

Operationalizing Survivor-Informed Services

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Two key principles - being victim-centered and trauma-informed – should guide victim service providers' approach to delivering services for victims of human trafficking. Within our respective organizations, we strive to implement these principles both in *what* services we offer and *how* we offer them. For service providers, being victim-centered and trauma-informed is an integral part of organizational culture. Organizational policies, physical spaces, programs and training curricula are all reviewed and adjusted to be more victim-centered and trauma-informed.

We now also recognize the importance of services being survivor-informed in addition to being victim-centered and trauma-informed. As we encourage providers to apply this view to programs, policies, physical spaces, and trainings, we acknowledge the challenges faced in altering multiple components of service provision.

In 2017 the Office for Victims of Crime (OVC) released [Achieving Excellence: Model Standards for Serving Victims and Survivors of Crime](#), a resource that includes a comprehensive glossary of terms related to victim assistance – including “victim-centered,” “trauma-informed,” and “survivor-informed.” As part of my fellowship work, I revised the definition of “survivor-informed” to, “A program, policy, intervention, or product that is designed, implemented, and evaluated with intentional partnership, collaboration, and input from survivors to ensure that the program or product accurately represents the needs, interests, and perceptions of the target population.”

This definition reminds providers of two things. First, “target populations” suggests that programs should be a good fit for the people or communities they serve. This requires that the fit between community needs and services offered be reviewed over time. For example, many programs are created in response to unmet needs. Over time, if service providers fail to reassess how well their programs and services fit the shifting needs of their communities, or fail to adapt programs to meet emerging needs, the programs or the organizations themselves risk becoming outdated, difficult to access, or ineffective.

Second, organizations should consider the experiences of survivors and the impact they could have on this field in more intentional ways. In the past, survivor voices challenged and changed the way our field thought about and responded to human trafficking. Survivor testimonies helped create legislation, funding for services, and systemic changes in how we address trafficking. However, the field is now at a place where an individual's trafficking experience should not be the primary way practitioners view survivors. In fact, the definition of “survivor-informed” pushes us to see survivors as potential partners and colleagues who can enhance and enrich our field. “Programs, policies, interventions and products” point to how versatile the application of survivor input can be, from data collection tools to HR policies to outreach materials. Equally important are the ways in which survivors work with organizations: as current or former clients of service providers; as community partners, advocates, and activists; and as service providers themselves.

Survivors working with and as service providers is not a new concept. In fact, many fields, e.g. domestic violence, sexual assault, health, and addiction recovery, include service professionals who also have lived experience. However, because the human trafficking field is relatively new, victim service providers are still exploring how to thoughtfully seek and incorporate survivors' perspective in service delivery. Some providers use peer-to-peer interventions; others focus on engaging survivors as mentors

to minors and transition-aged youth. Both models are drawn from the mental health and substance abuse fields who have used the models and obtained successful outcomes. Still, there are many issues the field should address as we move towards becoming survivor-informed.

Currently, there are two primary ways our field engages survivors as service providers. One highlights the experiences of survivors as being uniquely suited for guiding and providing victim-centered, trauma-informed services to victims. Who better to point out culturally insensitive or re-traumatizing practices than one who has navigated similar systems and services in the past? Who is better equipped to begin rebuilding trust and common ground than one who also endured the same crime? As such, survivors should be integrated at all levels of service organizations and involved in every aspect of program planning, implementation, and evaluation. This describes the *specialization* of survivors, where experience of trafficking is the main qualification needed to provide services and the term “survivor” is added as a role or title within the organization. The other perspective is that survivors’ skills and perspectives can complement and should be used in tandem with evidence-based or best practices. As such, survivors and their input are engaged alongside program planning, implementation, and evaluation efforts. Organizations hire survivors based on a combination of knowledge, skills and experiences; survivors are hired into positions that don’t explicitly state “survivor” in the job title. This describes the *integration* of survivors.

An overwhelming majority of service providers and survivors consulted on this issue believed that the field must move towards integrating and not specializing survivors who wish to work with organizations. One consultant I spoke with addressed the incongruity of working holistically with a survivor within programs but only valuing one aspect of a survivor’s experience outside of them. Another acknowledged the unique quality that being a survivor can bring to service provision and that the field must find ways to respect and honor survivors who wish to integrate that to their roles. All consultants agreed that there is a gap in resources to help survivors obtain knowledge and skills to integrate into service organizations. As mentioned previously, other fields have integrated lived experience into professional service provision. [CIHS](#) (through SAMHSA-HRSA) and [NCPRSS](#) are two examples of integrated peer positions in other fields.

How, then, can anti-trafficking providers engage and integrate survivors? One important step is shifting the perspective of working with a survivor to that of working with a partner and redefining the roles of – and therefore the relationship between – service providers and survivors. Organizations are responsible for creating the platform through which their staff and programs engage survivors. Be open and talk to survivors about what it means to work with an organization that strives to be victim-centered. There should be “front-end” discussions within organizations where desired outcomes, parameters and context, and responsibilities are defined. Clear goals and outcomes help organizations identify what qualifications are needed for specific projects/programs. For example, if the goal is to create outreach materials for runaway and homeless youth in a local community by collaborating with survivors, you’d potentially look for a survivor with experience in youth outreach, child welfare or juvenile justice systems, or perhaps a survivor who is considered a leader in that community. If there are no survivors with the experience or qualifications needed for this project, consider reaching out to other survivor networks and using a complementary team of survivors and non-survivors.

Organizations should be explicit about setting expectations for survivors serving in the organization. There are familiar roles within organizations such as client, case manager, or program director, but as more organizations begin to on-board or contract former clients as staff or consultants, the need to re-define roles and relationships becomes increasingly necessary but often overlooked.

Roles could be devised to respect survivors' skills as assets to your organization beyond providing a voice for survivor stories or experiences. For example, what are your expectations around what survivors will be contributing? What new information, perspective, or insight are you seeking from them? How will this individual support and enhance the work that the organization does? Do you think about how survivor staff will be able to participate fully in the operation of the organization? Are you bending rules or performance standards for this survivor? If the majority of your answers are yes or pivot around the survivor's experiences as a victim of trafficking or as someone who's "gone through our services," it's possible you've tokenized the survivors you're working with. It's generally not too late to talk about roles and expectations and sometimes the limitations are simply due to how you've been thinking about the survivors you're working with.

Integrating survivors as partners require organizations to hold themselves and their partners accountable for upholding a professional standard of work. When establishing a relationship with a local partner, organizations create memorandums of understanding (MOUs) that outline what each partner provides for the other. Contracts for consultants similarly outline the exchange between the individual and the organization and the amount of compensation in line with the work expected. These relationships, formed by setting up guidelines and expectations centered around mutual exchange of skill, knowledge and resources, look very different than the relationships created between clients and case workers.

Setting clear expectations for what each partner contributes requires strong management skills. Clear and consistent communication, constructive feedback and meaningful project evaluation are key aspects of effective partnerships. Consider these questions: How often do you check in on a sub-grantee or consultant? How do you get back on track when expectations are not met or when responsibilities are not fulfilled as agreed upon? How do you evaluate a partner's performance once a project is complete? How do you evaluate your own role, and how do you receive feedback on your performance from partners? (Note: OVC's *Model Standards* is a good reference and resource for those looking to assess their program standards.) These considerations bear increasing weight as we look to professionalize contributions by survivors

The intention of this article is to help service providers consider how to think about and implement the concept of survivor-informed services and work collaboratively with survivors in a way that is meaningful and intentional. It's not enough to say that we should pay survivors for their time and that they are more than their stories. It is far richer to break away from the one-dimensional perspective of survivors and see them holistically as partners that will sustain and innovate the work that victim services are doing in our communities.