims and frontline professionals actually seek help. Preliminary implementation data suggest that a significant proportion of individuals rely on multiple communication methods when seeking help or reporting concerns. Systems that rely primarily on a single access point, such as a hotline, may not fully capture the range of individuals seeking help, particularly those facing barriers related to safety, access, language, or situational constraints. This is particularly acute in trafficking cases, where victims often face controlled communication environments, surveillance, or immediate safety risks that limit their ability to engage through traditional channels.

In addition to access limitations, significant breakdowns persist in response coordination, data accuracy, and referral pathways. Frontline stakeholders, including law enforcement and service providers, report systemic challenges such as delayed response times, outdated or unavailable service referrals, and inconsistent information sharing across jurisdictions. These gaps impede timely intervention, disrupt continuity of care, and reduce the likelihood that victims are connected to appropriate services when they are most vulnerable.

Further, limitations in reporting infrastructure have created barriers to effective collaboration with law enforcement, impacting both victim protection and investigative outcomes. Inconsistent or restricted sharing of actionable information has been identified by practitioners as a contributing factor to missed opportunities for intervention and declining enforcement outcomes in some jurisdictions.

These challenges are not isolated, they reflect structural limitations in the current national approach to trafficking identification and reporting. As a result, victims remain unidentified, service systems operate without complete information, and public safety responses are weakened. Without modernization of the reporting and identification infrastructure, these gaps will persist, limiting the effectiveness of existing federal investments and undermining the broader national response to human trafficking.

Background

The United States' modern anti-trafficking framework was established through the passage of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA), which created a comprehensive, victim-centered approach organized around prevention, protection, and prosecution. Since its enactment, the TVPA has been reauthorized multiple times with strong bipartisan support, reflecting sustained national commitment to combating human trafficking and supporting survivors.

A central component of this federal strategy has been the development of a national reporting and referral infrastructure, including the establishment of a federally supported hotline to serve as a centralized access point for victims, witnesses, and service providers. This model was designed to ensure that individuals could report suspected trafficking, access assistance, and be connected to local resources regardless of geographic location.

Over the past two decades, Congress has continued to strengthen the federal response through bipartisan legislation that expands victim protections, enhances detection, and improves coordination across systems. Most recently, the Frederick Douglass Trafficking Victims Prevention and Protection Reauthorization Act of 2025 reaffirmed federal investments in victim services, prevention, and interagency coordination through FY2029. Additional legislative efforts, including the Enhancing Detection of Human Trafficking Act, emphasize the need for improved identification of trafficking victims across sectors such as labor, healthcare, and law enforcement. The enactment of the Trafficking Survivors Relief Act further reflects bipartisan recognition of the need for survivor-centered reforms that address the long-term impacts of trafficking.

These legislative developments underscore a clear and consistent federal priority: improving victim identification, strengthening coordinated responses, and ensuring access to services across systems.

At the same time, the nature of human trafficking has evolved significantly. Trafficking operations increasingly leverage digital platforms, operate across jurisdictions, and exploit individuals in both visible and hidden environments. Victims often experience coercion, surveillance, and restricted communication, limiting their ability to safely seek help through traditional means. As a result, trafficking remains significantly underreported, and many victims continue to go unidentified despite frequent interaction with public systems.

While the national hotline model remains a critical component of the federal response, it was designed in a different technological and operational context. Today, individuals seeking help, including victims, witnesses, and frontline professionals, utilize a range of communication methods shaped by access, safety, and situational constraints. The continued reliance on a primarily single-channel access model does not fully align with these realities when used as the sole access pathway.

Data from federal and national sources highlight both progress and persistent gaps. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, referrals of suspected human trafficking offenses to U.S. attorneys increased by 26 percent over the past decade, with prosecutions and convictions also rising significantly. At the same time, national reporting systems continue to capture only a fraction of actual trafficking incidents. In 2023 alone, over 30,000 signals were received through national reporting mechanisms, including thousands of direct contacts from victims and survivors; yet these figures are widely understood to underrepresent the true scope of trafficking due to barriers in identification, reporting, and access.

The increasing complexity of trafficking cases, often spanning multiple jurisdictions and involving diverse systems such as law enforcement, healthcare, child welfare, and community-based organizations, has further elevated the need for coordinated, real-time communication and referral pathways. Effective response requires not only access to reporting mechanisms, but also the ability to route information efficiently, share data appropriately, and connect victims to services without delay.

Taken together, these factors point to a critical inflection point in the national response. While foundational systems established under the TVPA have significantly advanced the fight against human trafficking, evolving patterns of victimization, technology use, and system interaction require a modernized approach to identification and reporting infrastructure, one that aligns with current realities and strengthens the effectiveness of existing federal investments.

Analysis of the Issue

Under-Identification of Trafficking Victims

Human trafficking remains significantly under-identified across the United States. Victims frequently encounter law enforcement, healthcare providers, educators, labor inspectors, and social service professionals without being recognized as victims of exploitation or connected to appropriate services. Federal criminal justice data show that trafficking enforcement activity has increased over time, but those numbers also underscore how much victimization still remains outside formal identification systems.

In fiscal year 2023, 2,329 persons were referred to U.S. attorneys for human trafficking offenses, up 23 percent from 1,893 in 2013; prosecutions increased from 1,030 to 1,782 over the same period, while convictions rose from 616 to 1,008. In 2023, 916 admissions to state prison were reported for human trafficking offenses, and 2,220 people were in state custody at year-end serving sentences for such offenses. These trends reflect sustained criminal justice engagement, but they do not resolve the upstream problem that many victims are still never identified early enough to receive help or support effective intervention.

National reporting data likewise suggest both continued demand for assistance and persistent barriers to access. The National Human Trafficking Hotline reports that it received 32,309 signals in 2024, including 8,024 from victims or survivors, following 29,272 signals in 2023 and 37,200 in 2022. While the national hotline remains a critical and widely utilized component of the response, it was not designed to function as a comprehensive, multi-channel identification and coordination system.

Safe House Project internal analysis (2026) points in the same direction. An analysis of Simply Report data found that roughly 70 percent of users rely on multiple methods of communication when seeking help or reporting concerns, indicating that single-channel systems are inherently misaligned with how victims and reporters actually navigate safety, technology, and disclosure. Internal Simply Report data also show substantial growth in identified cases and service connections over a three-year period, increasing from 534 individuals identified and connected to services in 2023 to 1,529 in 2024 and 2,466 in 2025. Taken together, these findings suggest that under-identification is not simply a matter of awareness; it is also a function of whether reporting infrastructure matches the realities of victim access, coercion, and communication.

Fragmented Reporting and Referral Systems

Even when trafficking indicators are recognized, reporting and referral pathways are often fragmented across agencies and jurisdictions. Information may be shared inconsistently, referrals may not be routed in real time, and frontline responders may have no clear mechanism for linking suspected trafficking to a coordinated local response. These gaps delay intervention, reduce continuity of care, and weaken the ability of law enforcement and victim service providers to act quickly when victims are at acute risk.

Current federal policy points toward the need for stronger cross-system detection and referral capacity. The bipartisan Enhancing Detection of Human Trafficking Act would direct the Department of Labor to train enforcement personnel to identify trafficking indicators, refer potential cases to appropriate authorities, and report annually to Congress on trafficking-prevention efforts. That legislative emphasis is notable: it reflects recognition across party lines that trafficking identification depends on equipping multiple frontline systems to recognize, route, and act on information effectively.

The same bipartisan direction is reflected in the pending Frederick Douglass Trafficking Victims Prevention and Protection Reauthorization Act of 2025, which would extend core TVPA authorizations, expand prevention education grants, support employment and education programming for survivors, continue authorization for the National Human Trafficking Hotline, and authorize additional housing assistance funding through OVC. The bill's structure reinforces a central policy point: federal anti-trafficking efforts increasingly depend on coordination across prevention, identification, services, and system response, not on a single reporting mechanism alone.

In addition to structural and coordination challenges, modern reporting systems must account for survivor-specific risks. These include the potential for unintended law enforcement involvement, false positives or misclassification, and data exposure risks—particularly in cases where victims have limited control over communication devices, are subject to surveillance, or face immediate safety threats. Addressing these risks requires clear protocols, human oversight, and trauma-informed system design to ensure that expanded reporting does not introduce new harms.

Why This Matters Now

Human trafficking is increasingly complex, technology-enabled, and cross-jurisdictional. Victims may be controlled through surveillance, isolation, debt, threats, or restricted communications, making disclosure difficult and often unsafe through traditional channels. At the same time, Congress has continued to advance bipartisan survivor-centered reforms, including the Trafficking Survivors Relief Act, signed into law on January 23, 2026, which created a federal process for victims to vacate certain convictions and expunge arrest records tied to offenses committed as a direct result of their trafficking.

This broader legislative trend is important. Federal policy is moving toward earlier identification, stronger survivor protections, and more coordinated system responses. Yet many local and national reporting and referral structures still do not reliably provide real-time, multi-channel, survivor-accessible pathways into services and coordinated response. Strengthening identification and referral infrastructure is therefore not a separate policy objective; it is essential to realizing the goals Congress is already advancing.

Policy Options

Option A: State-Level Multi-Channel Reporting Expansion

This option supports state-led efforts to strengthen trafficking identification by expanding multi-channel reporting and improving coordination across agencies. Rather than relying on a single access point, this approach enables victims, witnesses, and frontline professionals to report concerns through multiple modalities that reflect real-world safety and access constraints.

Implementation would be led by states in partnership with law enforcement, victim service providers, and multidisciplinary task forces, building on existing coordination structures and focusing on high-prevalence areas. Time-limited investments (e.g., Congressionally Directed Spending) would support deployment, training, partner onboarding, public awareness, and limited surge capacity for victim services to ensure timely stabilization and referral.

Benefits

- Expands access by aligning with how individuals safely seek help
- Strengthens identification at the point of contact
- Improves coordination across law enforcement and service providers
- Builds on existing state and task force infrastructure
- Provides timely, localized data to inform response

Considerations

- Implementation may vary across states
- Requires upfront training and coordination
- Dependent on state leadership and governance
- Requires clear data-sharing protocols

Cost / Feasibility

Moderate cost with strong near-term impact. Feasible through existing state partnerships with limited-duration investments.

Option B: Federal Expansion of ECM Identification Capacity

This option strengthens trafficking identification by expanding the Office for Victims of Crime Enhanced Collaborative Model (ECM) Task Force framework through targeted federal investment. While ECM has improved coordination after identification, this approach focuses on strengthening front-end identification, reporting pathways, and referral coordination within existing multidisciplinary structures.

Funding would support improved reporting pathways, referral management, cross-sector training, and coordination among ECM partners, including law enforcement, prosecutors, healthcare providers, child welfare agencies, and community organizations. It would also enhance data collection and analysis to inform national response strategies.

Benefits

- Builds on an established federal framework
- Strengthens national consistency
- Enhances multidisciplinary coordination
- Improves early identification within ECM structures
- Aligns with federal priorities

Considerations

- Dependent on existing ECM capacity
- Requires coordination across multiple stakeholders
- Implementation may be slower due to federal processes
- May not fully address access gaps without state-level efforts

Cost / Feasibility

Moderate federal investment with high national impact. Highly feasible through targeted appropriations to an existing program.

Recommended Option

A Coordinated State and Federal Approach to Modernize Trafficking Identification and Reporting

The most effective path forward is a combined state and federal strategy that integrates state-level deployment of multi-channel reporting and coordination approaches with a targeted federal investment to strengthen identification and referral infrastructure within the Enhanced Collaborative Model (ECM).

This approach recognizes that human trafficking is both a national issue requiring federal coordination and a local issue requiring real-time, community-based response.

At the federal level, expanding the ECM through targeted appropriations will strengthen multidisciplinary coordination, enhance data-informed response strategies, and ensure consistency in victim identification and service delivery across jurisdictions. At the state level, deploying multi-channel reporting and coordination capabilities will address critical front-end gaps in identification, enabling victims, witnesses, and frontline professionals to report concerns safely and connect to services in real time.

Together, these investments are intended to support a more comprehensive, interoperable infrastructure that strengthens the full continuum of response, from initial identification to coordinated investigation and victim support.

Operational platforms that meet these criteria, such as multi-channel reporting and coordination systems, demonstrate how this model can be implemented in practice. For example, platforms like Simply Report illustrate how these principles can be operationalized in a secure, scalable environment. These systems can expand access beyond traditional call-based models by allowing

individuals to report concerns and seek assistance through modalities that reflect real-world communication patterns and safety considerations.

The platform can support:

- Real-time routing of actionable information to law enforcement and multidisciplinary partners
- Immediate connection of identified individuals to survivor-centered services
- Structured data collection to inform local, state, and national response strategies
- Seamless integration with existing task forces and coordination frameworks, including ECM partnerships

This combined approach is the most effective option because it:

- Addresses both identification and response gaps, rather than focusing on one in isolation
- Builds on existing federal investments, avoiding the need for new program authorization
- Aligns with bipartisan legislative priorities to improve detection, coordination, and survivor outcomes
- Provides scalable implementation pathways through both federal appropriations and state-level funding mechanisms

Risks and Mitigation

While this approach requires coordination across federal, state, and local partners, implementation challenges can be mitigated through phased implementation, standardized training, and alignment with existing multidisciplinary structures. Leveraging established frameworks such as ECM task forces and state trafficking councils ensures efficient integration and reduces duplication of effort. Transition considerations can be addressed by maintaining continuity of access while expanding capabilities, ensuring that no individuals lose access to support during implementation.

Additional considerations include the need for clear data governance, defined roles for information sharing, and safeguards to ensure that expanded reporting does not introduce unintended risks to survivors.

Implementation Plan

This policy can be implemented through a coordinated federal, state, and local approach that strengthens existing anti-trafficking infrastructure while introducing modernized identification and reporting capabilities. It aligns federal investment with state-level deployment and leverages multidisciplinary partnerships to support effective, nationwide impact.

At the federal level, targeted investment through OVC would strengthen the ECM Task Force initiative by addressing gaps in victim identification, reporting coordination, and referral infrastructure. This includes establishing consistent data governance standards, enhancing coordination across ECM task forces, and improving alignment among federal, state, and local partners.

At the state level, implementation would support the deployment of multi-channel reporting and coordination capabilities integrated within existing frameworks, including state trafficking councils and multidisciplinary teams. States would focus on expanding access to reporting,

strengthening referral pathways, and improving coordination among law enforcement, service providers, and other frontline systems.

Implementation can be supported by existing, operational technology capable of secure reporting, real-time referral coordination, and system integration. Platforms that meet these criteria—such as multi-channel reporting and coordination systems—demonstrate how a scalable approach can support deployment while maintaining alignment with federal standards and continuity of access.

Over time, this approach is expected to support more consistent identification, faster routing of information, and stronger connections between victims and services, while allowing flexibility for states to adapt implementation based on local needs and infrastructure. Technology modernization alone will not improve outcomes without sufficient staffing, referral capacity, training, and access to trauma-informed services; digital infrastructure must be paired with human capacity to translate identification into meaningful support.

Expected Outcomes

Implementation of this policy is expected to strengthen the national response to human trafficking by improving victim identification, accelerating coordinated response, and increasing access to trauma-informed services.

By aligning federal investment with state-level deployment and modernized reporting infrastructure, communities will be better positioned to identify trafficking earlier, route information more efficiently, and connect victims to appropriate care in a timely manner.

This approach is expected to:

- Increase early identification of trafficking victims across systems
- Improve coordination between law enforcement and victim service providers
- Expand and accelerate connections to victim services
- Strengthen multidisciplinary response capacity within ECM partnerships
- Enhance data visibility to inform national prevention and response strategies

In the near term, improvements are likely to be observed in operational outputs such as reporting volume, referral timelines, and coordination across partners. Progress can be measured through key indicators including identification rates, referral timeliness, service connection outcomes, and participation across multidisciplinary systems. Independent evaluation will assess changes in identification, the effectiveness of reporting and referral processes, and the strength of coordination across agencies. Findings will support continuous improvement and inform emerging best practices.

Over time, this policy is intended to support the development of a more modernized, nationwide trafficking identification and coordination infrastructure that improves consistency, strengthens cross-system collaboration, and enhances survivor-centered service delivery across jurisdictions.

Conclusion

Human trafficking continues to evolve in complexity, scale, and method, yet the systems designed to identify and respond to victims have not kept pace. While federal investments and bipartisan legislation have strengthened prevention, protection, and prosecution efforts, persistent gaps in victim identification, reporting pathways, and coordinated response continue to limit the effectiveness of the national approach.

Modernizing trafficking identification and reporting infrastructure is essential. A system that reflects how victims seek help, how frontline professionals operate, and how agencies coordinate in real time is critical to improving both survivor outcomes and public safety.

The approach outlined in this brief offers a practical and scalable path forward. By aligning federal investment with state-level implementation and strengthening coordination through existing frameworks, this policy builds on proven models while addressing persistent gaps. This approach is designed to support a more responsive, accessible, and coordinated national system that enables earlier identification, more timely intervention, and stronger connections to survivor-centered services.

This is a critical inflection point. Without modernization, persistent gaps in identification and coordination will continue to constrain the nation's ability to identify victims, deliver timely support, and hold traffickers accountable.

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Appendix A: Case Examples

These examples illustrate early adoption across diverse state environments, demonstrating the scalability of multi-channel reporting and coordination approaches.

Mississippi: Statewide Adoption of a Multi-Channel Reporting Model

Mississippi provides a leading example of how states can strengthen human trafficking identification and response through coordinated policy, law enforcement leadership, and technology-enabled reporting.

Under the leadership of Lynn Fitch, the Mississippi Attorney General's Office has implemented a comprehensive strategy to address human trafficking that combines public awareness, law enforcement training, and enhanced investigative coordination. Central to this effort is the state's partnership with Safe House Project to deploy the Simply Report platform as a statewide reporting and coordination tool.

Mississippi is the first state to formally adopt Simply Report as its primary human trafficking reporting mechanism, providing residents with a secure, accessible way to anonymously report suspected trafficking. The platform enables real-time routing of tips to law enforcement and supports prioritization of cases through an AI-informed behavioral assessment framework, allowing investigators to more effectively allocate resources and respond to high-risk situations.

This deployment builds on Mississippi's broader anti-trafficking initiatives. In 2021, the Attorney General's Office launched the "Be the Solution" campaign, a statewide public awareness effort designed to equip residents with the knowledge to recognize and report trafficking indicators. The office has also trained more than 550 law enforcement officers across the state in trafficking-specific investigative techniques, strengthening frontline identification capacity.

Operational outcomes from these efforts demonstrate measurable impact. The Attorney General's human trafficking team has led 58 multi-jurisdictional operations, resulting in:

- 341 victims identified and supported
- 99 arrests of suspected traffickers
- Numerous investigative leads contributing to ongoing enforcement efforts

Mississippi's approach reflects a coordinated model that integrates:

- Public awareness and community engagement
- Law enforcement training and capacity building
- Multi-jurisdictional investigative coordination
- Technology-enabled reporting and referral systems

This combination of policy, practice, and infrastructure addresses key gaps identified at the national level, particularly in early identification, reporting access, and coordinated response. Importantly, Mississippi's implementation demonstrates that modernized, multi-channel reporting systems can be successfully integrated into existing state-led anti-trafficking frameworks without requiring the creation of entirely new structures. Instead, technology is used to strengthen and connect existing systems, improving both victim identification and law enforcement response.

As other states explore strategies to improve trafficking identification and coordination, Mississippi provides a scalable model for aligning policy, technology, and multidisciplinary partnerships to enhance the effectiveness of the overall response.

Missouri: Early Adoption Focused on Statewide Coordination

Missouri is in the early stages of implementing Simply Report through collaboration with the Missouri Attorney General's Office, signaling a growing interest in strengthening statewide trafficking identification and reporting infrastructure.

Initial implementation efforts are focused on:

- Expanding accessible reporting pathways for the public and frontline professionals
- Improving coordination between law enforcement and victim service providers
- Integrating reporting tools into existing investigative and referral processes

Missouri's approach reflects recognition of persistent challenges in identifying trafficking victims across jurisdictions, particularly in cases involving labor trafficking, rural communities, and transient populations. Like many states, Missouri relies on a combination of local task forces, law enforcement agencies, and service providers, which can create variability in reporting pathways and response coordination.

The introduction of a multi-channel reporting platform is intended to:

- Standardize how trafficking indicators are reported across the state
- Improve real-time routing of actionable information to appropriate authorities
- Strengthen connections between identification and victim services

As implementation progresses, Missouri presents an example of how states can begin integrating modern reporting infrastructure into existing systems to address fragmentation and improve response consistency.

Montana: Addressing Rural and Geographic Barriers to Identification

Montana is also in the early phases of implementing Simply Report, with leadership from the Montana Attorney General's Office and statewide partners focused on improving trafficking identification in a predominantly rural and geographically expansive environment.

Montana faces unique challenges that are common across many rural states, including:

- Limited access to centralized services
- Long distances between communities and service providers
- Reduced visibility of trafficking in remote areas
- Barriers to reporting due to isolation and lack of awareness

Early implementation efforts are centered on:

- Expanding access to reporting tools that function across low-connectivity environments
- Supporting law enforcement and community partners with improved identification resources
- Enhancing coordination between state, tribal, and local stakeholders

The deployment of a mobile-first, multi-channel reporting platform is particularly relevant in Montana's context, where traditional, centralized reporting mechanisms may be less accessible or effective. By enabling reporting through multiple modalities and improving routing of information, the state aims to strengthen both identification and response across dispersed communities.

Montana's implementation highlights the importance of adaptable, technology-enabled solutions in addressing geographic and infrastructure-related barriers to trafficking identification.