



Labor Trafficking among People with Disabilities

The **Addressing Labor Trafficking Resource Center**, https://cops.usdoj.gov/labor_trafficking, is a comprehensive one-stop shop for resources. It houses the resources developed as part of the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office) / Institute for Intergovernmental Research (IIR) Partnerships to Address Labor Trafficking project, as well as existing labor trafficking-related materials available from federal partners or developed by federally funded and supported nongovernmental organizations. Resources are available for download, both individually and collectively, in toolkits organized by target audience (law enforcement, prosecutors, businesses, community partners, and general).

This publication outlines newly developed resources providing law enforcement with practical considerations for addressing the problems faced by people with disabilities in human trafficking cases. These individuals are particularly vulnerable not only to labor and sex trafficking but also to theft of social security and disability benefits, which is another added incentive for targeting this population.

Persons with disabilities represent one in four adults in the United States¹ and include those with physical disabilities, sensory challenges, mental health diagnoses, substance use concerns, and intellectual or developmental disabilities.² Several factors can make people with disabilities particularly vulnerable to human trafficking. These factors include relying on others to meet their basic needs, with the caregiver taking advantage of the dependency; being sheltered or isolated and craving friendship and human connection; having difficulty with speech or communication; being desensitized to inappropriate touching because of isolation, lack of informed sex education, or medical or intimate care related to their disability; and fearing that they will not be believed because of the social discrimination and prejudice against those with disabilities.³

As in all trafficking cases, perpetrators use force, fraud, and coercion to hold victims with disabilities in servitude.⁴

Consider the following when working with labor trafficking victims with disabilities:

- Establish ongoing relationships with experts in the disability community, such as psychiatrists and counselors who understand the unique needs of people with disabilities. Service organizations may be able to provide specialized support or devices.
- Use a forensic interviewer to conduct law enforcement interviews. Forensic interviewers use nonleading, victim-sensitive, neutral, and developmentally appropriate investigative interview techniques, which are particularly critical for victims with cognitive or developmental disabilities.⁵
- Relatives, guardians and caregivers also can perpetrate human trafficking against those entrusted to their care, so it is critical to identify advocates, independent observers, or disability rights attorneys who may support survivors throughout the criminal justice process.⁶

1. “Disability Impacts All Of Us,” Centers for Disease Control, accessed October 19, 2023, <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/infographic-disability-impacts-all.html>.

2. “Individuals with Disabilities May Face Increased Risk of Human Trafficking,” Polis Project, accessed October 19, 2023, <https://polarisproject.org/blog/2018/08/individuals-with-disabilities-may-face-increased-risk-of-human-trafficking/>.

3. “Victims with Physical, Cognitive, or Emotional Disabilities,” Human Trafficking Task Force e-Guide, Office for Victims of Crime Training and Technical Assistance Center, accessed October 19, 2023, <https://www.ovcttac.gov/taskforceguide/eguide/4-supporting-victims/45-victim-populations/victims-with-physical-cognitive-or-emotional-disabilities/>.

4. “Fact Sheet: Trafficking of Persons with Disabilities in the United States,” The Human Trafficking Legal Center, accessed October 19, 2023, <https://htlegalcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/Trafficking-of-Persons-with-Disabilities-in-the-United-States-Fact-Sheet.pdf>.

5. “Individuals with Disabilities May Face Increased Risk” (see note 2).

6. Justice Shorter, “Trafficking During Crisis: Centering Race, Gender and Disabilities,” National Human Trafficking and Disabilities Working Group, May 26, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CHB9ZRJS9UI>.

- To help identify that a human trafficking survivor has intellectual or developmental disabilities, look for the following cues and clues, adjusting for cultural differences. It is important not to make assumptions about a person’s ability to communicate, and the presence of these cues is not a diagnosis but rather a sign that you may need additional resources to meet the victim’s needs.
 - High dependence on others for activities of daily living
 - Difficulty in communicating
 - Struggles with understanding questions or the process
 - Tendency to become overwhelmed by environmental stimuli, such as lights or noise, or to focus on a single topic or item in the environment
 - Unconventional social behaviors⁷
- Accommodate the victim’s unique needs through methods such as the following:
 - For people with physical disabilities, furnish auxiliary aides for victims with communication barriers; provide an American Sign Language interpreter for those who are Deaf or hard of hearing.
 - Select interview facilities that are easily accessible for individuals with physical disabilities and adapt facilities to accommodate service animals.
 - For people with developmental disabilities, use simple language, pictures, extra time or regular breaks, and verbal or nonverbal cues for questions or responses.⁸ Make sure to move at the victim’s pace and use language that is clear, respectful, and understandable. Ask individuals if they are comfortable in the space where meetings take place and with the individual conducting the interview before you begin working with them.
- Remain calm, literal, and concrete and avoid sarcasm when speaking to people with autism spectrum disorders; remove anything from the room that may be distracting; do not interpret monotone speech or lack of visible emotion as a lack of ability to feel.⁹
- For people with mental health concerns, such as depression, anxiety, PTSD, isolation, and addiction issues, consult with mental health professionals before proceeding with the interview, and use short, simple, words and sentences.¹⁰

7. Ashley Garret and Darla J. Stuart, “How to Identify and Communicate with Human Trafficking Victims with an Intellectual and/or Developmental Disability” (webinar, National Disabilities Rights Network, January 15, 2021), <https://www.ndrn.org/resource/human-trafficking-and-the-disability-community/>.

8. “Individuals with Disabilities” (see note 2).

9. Garret and Stuart, “How to Identify” (see note 7).

10. American Law Institute, *Principals of the Law, Policing*, § 11.05 “Questioning of Vulnerable Individuals” (2023), <https://www.policingprinciples.org/chapter-11/11-05-questioning-of-vulnerable-individuals/>.

- If known, use the terms a person uses to refer to themselves and their disabilities. If you don't know how they describe themselves, refer to a person's disability only if necessary and if the disability directly affects the problem you are discussing, and use the term "person with disabilities" rather than "disabled person."¹¹
- Many people hold beliefs about individuals with disabilities based on stereotypes that are generally not true. It is important for law enforcement and victim service programs to be aware of their own biases and to remember that people are not defined by their disabilities.

For people with disabilities, recruiting for human trafficking may occur in group homes, mental health facilities, substance abuse disorder programs, social security and benefits offices, online spaces, homeless shelters, or youth programs. Trafficking cases often are not reported by people with disabilities because they may not understand the reporting process, fear being arrested or labeled a "frequent flyer," have a fear of police, get overstimulated by the process, cannot remember the order of events, have communication barriers, or fear losing their independence.

When investigating cases of human trafficking involving people with disabilities, it is important to remember the following:

- No two cases are the same.
- These cases require a significant amount of flexibility and patience.
- Cases may require months or years to resolve.
- Building rapport may be challenging.
- Relapse and recovery trajectory is unpredictable.
- Victim trauma may affect recall of events.
- A person's disability may impact recall and chronology of events.
- Survivor impact may not be what you expect.
- The trafficking experience itself may cause lasting health concerns and disabilities, including brain injuries, post-traumatic stress disorder, and physical disabilities.¹²

11. Victims with Physical" (see note 3); "Individuals with Disabilities" (see note 2).

12. Jody Haskin and Ericka Reil, "Introduction to Human Trafficking: What It Is and How It Impacts the Disability Community," National Disability Rights Network, accessed October 19, 2023. <https://www.ndrn.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/FINAL-HT-and-Disabilities-101-Ericka-and-Jody.pdf>.

It is vital to have multidisciplinary resources in place before human trafficking or other crimes are reported by people with disabilities. Here are some national resources that may assist you with assembling those teams:

- **End Abuse of People with Disabilities**
<https://www.endabusepwd.org>
endabusepwd@activatingchange.org
- **Human Trafficking Hotline**
 888-373-7888
<https://Humantraffickinghotline.org>
- **Human Trafficking Legal Center**
info@htlegalcenter.org
- **Office for Victims of Crime Training and Technical Assistance Center**
 866-682-8822
<https://www.ovcttac.gov/views/TrainingMaterials/dspTrainingByRequest.cfm>
- **National Disability Rights Network**
<https://www.ndrn.org>
 202-408-9514
- **The National Association of State Directors of Developmental Disabilities Services**
 703-683-4202
<https://www.nasddds.org>
cmcgraw@nasddds.org
- **The National Resource Center for Reaching Victims**
<https://www.reachingvictims.org>

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For more information and additional resources, visit https://cops.usdoj.gov/labor_trafficking.

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People with disabilities may be vulnerable to labor and sex trafficking and theft of social security and disability benefits, including by caregivers. Trafficking victims with disabilities may also face obstacles to reporting including accessibility barriers, communication challenges, and prejudice. This publication, *Labor Trafficking among People with Disabilities*, was developed as part of the Partnerships to Address Labor Trafficking project, designed to improve awareness, responsiveness, and accountability on labor trafficking among law enforcement, businesses, communities, the courts, and other stakeholders. It provides steps criminal justice and social service agencies can take to serve this population and links to resources providing further information and assistance.



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