

Voices of Safe Harbor: Survivor & Youth Input for Minnesota's Model Protocol on Sexual Exploitation and Sex Trafficking of Youth

December 2015

Hennepin County No Wrong Door Initiative

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Thank you to all of these organizations for bringing together youth and adults to participate in this process. Staff members from the participating organizations were present during the focus groups to provide support to and also assisted with the administration of the surveys.

A very special thanks to the participants (ages 12 to 46) who shared their opinions with honesty, candor, authenticity, generosity and the wisdom of experience. Some are survivors (adults and youth) and some are allied youth and adults who are interested in the issue or have friends or relatives who are affected. Their insights serve as an invaluable resource to the development of an effective coordinated community response to the sexual exploitation of youth in Minnesota.

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Executive Summary

Overview:

The voices of victims/survivors in the public conversation surrounding sexual exploitation have often been overlooked. Few victims/survivors are available for public comment for a variety of reasons, including confidentiality, fears of stigmatization or retaliation by perpetrators, and the simple desire to move on with one's life. Because there are so few public voices of sexual exploitation, certain narratives have been constructed: Well-worn paths that tell a familiar story, spun by the media in repetitive iterations that focus more on sensational headlines and less on the actual daily realities for a victim/survivor.

While the public perspectives are important and educational, there are still thousands of victims whose voices will never be heard. Their stories are just as precious as those on the front pages or the nightly news. From November 2014 to April 2015, as support for Hennepin County's No Wrong Door Initiative, participants ages 12 to 46 from a range of organizations engaged in surveys and focus groups. Some are victims/survivors; others allies for those in "the life." The project provided an opportunity to share stories and self-reflections as well opinions about what services and supports are needed for victim/survivors.

These voices ought to be taken seriously in addressing policy change and advocacy across disciplines, from prosecution to health care provisions. The respondents' perceptions are frank, powerful, and stirring. The purpose of this document is not only to highlight people who have previously been marginalized, but also to share the participants' astute recommendations to legislators, advocates, prosecutors, law enforcement, and the public. Change based on their lived experiences, rather than what others think is best in theory, will lead to the best outcomes for victims/survivors.

Highlights:

This document is a distilled version of research findings, divided into eight thematic sections. Each chapter explores a main turning point of conversation that recurred throughout surveys and focus groups.

1. Misperceptions and Misunderstandings: Respondents described the way they are perceived by the public and service providers, revealing an alarming gap between reality and stereotypes.
2. Family Ties: Several discussion points surfaced regarding family, from the role of the family in preventing sexual exploitation to the way family reunification ought to be handled.
3. Prevention: What Youth Need: Respondents discussed the necessity of community engagement, healthy environments, and positive influences to prevent sexual exploitation.

4. Need For Sexual Health Education: Respondents expressed a glaring need for sexual health and healthy relationship education; some discussed how their lack of knowledge abetted exploitation.
5. Cultural Competency: A variety of stories emerged regarding the mistreatment of minority groups in society at large as well as the systems attempting to serve them.
6. Trust and Rapport: Respondents stressed the need for trust and rapport in services, both to prevent exploitation and during the healing process. Topics include how to improve relationships with law enforcement and mandated reporting.
7. What Survivors Need: Respondents described a multitude of ways that the healing process may be approached, with helpful suggestions for service providers and law enforcement. They emphasized that each experience is distinctive, and that survivors need time, personal care, and validation.
8. What About Perpetrators?: Although respondents asked for more prosecution of perpetrators, they also encouraged therapy access for buyers and exploiters.

Methodology:

The survey gathering and focus group interviews occurred during a period from November 2014 to April 2015 as support for Hennepin County's No Wrong Door Initiative created in response to the new Safe Harbor law as well as the Ramsey County Attorney's Office and the Sexual Violence Justice Institute at the Minnesota Coalition Against Sexual Assault's Minnesota Safe Harbor Model Protocol development.

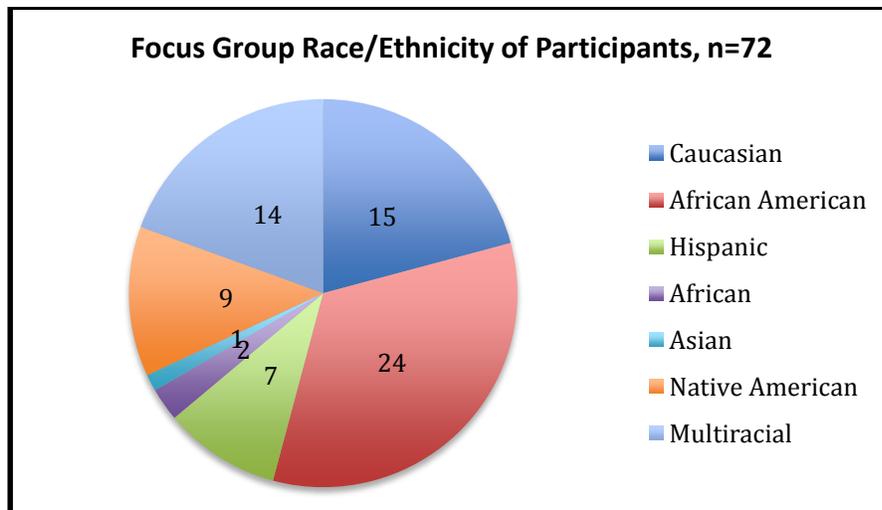
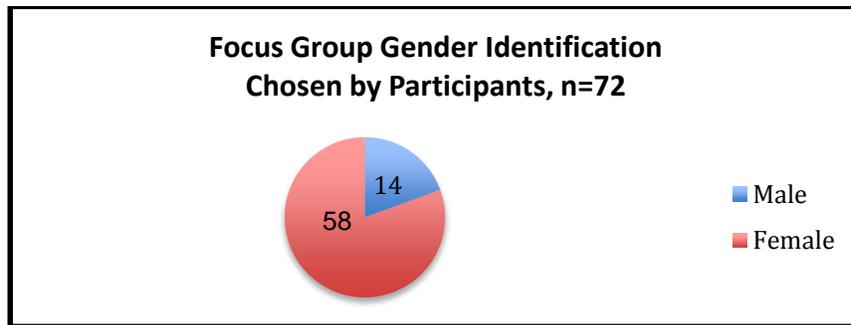
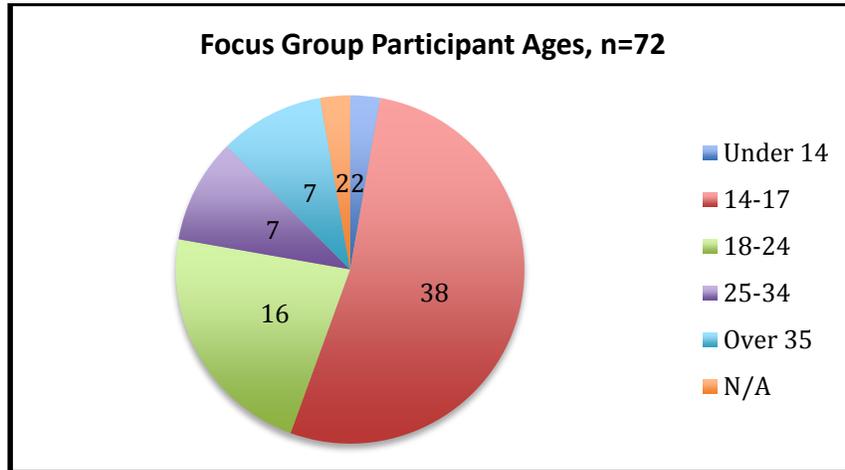
Participants were referred to the project by a range of organizations, and no names were collected. Only information about age, race/ethnicity, gender preference and survivor status were requested. The responses are de-linked from the particular surveys or focus groups linked to an organization to preserve confidentiality. The survey questions were developed in collaboration between the Hennepin County No Wrong Door Initiative, Paula Schaefer & Associates, the Sexual Violence Justice Institute at the Minnesota Coalition Against Sexual Assault, and the Ramsey County Attorney's Office.

There were 72 focus group participants and 57 surveys, mostly completed by people who had also participated in focus groups. Ages ranged from 12 to 46. Young Adult is defined as age 18-24. Of the surveys, 36 were completed by Youth/Young Adults, and 12 were completed by Young Adult/Adults. The remaining 9 were completed by adults who identified as survivors. Participants took surveys in two different formats and were asked a variety of questions in the focus groups depending on the trajectory of the conversation.

It is crucial to note that this group, while representing a more diverse set of viewpoints than typically available in the media, is by no means all-inclusive of ethnic, religious, LGBTQ, tribal, and rural communities. The contents of this document ought to be considered in light of the fact that there must be deeper research to include more voices. Likewise, each voice is unique: although the broad strokes of surveys and focus groups are included here, each participant has a valid personal experience that is impossible to convey in full.

Focus Group Participant Demographics

(Note that 57 surveys were also completed, the majority by focus group members)



A Note About Language

The editors have selected the following words for use throughout this document. These words are not meant to exclude other commonly used terminology and will not replace language from direct quotations or cited legal definitions.

Cisgender: Refers to a person whose gender identity corresponds to the sex assigned to them at birth. Typically, this term denotes someone whose gender expression also aligns with his/her/hir sex and gender identity.

Exploiter: A pimp, trafficker, facilitator, purchaser or other third party who sexually exploits a minor in a manner defined below.

Exploitation: According to the Minnesota Department of Health, “Minor commercial sexual exploitation occurs when someone under the age of 18 engages in commercial sexual activity. A commercial sexual activity occurs when anything of value or a promise of anything of value (e.g., money, drugs, food, shelter, rent, or higher status in a gang or group) is given to a person by any means in exchange for any type of sexual activity. A third party may or may not be involved.”¹

Victim or Victim/Survivor: The term “victim” is used primarily in relation to a participant in the criminal justice system. Otherwise, the term “victim/survivor” is used to represent someone who has made it past the immediate trauma of sexual exploitation and is working through the process of healing physically, mentally and emotionally as they move forward in their lives.

Minors, Youth, Young People, Young Person: Children and adolescents are victim/survivors of sexual exploitation. These general terms indicate the wide range of ages affected and acknowledges that the needs of children and adolescents differ, particularly as young people near adulthood.

They/Them/Their or She/He/Hir/Ze: Male, female and gender nonconforming youth are subject to sexual exploitation. Gender-neutral language is used throughout this document except in direct quotation or when a specific gender identity is discussed.

¹ <http://www.health.state.mn.us/injury/topic/safeharbor/>

Section 1: Misperceptions and Misunderstandings

In both surveys and focus groups, most youth/young adult respondents expressed frustration with adults' misperceptions of sexual exploitation. According to respondents, adults (including advocates) misunderstand various aspects of "the life." This lack of insight leads to meager, and sometimes damaging, responses to sexually exploited youth.

Throughout their responses, participants expressed a genuine frustration that adults, advocates, and the public at large fail to notice the root causes that lead people to enter prostitution or to be sexually exploited. Participants pointed to poverty, racism, family abuse, and marginalization as contributors to entering "the life." Further, they stressed that "the life" is never a legitimate choice, but rather the only way to stay afloat in desperate situations. Respondents hoped for deeper questioning of the societal issues that play a role in "the life," as well as recognition that victims are doing all they can to survive. As one respondent said,

"If you aren't going to help us with jobs and housing then you can't complain about what we do to survive."

Firstly, respondents explained that adults fail to realize that there is little choice in entering "the life," and that survival is the strongest motivating factor behind behavior.

"They forget the purpose and why youth are doing what they are doing. It's survival. People don't go out with the intention of what they do. They forget [because] they haven't gone through what we've been through."

"A lot of [youth in "the life"] don't want to be in it or doing it."

"If you never prostituted it's hard to see why people do the things they do."

"[Adults] don't look at it as a survival skill."

"Because you're a prostitute they think you're dirty, filthy, that you're trying to get over. They don't think maybe this person needs counseling instead of labeling them as a prostitute . . . they don't [think] that there could be reasons behind it."

"We're not choosing to do this. We go with it because we don't know other options."

"Whatever men asked of me I did so I could eat."

"No money, nowhere to go, they look at one option. Youth can get killed, raped, kidnapped, get diseases."

“The state, the court, the people, the prosecutors – they think they know about your life, that you’re a menace to society, they just assume but they don’t really know what’s going on. All they do is look at your record, they don’t know what’s going on.”

Furthermore, youth expressed that adults don’t take them seriously or understand how dire their situation may be, either physically or psychologically. According to youth, adults frequently write off their sexual exploitation as “not that big a deal,” and tend to blame youth for not exiting the situation. Respondents explained that this approach gravely oversimplifies the experiences of sexually exploited youth, and ignores the power dynamics between perpetrator and victim.

“Another thing that adults don’t really get is that they need to take kids seriously . . . they just can’t talk to a school counselor and everything will be okay.”

“[Those outside “the life”] don’t understand the damage it can do.”

“[Adults are] not understanding of the situation and how dependent someone can get on the adults in their lives, not understanding they just can’t stop.”

“They’re like stay away from the guys, stay away from the drugs, stop doing it, it’s easier said than done. You can’t just stop.”

This respondent further described why, in her situation, “just stopping” proved so difficult:

“For me there was somebody behind me who always came back even if I went somewhere different. He would find me or his group of friends. If a girl is involved with a guy who is gang-affiliated or they have a group of ‘partners,’ they’re all in it together and they all communicate together about the girls. It’s kind of like organized for some.”

“Just stopping” was impossible for this survivor because of her exploiter’s constant watch. As seen here, physical constraint and threat of bodily harm are frequent barriers to leaving exploitative situations. For others, the obstacles may be more psychological or financial. According to one youth,

“I just wasn’t going home because it wasn’t safe. I found safety with a man who I thought was good for me and built me up but really it was a source of control.”

“[Victims] have no means of getting by financially. They may lose the stability of food/roof over their head. They are ridiculed for who they are because of what they do.”

“We as a society don’t see the deeper piece where it’s psychological and emotional and how traumatized you are after having to endure a lifestyle such as trafficking and prostitution . . . so much damage has been done in the course of time, we don’t pay attention to it.”

Respondents also observed that prostitution is frequently glorified in media, leading to misperceptions of sexual exploitation:

“[We should be] doing some type of critical thinking when it comes to media and music and how sexuality is normalized. Now it’s every teen’s dream to be a stripper, Kim Kardashian or Coco [Austin].”

“Kim Kardashian, Coco [Austin], all these high priced prostitutes. If Coco woke up and her butt was deflated she’d feel different. You can still be broken emotionally and physically . . . a year ago I would’ve told you straight up ‘I’m a ho,’ I didn’t think it was a problem. It is whether you realize it or not.”

“Sometimes you have to ask questions before jumping to conclusions . . . you have to ask what their story is and how did they end up doing this.”

Section 2: Family Ties

The theme of family, in different iterations, resurfaced throughout focus groups and surveys. Family ties may make or break the success of a vulnerable youth or survivor. Respondents tended to have a negative view of foster care, while opinions of family reunification varied, pointing to the idea that family reunification is situational.

With regard to sex trafficking specifically, respondents said that families play an important role. This could be because the exploitation is intergenerational, because parents act as exploiters, or simply because of the toxic family atmosphere.

“Sometimes they get out because of stress with families, they do sex trafficking probably because of stress with their families.”

“A lot of times families have never had that help. Certain moms and dads when they were younger they never had that help with their families, they just pass on whatever was taught to them when they were younger and they think it’s normal. They just need that outside perspective telling them that’s not normal and they played a part in why their kid has done some things they’ve done.”

“Some families encourage it, it’s a cycle, their mother and grandmother did it.”

“Having a dad figure in my life was super important, that’s what caused a lot of the promiscuity because I never had that attention anywhere else and I always thought that was my fault, building that bond and having a strong, important male figure in your life is important that doesn’t involve sexual activity.”

“I know a girl whose mom encouraged her to do it and now she’s missing. The mom is acting like a victim. It could have been easily prevented by the county, the state, having better methods of assessing.”

Respondents explained that family has perhaps the most crucial role in shaping a youth’s positivity and sense of self, as well as their understanding of relationships and healthy sex. For more detailed information, see the “What Youth Need” and “Need for Sexual Health and Healthy Relationships Education” sections. They named love, trust, support, and communication as meaningful factors in a healthy home environment.

“Communication. Families need to have the understanding of what their youth is dealing with in more in-depth detail.”

“[Family] . . . means that wherever you are you are safe from things/people that are out to hurt you cause you are young, vulnerable.”

On the flip side, a damaging home environment was cited as the main reason that youth run away, or seek an “alternative family” from the company of an exploiter or gang.

“Usually a youth runs from home because they’re being mistreated in the home and wants to go to a better environment.”

“Sometimes we feel misunderstood and uncomfortable because parents impose values and lifestyles on us.”

“Abuse and situations like that, if there’s abuse in the house and they’re being abused [they might run away]. It’s a long story for me.”

“Usually they are placed in a situation they don’t want to be in . . . I’ve heard time and time again, ‘I’m doing what’s best for you,’ [but] only I know what’s best for me.”

When asked about foster care, most respondents expressed suspicion and concern. They maintained that most foster parents are only interested in monetary benefit, and that abuse can occur in foster homes without system awareness or sufficient intervention from child protection or law enforcement.

“I am not sure [how I feel] because I know some foster parents only do it for the money so I would not feel safe at all.”

“Been there . . . [sexual exploitation] happens there too.”

“It seems like that’s where [exploitation] starts . . . in some foster homes.”

“I know a lot of people do this for the money and they will do whatever they want to [youth] and still get the money.”

“Foster systems can slip past inspection and look safe when they’re not.”

The topic of family reunification produced a variety of opinions, but mainly, respondents said that family reunification depends on the situation. They were troubled by the idea of automatic reunification, because family may not always be safe or stable. They gave various suggestions for how system workers, like advocates and social workers, could help guide the youth into the best possible situation.

“[Before reunification,] all family members [must be] checked out as being unharmed [sic] to the young person.”

“The courts should ask the youth if their house is safe to go back to or if the person who was selling them knows where they live, they should get more information about the

person who was selling them and also ask the parent or whoever is at home with them if they're comfortable with them being home, whether it's safe?"

"There should be more help for kids and their families but not intrusive, if their family feels that they need the help they should have that always available but if they don't let them work through it on their own."

"It's wrong, depending on the situation, if the child got taken out of home because of abuse or neglect, they shouldn't go back to get re-abused, they should have something else. But if it's not the parents' fault reunification would be best."

"Check on the family's mental stability. I'm a big fan of therapy and counseling because I've seen the wonders it can do. There's not enough counseling or therapy that is affordable. I feel there should be more counseling or therapy for low-income families."

"They should make sure it's safe at home, like work on a family plan to get their kids back in the home, make sure it's safe before they send a kid home. Help them after they get home and still be involved with them, set them up with a good therapist and keep checking in on them, ask them how it's going. It depends on the case and what kids want, if they don't think it's safe they shouldn't have to go home but if they do want to the courts should try hard to get them there."

In sum, the effect of family ties on a youth, whether negative or positive, cannot be overstated. A healthy home environment can prevent sexual exploitation or help ease recovery, while a detrimental environment can increase risk and defeat a youth's opportunities. Respondents were concerned about foster care, and said that family reunification should be approached on a case-by-case basis according to safety and check-ups. Because of the important role that family environment plays in recovery, family services, including family analysis, therapy and reunification needs to be an integral part of youth-oriented services.

Section 3: Prevention - What Youth Need

When discussing prevention of sexual exploitation, respondents described the need for services, people, and healthy influences to help keep youths' lives on track. These needs focused on two main areas: firstly, the need for a positive social environment to engage youth and the need for deeper empathy in the system. As a whole, the responses show that youth feel deeply undervalued, and this theme manifests itself throughout their suggestions.

Youth described a need for a healthy social environment that cherishes the youth's individuality and worth. This compassionate community could take the form of family, as several respondents mentioned:

"Parents showing love and being supportive and being available and being present at school and [knowing] where your kids are. Be firm but gentle with your kids."

"People in their life who believe in leading by example . . . It starts at home."

Many respondents said that troubled family circumstances give youth a skewed vision of relationships, and that education about healthy relationships must rectify this. Respondents seemed sad to have learned "the hard way" about unhealthy relationships, and maintained that they would have benefited from early discussions on the topic.

"Healthy relationships are important because a lot of people don't have them. My parents and their parents didn't have them. People grow up not knowing what that would look like . . . It's easier to get into unhealthy relationships when you don't know the difference."

"In an unhealthy relationship you're blind to it. In the beginning it could be really good, it's hard for you to get out of that position because you don't want to be alone or you really believe this person loves you or maybe you have a kid with this person or think they will change."

"I have a lot of friends who started dating when they were 11, and . . . [later in life] started developing more unhealthy relationships. Educate more about trafficking and domestic violence."

". . . when I was growing up I was barely a teenager and I was hanging out with people, guys much older than me. I never had a father figure in my life. These people we would meet would be older than me and I thought it was love. Now I know it was to fill a void."

"It's really important to learn what healthy relationships are . . . and what unhealthy relationships are. If you don't know what an unhealthy relationship is it's easier to get sucked into one."

“There’s so much abuse and bad relationships that are romanticized by the media, ‘50 Shades of Grey,’ people see that and think it’s a romance.”

“These kids have to have a sense of who they are. Relationship classes in high school. What are the signs of somebody who’s not loving you? What is a healthy relationship? . . . In the community I come from, a woman is for two things: give babies and take care of the husband . . . There’s more to you than just your body, the makeup, the guy who is trying to talk to you. Relationship classes will encourage more girls to look into ‘why is this guy talking to me?’”

“. . . I just feel like they should teach them about healthy relationships. And that having a relationship isn’t everything.”

“I wish I would have known that I went through abuse and I wasn’t taught about relationships when I was young.”

When family cannot be the primary source of support, other positive communities and role models must step in to constructively engage youth. To this end, respondents said they needed more community programming to provide a sense of purpose and value. This could take the form of “group discussions, counseling, access to safe space, outreach and free activities,” among others:

“[We must] provide stronger education, provide centers for youth who have living problems, self-esteem issues or any unstable situation.”

“[We need] a new community resource – to get help . . . to live a stable lifestyle, course on the effects of sex trafficking on your health, parenting courses, budgeting, finances, how to raise your credit score, counseling, GED, housing program, Life Track program, afterschool program, how to prevent risky sexual behaviors, shelter referral and bus tokens. A place in the community that youth and young adults can go to that’s safe.”

“Different options and coaching. They are going to need references and supplies. Education, from GED to college help, positive influences. People who can show them more to life.”

“. . . I feel like what could help is a program that is focused on the youth of this demographic that taught them life skills and survival skills and gave them a safe place to stay, taught them how to fend for themselves, there are tons of reasons why someone could be in this situation.”

In the context of community programming, participants described an overwhelming need for mentoring. Broadly, respondents said they wanted more people to simply converse with: friends, siblings, coaches, beneficial role models, teachers, and counselors. Both youth and adult surveys show a lack of trusted adults available to vulnerable youth. These relationships may be vital in

preventing sexual exploitation, and participants underscored the importance of investment and longevity. As one explained,

“[I want] someone who would stay in my life in friendship. Not someone who I see every blue moon or talk to every other two weeks.”

“[We need to] have counselors that are available for youth to talk to with privacy [about how] not to be exploited by judgmental parents or people that are not out for [their] best interest.”

“[Adults should] be more aware of what they do and where they are at. Make sure you have a good bond and they trust you enough to tell you what’s going on.”

“Talk to the person that is having problems, really listen, and offer them help instead of pushing them away.”

“I think it’s all about talking to these kids, the right conversations, the more they will listen.”

Clearly, respondents feel that positive environments and mentoring for youth play a significant role in preventing sexual exploitation. This commentary needs to be carefully considered when it comes to funding for after-school programs, community programming, job-training sessions, counseling services, and mentorships.

Respondents described a second major need revolving around “the system” of social services, attorneys, law enforcement, and other structures that vulnerable youth may interact with. Many respondents felt disrespected and marginalized by the system, and maintained that system workers ought to regard youth as treasured individuals. In effect, youth need to know the system cares about them. These remarks are a meaningful criticism of how the system treats youth, and illuminate the way this heightens vulnerability to sexual exploitation instead of preventing it.

“Once you’re in the system you become a number, you’re looked at as a criminal or a delinquent because you’re out here doing this to survive and I don’t think the system realizes it.”

Respondents had suggestions for how system workers may interact with youth more positively. Of attorneys, judges, and probation officers, respondents said,

“Talk to them as a person, not a docket number.”

“Hear [youth] out.”

“Be more respectful and talk to them more about goals and activities that can keep them motivated.”

Some respondents described social workers as effective in preventing sexual exploitation. Respondents reasoned that social workers ought to “assess risk factors, help [youth] out with resources, talk with parents and make sure youth are safe.” Here, too, respondents were clear that social workers ought to show the youth they care:

“I think [social workers] should talk to them and make them feel safe about themselves to the point where they can make you feel like you can tell them anything.”

“Get involved with the whole family of the youth.”

Regarding other services, respondents had an overall negative view of some shelters and all correctional facilities. Respondents expressed fear that some shelters are not safe, both on a physical and psychological level:

“Most likely the pimps and buyers would know teens would go here and they’ll be the next target.”

“[Shelters] are never 100% safe.”

“A lot of people don’t trust the shelters so they find another way to find a place to stay.”

In the same vein, respondents conveyed that correctional facilities sometimes lack empathy for youth: one respondent wrote that *“some detention centers are not compassionate,”* while another explained *“not all facilities care about the youth.”* Respondents held that this must change to successfully prevent sexual exploitation:

“[Staff should] be more understanding, not quick to judge. Learn more about the trauma of exploitation.”

“People who work with youth should like or even love what they do.”

“[Staff] have to have some kind of passion for working with teens. Can’t just work 9-5 and it’s just a job, hurry up and get off work. Don’t sign up for it if your heart isn’t in this profession. If I see that you don’t care, I’m out of here.”

Other youth expressed that shelters and correctional facilities are not culturally safe. For more on this topic, see the “Cultural Competency” section. In general, responses highlighted a need for heightened physical protection from sexual exploitation, as well as increased access to counseling, treatment, education, and culturally competent services. One respondent said,

“I think they should pass a law as to where all officials take classes on this and they should have to offer some sort of knowledge.”

Across these various services and relationships, respondents expressed a fundamental need to have their voices heard, and to know that they are valued as people. The responses drew attention to the need for a healthy social environment to prevent sexual exploitation, particularly in the form of mentors and role models. When it came to shelters, correctional facilities, and system workers, youth stressed the importance of deeper empathy and long-term interest in the youth's well-being.

Section 4: Need for Sexual Health and Healthy Relationships Education

Universally, respondents felt that sexual health education (with an emphasis on relationships) is one of the best ways to prevent exploitation and abuse. They expressed the need for earnest and open conversations about these topics, whether in a school or health care setting. They tended to feel that parents couldn't be expected to deliver useful information to youth, in part because many parents are engaged in unhealthy relationships or are uninformed themselves. To this end, respondents called for a mandatory and meaningful dialogue in schools, beginning at a young age, to arm youth with effective information.

Throughout the surveys and focus groups, respondents underscored the need for sexual health education, particularly emphasizing healthy relationships. Many respondents expressed that "normalizing the conversation" about sex and healthy relationships is paramount to preventing victimization. Few respondents had a strong educational background that included sexual exploitation and unhealthy relationships, and held that classes on these topics ought to be in-depth and mandatory.

Most respondents described previous sexual education as "boring," "awkward," or simply nonexistent. Though a few mentioned learning about puberty and sex from their mother or grandmother, no respondents mentioned fathers or male role models as broaching these topics.

"[I had sex ed] from my health teacher. It was a lot of facts, was kind of vague and boring and I didn't learn much."

"My health class – some my mother. I was not taught about many things that I had to find out on my own in ways like from myself and more like wondering about it and going to clinics and finding out about it."

"[I] did not have that bond with my mother."

"[I] found out everything pretty much myself, as I got older."

Respondents were generally disappointed in school health classes, explaining that they were uncomfortable and had little to do with real-world consequences.

"They are mainly trying to control teen pregnancies instead of sexual exploitation."

"The curriculum was given a scare tactic. The teacher had a question box and more than 95 percent [of the questions] had to do with gay sex and how to protect yourself and then she wasn't allowed to answer those questions."

"Class in school is not required, it's an elective. Some people think it's funny and don't choose it as an elective. It should be required."

“We had to petition to get those classes in school, we knew we needed the classes, there were a lot of things not taught, we just kept watching pregnancy videos before lunch.”

“People in these classes need to feel comfortable. People start laughing at you when you go there. You go to the class for your own safety.”

Though frustrated with the limitations of existing health classes, respondents agreed wholeheartedly that sex and relationship education is extremely valuable. Many respondents expressed regret that they had not been educated earlier, or were given too little information about their bodies, choices, and empowerment.

“[Sexual education is] more applicable to life, it will help you in your life, we will need reading, writing and math but we will need other things when you’re out there in the real world. Things happen, it’s not like math is going to solve your problems if you’re in abuse.”

“There are kids attending classes who are not getting the information they need. Some of these kids don’t even know why they aren’t interested in having sex with girls – so what’s wrong with me? Having this information at a younger age provides an open mind earlier cause parents aren’t going to do it. I wasn’t taught as a kid. I had health class where we learned about the body.”

“Growing up in poverty I was told to just put on a pad and move on. Growing up in poverty is just living to survive. There’s no time to sit and talk about bleeding and talk about what’s going on during dinner.”

Further, respondents had suggestions as to how teachers, health care providers, and parents may carry out these difficult conversations. They stressed good humor and openness, and that it’s important to treat the topic seriously. Repeatedly, respondents said that the discussion should begin early, and should address prostitution and sexual exploitation in depth.

“Normalizing the conversation in middle school. Middle school is when hormones kick in, puberty can hit early, I got my period at nine and I didn’t know what I was going through. My mom was a kid when she had a kid and I wasn’t getting proper education on my body and my school wasn’t giving it to me. I was going through these changes I didn’t know about.”

“In the class the teacher should communicate with the kids, try to be funny with them, create comfort, not just a teacher trying to make you learn because it’s an obligation. So the teachers and youth have a connection.”

“[Doctors] could talk to you more about it rather than you figuring it out yourself.”

“Our parents are turned off talking about a lot of things with us, they think school will teach us. School maybe spends a week, there’s not enough communication. Schools should

have a mandatory class, sex education and teen pregnancy . . . [alongside] prostitution and trafficking, what it is, how they recruit, what to do if they or someone they know is in the life, who to talk to and get help . . . A lot of kids had tough times growing up, not everyone knows what healthy relationships are, they get used to what they're given."

"[Health care providers should] offer a safe place to talk, get information and free counseling."

"[Teachers should be] adults who know the subject well – don't just do it because it has to be checked off, [students] need research and lots of details."

"[Education should] be graphic and honest about prostitution."

"One school has [an] embedded health [class] in each year of high school, build a relationship with teachers, works well, a lot of speakers come in, doesn't feel like a credit you have to do to graduate. Need better health class. It's everyone's responsibility."

"ACTUALLY TEACH US."

Access to education about healthy relationships and sexual exploitation in an age-appropriate manner is absolutely essential. The more information a young person has the better able they are able to understand the dynamics of relationships, what consent looks like, build self-esteem and identify the red flags of a problematic relationship. Without meaningful resources youth are left alone to make difficult decisions. The best protection against exploitation is education and without it the risk only rises.

Section 5: Cultural Competency and Inclusivity

Respondents consistently pointed to a lack of cultural competency and inclusivity as the most common reason respondents felt unsafe in shelters, services, or working with system workers. Respondents described discrimination and mistreatment as chief concerns when interacting with police, and stressed the need for diverse staff in victim services, including representation of survivors. They agreed that being a minority in race and/or gender identity is extremely ostracizing, leading to an increased chance of victimization and multiplying the negative effects of sex trafficking.

Respondents shared intimate stories of abuse and neglect based off various cultural or LGBTQ identities. Several are worth quoting at length:

“I’ve been told wouldn’t it be easier to be a gay boy, why can’t you just do that, they tell me these things like I haven’t tried. If I’m not supposed to be this way why am I still this way? I was not happy as a gay boy with men. I don’t feel like a man with a man, I identify as female. I feel most happy when I get up and put myself together like a woman would. For people to say you’re wrong or you’re just confused and one day you’ll wake up – people identify everybody else from what you’ve got between your legs, to that I say I’m in disagreement, it doesn’t matter what I have, it’s how I identify and how I’d like to be seen in society. I face that every day this questioning with my gender and who I am and I want to be treated like a normal person. I just wished for a world where we were all respected.”

“I’m GLBT, have dyed hair and piercings, so I when I go into government areas looking for help or looking for someone I know is there, not only can I tell the cameras are following me, I’m labeled as a troublemaker. I can see security coming out of the booths . . .”

“. . . I don’t want to get up every day and be a prostitute but the state is not helping me survive because of my gender and race . . .”

“... I could have sexually exploited as a child just because of the color of my skin and mostly because I’m trans as I dress and carry myself. I’m sexually exploited by men who are in business, who are in society, mostly white men in power ... I could have been on my way to work, school, grocery store, out in the wee hours, out on a hot summer day, I get stopped by these older men who have some sort of feeling towards me and they want to pick me up, they want to use me and try to make money off me ... We just can’t be treated any kind of way. I was a trans women of color being sexually exploited when I was arrested, I would get caught up with situations where police get called or crooked police do this to me and I would get arrested and put on trial with charges . . . If I was a cisgender woman, hetero woman gender conforming, I am sure I would get all sorts of assistance from the government but if I was just cisgender colored woman there are still resources for me, there would still be help for me, but I am a mixture, a trans woman of color, I am very limited as to what I can get. I’m seen as a criminal. These men doing these things to these young queer identified youth they don’t get charged, politicians, men of business,

they could be in Congress, they are not frowned upon because they have money. If they do get caught they have ways to get out of things. Someone like me or a young person who is innocent, they get stepped on, they will get put away.”

“I grew up being a boy . . . that’s all I know to be a boy but me feeling a different gender – I want to take over the role of woman. I’m just trying to have a life and making a living and trying to be successful just like people who grew up normal, who grew up all their lives cisgender and white.”

“People want to know how to ‘deal with’ gay people, people treat you like you’re hitting on them, it makes it hard to talk with people. I’m not going to hit on you, I need people to understand. I played every manly sport like football but I couldn’t change in the locker room without the rest of the team being uncomfortable. I had to use another part of the locker room that was never used.”

In schools, social services, health care, shelters, and police interactions, respondents repeatedly reported feeling unsafe due to factors such as race, ethnicity, gender identity, or religion. A smattering of these responses include:

“People of color are almost never safe around the police.”

“People feel really uncomfortable when they go to a group of a different race.”

“Religion is such a broad spectrum and most of the organizations out there are Christian and not very varied, not very tolerant, religion can be a driving force. I’ve for sure seen issues with religion.”

“No one makes it easier because of religious norms and societal norms. There are a lot of queer organizations coming up but really just for queer white youth. It’s hard for an African American to get a grant in America for anything, let alone if they are trans.”

Respondents felt that stereotyping and bigotry continue to hinder effective services. They held that the system upholds the discrimination of the outside world, negatively impacting quality of care.

“They need to stop in the system labeling Indians as drunks, or label as prostitutes blacks and Native Americans, they are labeled really bad, a black dude is a drug dealer, [there are] stereotypes and racism.”

“[It’s a problem] . . . that there isn’t a GLBTQ person in a seat of power that can provide that help. So automatically [youth] feel like they are putting themselves in an untrustworthy society, society is saying everything about them is wrong. Maybe they won’t get as much help as someone in another part of society. A surprising number of

sheriffs and police have in their mind that homosexuality is not just a sin, it should be illegal.”

“Some youth would feel uncomfortable because of an officer’s race or gender. So they should be able to talk with someone they feel safe with . . .”

One respondent described how a policeman’s failure to engage in cultural competency stopped her from receiving any services whatsoever:

“The first time I ever ran away, this was supposed to be my fiancé, and nowhere in US law was I married to him but under religion in my culture he was my husband. I went to the police station, a cop took me back. A cop said, ‘In your culture you guys have so many rules that I cannot come between.’ What part of I’m being raped and abused and forced into prostitution do you not understand? I’m forced to stay in this until I find a way out. That’s where the stereotype comes in. Just because you’re a Somali woman covered up with her husband does not mean she’s happy or not being abused. Many times I went to school and was happy but I knew what was gonna happen when he finds out I went to school without telling him.”

In order to respond to the reality that certain populations at a significantly higher risk for exploitation, increased cultural competency is key. Respondents had a rich spate of ideas to accomplish this. Firstly, respondents were concerned that their own race, gender identity, and other affiliations were well represented on services’ staff. Secondly, if a provider is interacting with someone of a different culture or identity, they must be conversant in the culture and be willing to respectfully learn more.

“Not two hours of training, two years.”

“If you don’t know something about someone’s culture say you don’t know. It’s more offensive and looks disrespectful when you try to act like you know.”

“Including more diverse staff . . . and some people I know relate to Native Americans more than any other nationality because that’s what they know, having someone in an authoritative position of their own race is a good idea, they have a better idea of what someone is going through.”

“[Staff] should get into the culture, they should understand one person’s culture before they get into it, what do they do, how do they talk, what do they do formally, if I’m going to a different country I should learn a little bit about how it works. Not making assumptions about how they dress, saying they are gangsters, you might dress like it but you’re not, maybe you just don’t want to dress up. Don’t make first sight assumptions, don’t say things that aren’t true or make rumors.”

“Including and opening up opportunities for ceremonial things or prayers and stuff and not making [Native Americans] change things about their daily lives because some Natives put out tobacco every day and burn sage and are really traditional in that way and if they were put in a shelter and sometimes they don’t have that opportunity, they should be able to have that opportunity to have their ceremonies.”

“Be educated on the community – lack of education is a lot of people’s downfall. People in authority, people ask me questions, “Why is it all about sex with gay people?” It’s frustrating. Why is it all about sex with straight people?”

“At my son’s school there’s actually young black teachers there, they speak his language and understand his slang and can redirect him using his language to positive thinking. Even if they were able to hire people who recovered or who have been where these kids have been, somehow integrate these people as employees so they’re not just facing a lily-white person who read a book and assumed. You don’t mean anything to me.”

“Meet us where we’re at. To advise someone who is not queer identified or trans, the ones with money who want to help us, put on a pair of my shoes and walk a mile in my heels. Live my life. Don’t judge me. Understand we are asking for help. I want to advise someone to come and see the issues, the things people are throwing up against us ... the things you need to do to make sure you get what you need ... You can’t come up with something to help if you haven’t walked through our experience. It is difficult for someone who is cisgender and not queer to do anything for someone who is trans and colored. There is no way for someone to understand without living it. If someone hasn’t lived it go out to where it’s being lived and then understand.”

“Spend 24 hours with us and see [what it’s like to be] black and living in poverty and on top of that be trans or queer. They have to be open, they can’t bring their badge. Have an open heart.”

“It’s important to have diverse education in the staff, you can’t take a room full of rich people to solve problems in poverty.”

“Let them be themselves. Uplift them. Since we have realized who we were and we’re trying to show the rest of the world we’re normal and been here as long as you. I’m just like you. I get up in the morning, go to the bathroom, put my face on and get ready for the day. We need to uplift instead of put down.”

Respondents also discussed the importance of including survivors in services staff, as a form of cultural competency. They also mentioned gender equity in staff as helpful. For a more detailed account of these responses, please see the “What Survivors Need” section.

In general, these responses illustrate the marginalization minorities and LGBTQ communities face, both outside the system and within it. Services providers, police, shelters, health care

providers, and anyone else working with vulnerable groups must strive to provide a culturally diverse staff that is fluent in LGBTQ issues. To this end, recognizing the role of stereotypes and discrimination is extremely important, as is endeavoring to change systemic oppression in society at large.

As one respondent put it simply,

“It’s a common sense thing to work in different cultures.”

Section Six: Trust and Rapport

Regarding system workers and victim services or youth advocates, respondents described fundamental “must-haves” in relationships. Foremost among these is a strong sense of trust, transparency about the limits of confidentiality and sincere rapport. These aspects could manifest in a variety of ways, but must be present for the relationship to benefit survivors and help them move forward.

The nature of the relationship ought to be based in deep trust and camaraderie, as echoed by many respondents:

“I feel like you need to know for sure that you can trust the person with what you tell them.”

“Don’t approach them with authority type thing, some people just want a friend, if they acted more like a friend that would help with trust.”

“[Advocates should] talk to them daily and ask them how life’s been, see them every once in a while, let them know you’re there and they can trust you. Get close to them, let them get to know you and you do the same.”

“I want to TRUST the adults around me.”

Resisting the impulse to push for information, and allowing the youth to come forward slowly, is essential to building a strong relationship. Many youth used the word “non-judgmental” when describing an ideal advocate, and emphasized the need for patience.

“When dealing with youth about this stuff, don’t pressure them, don’t make them tell you in a specific amount of time, give them their time.”

“Don’t push the help. Come as a friend . . . be open, don’t judge. Police could be less pushy and supportive and develop a relationship with young victims. Judges could listen and empathize with the young people and be understanding. Advocates should be supportive and help youth understand [he/she/hir/ze] isn’t alone. Operate in their humanness while being an expert. Motivate.”

“Don’t push too much. If they don’t know how to share yet don’t try to get a lot out of them.”

“Let them know you are there for them and they’ll open up to you over time and that’s how you learn how to help them.”

“Don’t be intimidating, don’t keep asking the kids question after question, ease into the conversation. Most people get uncomfortable and won’t talk anymore. Sometimes it’s better to do a project and ask questions through the project, its fun too.”

“They should not expect a youth to pour out their feelings and especially no pressuring.”

Further, respondents said that the best victim services and youth advocates are people who are relatable, open, and seem to “get it” without extensive explanation. In other words, youth need someone who will at least meet them halfway.

“Be cool but not like when adults try too hard and attempt to relate to the youth.”

“[Staff] would have to have a good personality, respectful, outgoing. They would have to be a person you can trust and somebody you feel you can talk too.”

“No judgment at ALL! One thing I would ask the staff both male and female is that they have common experience. That way they become sensitively understanding.”

“Spend time with them, make them feel like they are included, like they are a part of their family, that they are positive, not wanting to ask them questions about it, keep talking to them in a friend way, when something bad happens they trust you enough to tell you.”

“[Staff should be] friendly, open-minded, helpful, serious about their jobs but friendly enough to relate to clients, respectful and happy with their jobs.”

“They shouldn’t be all strict, they should be cool, act like an adult but know how to get along with teenagers. Don’t treat you like criminals, treat you like regular people.”

Many respondents described confidentiality as a key part of this rapport. One youth wrote, *“Confidentiality’ invites trust – will get more people to seek help.”* Respondents generally expressed frustration with the mandated reporting process. Although many recognized that it could be helpful, they said that it frequently broke trust between survivor and advocate, or made things worse for the victim. As one respondent said,

“Confidentiality is really important because you don’t want to tell someone something and have them gossip about it with everyone else.”

“You don’t want to tell someone something difficult to talk about if they aren’t going to keep it confidential.”

“I need my secrets to be kept.”

“There shouldn’t be [mandated reporting]. If a youth is involved in that activity and someone from services knows – being able to initiate the conversation if [he/she/hir/ze] wants to talk about it. But being aware that the youth is still being involved in the activity.”

“Sometimes adults at schools they say it’s confidential but it’s really not, they lie and they tell all the teachers, and then you get treated differently.”

“It makes you not want to open up and tell everything . . . [advocates should] let [youth] know just a little bit that they’ll still help you and not have to report it.”

“Beforehand [you should] say I’m a mandated reporter so they know it’s their job to tell, it’s important to say that up front, if somebody did say it was confidential and told everyone I’d lose trust with anyone.”

Several youth explained that they understood why mandated reporting existed, but maintained that it still encountered difficulties in practice.

“A lot of youth go into shelters and tell them and then call their probation officers, it’s because they want those people to know who care about you, so they know where you are and you are safe, not so much we are gonna tell your business, it’s basically telling people who care about you, it’s not like calling your abusers.”

“In my head I wasn’t thinking that a kid would tell the shelter people exactly what’s going on, but in order to stay you have to tell them your name and age to stay. If they don’t feel like they’re gonna be able to stay without having to tell their whole life story, if the only way to stay is to tell everything about them, I understand mandated reporters are mandated reporters.”

When it came to law enforcement and police, respondents expressed feeling blamed, shamed, and unsafe in interview situations. One youth said, *“People will share when they feel safe,”* indicating that this is rarely the case when being interviewed by police. Another summed up the interview experience by saying:

“Being locked in an interrogation room by law enforcement – in there by yourself with an investigator, they ask you questions, leave you there, you start stuttering and they think you’re lying but you’re just really nervous. It’s easier for sexually exploited youth to go on a walk so they are outside and not uncomfortable. When they interrogate you or lock you up it makes you feel like you did something wrong.”

Other respondents in the youth/young adult survey had various suggestions for law enforcement to better gain trust and rapport with survivors:

“[Don’t say,] ‘if you weren’t dressed that way in the first place this wouldn’t have happened to you.’”

“. . . one thing is to not look so mean. To offer support and a way to give options. To not focus on the emotional part of the issue but to have a positive reinforcement on what the youth wants.”

“Try to understand from the youth’s point of view, really try to understand how it feels or if that were their children what would they want done.”

“Don’t judge, don’t bombard with questions, don’t treat them like they are stupid.”

“Being able to be compassionate and listening to their side of the story, even if they have the feeling of it being a crime.”

“They should not press the victim to answer certain questions. They should be able to answer their questions when they are ready.”

Respondents described the same characteristics – being nonjudgmental, caring, patient, and honest about mandated reporting – as desirable in most disciplines, including social work, correctional facility work, and the court system. They also communicated the need for self-agency and a feeling of control, particularly throughout interactions with judges and attorneys. Respondents emphasized that these advocates should continually ask the youth what [he/she/hir/ze] wants, and not assume that the adult knows best.

Section 7: What Survivors Need

Respondents expressed a wide variety of needs for survivor empowerment and progress, including comprehensive and culturally competent services, job training programs, and mentoring. For the most part, respondents disliked both lock-up and electronic monitoring as ways to supervise sex trafficking victims. Instead, they asked for holistic recovery and empowerment services, emphasizing that the recovery process is unique for everyone. Service providers ought to appreciate different paths and allow room for mistakes.

One of the chief needs of survivors is safe shelter. Respondents emphasized that survivors cannot exit the life without a reliable place to sleep and nutritious food:

"[We need a] non-locked shelter, non-locked residential facility, drop-in centers and sometimes foster homes or non-locked out-of-state facilities."

"[We need a] warm, caring spot or shelter to go to."

". . . If they're forced into being homeless, they're going to go back to the familiar which is soliciting in order to survive."

"If the minute you leave the safe place you have to go back to the person exploiting them, not good. Need more housing. It's not just small actions, more institutions."

After food and shelter, respondents said that survivors need opportunities for jobs, housing, and other steppingstones toward an independent life.

"[If I were a service provider, I] would buy a house with plenty of room, each designed for a specific teen (boy or girl). Each day there will voluntary therapy. Services will be provided. Counselors for everyone who feels the need."

"[Survivors need] other options of finding financial stability. Giving them a chance to work a normal job . . . I think it is crucial to check in with these youths."

"I didn't know about grants, scholarships, school just seemed like something I didn't have money for. Kids need involvement in something else to keep them busy. Have guidance, showing them if an addict fails they get steered in a different direction. If the youth are steered there's more than one way to success. Show them where you would want to be."

"Help them find a job, so they don't have to use people. Get them somewhere to live. You don't want them to live like that the rest of their lives. It all depends on how they think and move on."

"Give them another skill set. A lot of people like me had to gain a different skill set to get out of that mindset. I just woke up and was tired of it, I have a child, I wanted to do

something with myself, I opened my mind to different things. I connected to someone, got tired of partying, walking around, doing drugs, it takes a lot out of you.”

“Jobs are the only solution. If they offered you a job and participate and do the job then you can help more. Get real food, somewhere to sleep, do a lot of sports. You could create a team with people you get along with, it can let off a lot of stress instead of smoking cigarettes, marijuana, drinking. Go in the weight room and get fit and feel good about themselves, not sitting around getting fat.”

“Independent living skills, like how to get a job, how to get housing, how to look for schools and different types of grants and financial aid, stuff that involves money. That is the hardest for people in rural areas, hardest to get money and they resort to getting it the fast way. Also a lot of programs that involve free recreation because a lot the time a lot of kids don’t have anything to do that isn’t work-release.”

“Schooling programs, like if they are behind in school. Schools that are smaller and more focused, more opportunities that are college-based, help them with doing all the stuff, jobs, apartments.”

“Show them that there are better things to do with your life and help them see inside themselves that they could use their energy on something more productive, something they are good at, hobbies.”

Further, respondents expressed that survivors need people-to-people services, particularly in the form of mentoring. For youth, this means increased programming and tutoring. For adults, this could mean parenting classes, GED coaching, and other activities to maintain a forward-moving life. The involvement of positive mentors is crucial for both youth and adult survivors.

“Need some support, encouragement, choices. Just show a new way of living and give them an opportunity to do without stress. Need some love, genuine care and concern. Need to know what ‘I love you’ means. Need to know what it means to have a hug.”

“It’s other people who can watch over them when they do something bad and help them get on track, have a person to guide them, they wouldn’t do those things if they had structure . . . They should have the staff who have been through it, sex trafficking, have been in prison, trying to change their life, people who understand them, who say ‘you don’t want to go to prison.”

“There need to be classes for parents. There are so many young parents out there. I’m 30 and I have a lot I can learn. There’s a lot I can learn from older mothers and fathers. I don’t object to listening to anything new. I’m open to giving my opinion too because that might help somebody else out there.”

"[Survivors need] different options and coaching. They are going to need references and supplies. Education, from GED to college help, positive influences. People who can show them more to life."

". . . Also need an opportunity to be empowered and guided. People willing to hire and mentor them."

"A lot of counties need to get more activity-based things to keep people out of trouble, more education-wise, programs like the YMCA, Step, all this stuff in the cities needs to be worldwide but a lot of counties don't have the money for that."

"Youth programs, a gym, more boys and girls clubs ... They need to do full background checks, not everyone registers as a sexual predator ... There could be teachers out there who have [been there] – they've been assaulted or sexually abused, they've been through beatings and rape and being exploited so they know what signs to look for."

"Outreach program. List of places to go if you need help. Help set up resumes. Big Sister, Big Brother. Like someone they can relate to so they feel they can reach out to them when they feel like they are slipping into those old behaviors. Life coach to help them stay out of the life."

In response to the idea of putting sexual exploitation victim/survivors in a detention facility (or using electronic monitoring), respondents generally expressed confusion and anger. Many wondered why victims and not perpetrators would be locked up.

"Victims shouldn't be locked up so they know it's not their fault."

". . . It will make us feel captive and not free . . . Everybody has to make mistakes in order to grow. [Instead] provide relatable adults (mentors) that understand where [she/he/hir/ze] is at and let the young person talk."

"Not dealing with the situation long-term, it's telling them they've done something wrong and they could feel betrayed after finally coming forward."

"It won't help a kid grow, you're going to confine a child into a solitary room and tell them they can't do things because they were brought up in a different situation. It will show them that they did wrong because a lot of people are just trying to survive. What is being locked in a room going to help you learn? That's a bitter ending. It will push people out to alcohol and drug abuse, when they get out they'll do it again. If you lock someone up it's going to make someone do it again, it's not their fault, they are kids."

"It's kinda crazy, if they are going to send people who are exploited away the exploiters are roaming free."

“If youth aren’t getting real help and affection and support in detention it will make them go back to their exploiter.”

“. . . If you’re not doing it on purpose you shouldn’t be locked up. I was in juvenile detention facilities when I had nowhere to go there was a lot of girls and guys in there for running away and for a lot of them it didn’t really do any good, it just made them want to leave more, and in their other program I saw almost every other kid who went into their program run away because they didn’t want to be there . . .”

“How do you do that and still build trust?”

“Being locked up will make them feel like it’s going to happen again at any moment. When you’re in a locked place someone could come in and abuse you.”

“It’s not very Minnesotan for Minnesota to lock up kids who are victims.”

“We need to rehabilitate instead of being so quick to incarcerate because that’s not solving anything.”

“It’s like animal cruelty to be locked up – If I’m the victim why am I being treated like a criminal, why am I being locked in a cage?”

Other respondents, though not fully supportive, felt that detention sometimes seemed to work:

“It’s definitely half and half, my first time getting locked up and stuff, all I wanted to do was get out of there and to think of a different route, to plan it in a different way and be smarter in what I was doing. After like the thirteenth time of going to jail it finally clicked in.”

“Some kids don’t have that type of authority, where they have quite a bit of freedom or they just have families that don’t really care, whereas lockup sometimes gives you that structure that you might need and it kind of puts you in check in a behavioral sense, helps to a degree especially with staff who really care, but it’s dependent on the person and whether they really want to change.”

“Keeping a female in placement hours away from what they were into would be a good idea ... I just feel like not every case you need to be away from everybody, but in some cases yeah.”

“Depending on how serious it is – they should first get a chance to fix it themselves but if it’s getting too out of hand get them someone to talk to and if they still aren’t willing to help themselves [then] put them in a locked facility.”

“Some good places and some bad places – put them where best for them. Have a treatment facility that specializes in helping youth who are sexually exploited, so they can have different levels of care, chemical dependency problems, don’t isolate them with mental patients.”

Personal stories of detainment deepen this discussion, providing the perspective of those most affected by lock-up policies. Several respondents shared harrowing accounts of getting arrested and/or detained when they were looking for help. They found the experience both baffling and painful.

“I was put in jail, treated like everybody in jail, treated me like a charge, take you there to protect you but it turns out you have other things wrong with you so we’ll put you in a cell. It was reported that I was harming myself so they wanted to hospitalize me. I was being abused – it was my abuser who told the police I was harming myself. They sent me to a shrink, they sent me to people who told me I was crazy and put on medication. After discharge we’ll take you to a safe clinic, tie you down to a bed, because you are insane. I was like, ‘I have no business being here, I’m wrongfully being put up, the person who did this to me should have been punished, I was punished because I tried to get help.”

“Half the time these kids don’t understand they are doing anything wrong, don’t know what’s going on. No one would talk to me in jail or tell me what happened. I’m 15, I don’t know what’s going on. I just felt trapped.”

“I got arrested for suspicion of trade, I was stopped because a man tried to pick me up and I was telling him I wouldn’t go and I looked like I would give my body for money. I was arrested and they didn’t ask me why. This man was armed who was trying to pick me up and I was trying to get away and he kept following me, told the police I had done stuff. I got arrested for that and they do nothing for this man. I just sat there like, ‘I’m not being helped.”

“I was always told don’t nobody love a ho but a pimp and a ho, so when I go to jail and they treat me that way, it solidifies that the pimp was right, nobody else loves me. He always told me, ‘Don’t say anything when you get locked up, the system doesn’t love you.’ Then when you treat me like crap it just solidifies what he said.”

Respondents echoed these sentiments when discussing electronic monitoring. For the most part, respondents agreed that electronic monitoring bestowed a false sense of guilt unto the victim, and rarely worked to sequester them in the first place.

In lieu of lock-up and monitoring, respondents suggested more people-oriented services, like check-ins, open communication with officers and advocates, and programming. Respondents generally distrusted the police, particularly out of fear of wrongful arrest/exploitation. They had suggestions as to how police could better interact with victims:

“DO NOT assume they are a willing participant. Use calm, reassuring measures, Send female officers.”

“Don’t attack, and don’t ask about the pimp first.”

“[Ask the victim] if they will withdraw off of drugs. Ask if they are safe, if they fear anybody.”

“They put you in jail before they ask if they [the youth] were forced into the situation.”

“Many youth are handcuffed too tight that leave marks/bruises – and sexually exploited youth are taken advantage by law enforcement sexually.”

“[Police should] understand, support, protect and guide.”

“They should start holding the abuser responsible and treating the victim like what they are, a victim.”

When it comes to other relationships survivors have in the system, respondents stressed trust and positive reinforcement as essential. This holds for police, judges, social workers, therapists, or any other system workers. See the “Trust and Rapport” section for detailed information. Likewise, cultural competency and inclusivity in services is imperative. See the “Cultural Competency and Inclusivity” section for detailed information.

In the context of cultural competency and inclusivity, respondents highlighted that having fellow survivors on staff – acting as both advocates and role models – is hugely beneficial. Street life and “the life” in general are cultures of their own.

“They should be prior victims.”

“. . . Staff should be themselves in our shoes, think about what it was like for them, a lot of staff have been through it, they may want to help and may know what to do.” Y

“Shelters [need] people who have been through the same thing, talk about it together, they understand because they actually went through it and then later on make a friendship, helping each other out because they went through the same things.”

Respondents also expressed ideas about the gender equity of the staff. Some thought that having an equal number of male and female staff was valuable to instill real-world skills in survivors. As one respondent said,

“Not just one specific gender. I feel like then if you’re not working with a specific gender then you won’t learn the skills to work with the opposite gender whether you’re a boy or a girl, when I’m working with just female staff I get all worked out when I see a dude. It’s easier for

me to learn my people and boundary skills when it's both male and female, not like you have a specific gender for each thing. It should be offered, not forced."

Other respondents noted that female survivors may prefer female staff, and expressed that survivors ought to be able to choose:

"Make sure they have enough female officers. If girls are being exploited sexually they may not want to talk to a male officer or have a male officer touch them. More female officers who know a girl child is going through and also have advocates."

"Some people can't handle interacting with the opposite gender."

Respondents emphasized that all recovery experiences are different, and that the advocates must respect self-agency in the survivor. The advocate also ought to encourage steps toward recovery even when the survivor makes mistakes or seems to backpedal. In other words, the advocate must never lose sight of the survivor's strength and invaluable worth as a person, despite the challenges of the process.

"Everybody recovers at different times."

"You have nightmares and flashbacks and it's really scary when you go to therapy and treatment."

"Recovery process shouldn't be timed and it should be their choice about how long and whether they want to be there."

"If it's timed you may go backwards, understand you make mistakes."

"It's hard and emotional and you can still come back and you're not all the way there. In a timed program it's hard to get other stuff done, you stress about when you have to leave, the stress overruns your life."

"For each case it's different. Some people might not have childhood problems that they have to go through and process. Maybe one case they've already been through different types of treatment, so the next time they're not gonna need the whole time. I think it really depends on the case and what you've done already."

"Be supportive and forgiving. When you make a mistake, especially if you're already being hard on yourself, [it's important that] staff or any authority figure [doesn't] throw it in your face. It makes you think there's no getting over that, like you haven't accomplished anything since that and you can't really make a difference or make a change."

"Make them comfortable. Let them know they are important. Even if you have to give a little bit of yourself so they see that they are not alone. What they have been through is

not as bad as it seems. Have some overwhelming compassion. Just reach. What comes from the heart goes to the heart. Even little babies know, little people. When a baby won't come to you, that's because they can sense your spirit. Be mindful of what we're working with. Take it all in and proceed with caution. Handle with care like a fragile package."

"Use a strengths-based approach, be educated on every aspect of sex trafficking and prostitution, their history, their grandma was a madam, granddad was a john, current relatives are in the sex industry ... When you're in a constant mode of survival there's no structure, sex and money, people make sex and money evil things and use it in wrong ways. Some stories I've heard about young girls in high school, they see their peers or their friends with nice stuff, this guy takes care of me, you should do it too, advertising it."

"Understanding that nobody is perfect and we all make mistakes. Just being able to be supportive and helpful to that youth and help them want to change. Anybody can say anything but actions speak louder than words do. Helping them make their words be more active. If I was to say, 'I wanna be the president,'" I can say that but if I'm just saying that but I have no actions to back what I'm saying up, it's basically a waste. Helping that youth back their words up and their goals and stuff they want to accomplish. There's nobody in life that doesn't have a dream."

Respondents also agreed that providing real-world help and planning is necessary to stay out of the life. One respondent brought up the scenario of encountering their ex-pimp on the street to express how difficult this transition is:

"What am I supposed to do? Blow a whistle?"

Along with dealing with the day-to-day situations of exiting the life, respondents repeatedly mentioned the notion of control: being able to control one's treatment, one's choices, and one's future. They felt that reclaiming a sense of self-agency and independence helped to foster genuine recovery. Advocates can help nurture this confidence. In particular, some respondents said that this could come from outpatient recovery, where they had a sense of ownership over their treatment.

"Structured outpatient, you go to treatment during the day and come home at night. My probation officer made sure I went home every night. You go to this place where you also have school and treatment."

"I would like to see outpatient facilities. A youth is able to take part in groups, activities (fun) or field trips related to their situations. But they are able to have structure as well as freedom."

"Sexually exploited youth don't feel in control and once out of 'the life' it's needed that they can start living an INDEPENDENT life, so they can gain control and feel like they can be successful and not have to prostitute to get money or a place to stay or food."

“They shouldn’t have to feel completely isolated from their own environment that would make them want to cooperate, they won’t feel like they’re two planets away from home.”

“A place with people in similar situations, where people won’t judge you by what has happened to you or by your race or religion or also a place where you know someone dangerous won’t come in. Control is kind of comforting, a program where they let you decide for yourself, let you grow on your own.”

“Some victims may not see themselves as victims.”

“We have to realize and recognize, admit, internalize, our self-worth. I am worthy of not having to be submissive to him or to settle for this or that. I am worthy of the big white house and the picket fence, so many things. Once I realize my self-worth, then I won’t just settle for anything and everything that comes my way. That helps me build my self-esteem so I don’t feel like I have to succumb to do this or to do that.”

As a final thought, one respondent described the recovery process with the metaphor of remodeling a house:

“We start with the attic and work our way through closets and everything. We don’t rush because we’re gonna spend the rest of our lives here. Do it with the thought of, ‘I’m gonna be here forever.’ It doesn’t happen overnight, it’s a process. Wall by wall, paint, room by room.”

Though difficult to sum up the diverse range of survivors’ experiences and needs, several themes emerge: firstly, respondents emphasized the importance of safe shelter, mentoring, programming, and having a community that cares. Respondents mostly disfavored lock-up and arrest of victims, and expressed confusion and anguish regarding their own experiences with this. As alternatives, respondents asked that they be treated as victims rather than criminals. Suggestions for law enforcement and advocates included increased encouragement, respect, and support for the victim, as well as reinforcing self-agency and job opportunities. Each survivor experience is distinctive, and each survivor is worthy.

Section 8: Views on Exploiters and Buyers

Unsurprisingly, respondents did not have a favorable view of exploiters. They had varying opinions as to how society ought to deal with these perpetrators, but mostly preferred rehabilitative options for buyers, as opposed to harsh punishments for exploiters.

Although disgusted and angry with buyers of sex, respondents felt that buyers ought to receive therapy and services. Jail time was mentioned, but most respondents echoed the idea that buyers should enter some sort of rehabilitative program.

“They should get help.”

“The buyers need some form of help, like something’s wrong with them, they don’t need jail cuz jail isn’t going to help anything. When they get out they’ll probably be like, ‘I need to buy a prostitute. They need some type of help because they feel like they can’t get a girlfriend or have intimacy.”

“Come down on the tricks like they do to prostitutes. We’re the victims and they are taking advantage of us, we have issues and we are vulnerable and we want money for drugs. They should get counseling and jail. They should see what they done, they can see how they affected the child.”

“They need mental help and a program that can help them.”

“I think the people who are buying children for sex should definitely be more looked at. They think they’re not doing anything wrong but then they think the pimps are the ones who are super horrible, like humongous jail time. I think ‘johns’ should be in jail . . . It’s all just something mental going on in there.”

“When they get caught the males make themselves out as the victims, they are the victimizers, preying on people.”

“They know what they are doing to this other person, they may not know how much harm it’s causing, they may think she’s wanting to do it, but they should at least have classes on it, like this is what you did to this female and this is how you made her feel, so when you get of here don’t do it again.”

For exploiters, respondents asked for jail time, first-offense prosecution, and education to prevent the exploiter from further offenses. According to one youth,

“I think police or somebody should make the criminal pay for a long time, not just for three or four years, because the youth does not feel happy with the amount of years [the traffickers] were given.”

“They should be locked up for a really long time, that’s really sad when people do that to innocent little kids.”

“They should burn in hell.”

However, some respondents maintained that exploiters deserve some sort of rehabilitation.

“[Traffickers] need help as well.”

“In treatment they’re getting the help that they need. They’re doing better with their lives and going to school, doing something better. Jail time shouldn’t be for somebody who’s selling the girl, or for the person who’s buying the girl, because obviously they need some type of help, because eventually that’s all you’re gonna know.”

“I think services and classes should be offered to both sellers and buyers. Each case is different but should be offered to both.”

“Start up a group like 12-step, so they know what they are doing is wrong. Even the main girl goes to jail nowadays. Need to have groups showing them what they’re doing wrong. Maybe they felt like they were doing the right thing or she was gonna go for free anyway. If affects families and a lot of different things. That’s more constructive.”

“Maybe to reiterate in their brain the impact they had. Some people just go through life living in a cloud ... Even though they know it’s wrong, it’s been somewhere taught to them that it’s okay to do or they justify it in their head. Just like I made it okay to sleep with men because I knew I needed the money. Every part of it was disgusting and I didn’t like it, but I didn’t feel like I had much of a choice.”

Respondents wanted to see sincere punishments for buyers and exploiters alike, while upholding that both groups need services and rehabilitation to avoid offending again. Though some respondents were harsh in the punishments they sought, most seemed to feel that trafficking, buying, and selling are complex and intertwined, requiring interventions that are equally multifaceted.

Conclusion

The voices of victim/survivors represented in this document are powerful. They are the true experts who speak out with candor and hard-earned wisdom, providing invaluable guidance to anyone who wants to work effectively with sexually exploited youth. Their statements and opinions, blended with those of young people who may not be victim/survivors themselves but understand the complexity of growing up in the world today, must be heard and heeded.

Sometimes adults don't want to listen to what youth have to say because the reality of their lives is hard to comprehend. The voices represented on the pages of this document point to an unassailable truth – that the effort to end sexual exploitation of youth in Minnesota will not be successful without the meaningful input of victim/survivors and young people. Hopefully the requests, opinions and experiences contained within these pages will inform the important ongoing work to assist sexually exploited youth.