

Responding to Human Trafficking: Developing a Program to Help Victims



Laura Castellanos, associate director at the American Hospital Association, discusses how to develop a human trafficking victim identification and response program.

Why is it important to have such a program?

Human trafficking affects virtually every community in the nation. Whether it is sex or labor trafficking, its victims often turn to hospitals and health systems for care. The needs of these victims can be complex and so many hospitals and health systems have adopted a person-centered and survivor-informed care approach to identify and care for them.

Can a hospital of any size have a program? Are the programs scalable?

Yes. No community, regardless of its size, is immune from trafficking. Many smaller and rural hospitals have developed response programs that are both scalable and replicable. These typically involve developing partnerships with community organizations with some experience with victims, including law enforcement, child protective services, faith-based organizations, and community and social services organizations.

Why it is especially important to train nurses as part of such a program?

Nurses are on the front line of care every day. Human trafficking victims are not always easy to spot, much less treat, for both the physical and mental abuse they have experienced. Training can help nurses identify and assess suspected victims and understand how to administer trauma-informed care. It can also help caregivers learn how to connect victims with community resources that can assist the recovery process.

In training staff to identify victims, what is the role of community partners?

The needs of trafficking victims are complex and often go beyond the identification and care that hospitals and health systems can provide. Partnerships with organizations that can provide shelter, counseling, legal assistance and other

social services are essential to help victims recover. Law enforcement agencies and local government services also can be useful to help hospitals return victims to the community.

In certain circumstances, law enforcement is the first point of contact for individuals forced into trafficking. Therefore, it is important to have collaborative processes with law enforcement to ensure a warm handoff and accurate reporting.

What are some ways to attain buy-in from senior leadership?

An important step is encouraging senior leadership to assess the community's needs and determine whether responding to trafficking is one of them. Working with some of the community partners identified above can help in making an accurate assessment. Another important step would be to make leadership aware of the resources available to provide education and models successfully deployed by similar hospitals for developing a response to human trafficking. The American Hospital Association (AHA) works with the National Human Trafficking Training and Technical Assistance Center that offers free accredited training opportunities for individuals and organizations. Specifically, it offers SOAR (stop, observe, ask, respond) Health and Wellness Training (<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/otip/training/soar-to-health-and-wellness-training>), which is web-based.

It is also important to be aware of requirements in various states for education or training. For example, New York mandates that hospitals adopt policies and procedures for the identification, assessment and referrals of victims of human trafficking while some other states mandate provider education.

Not all victims are identified in the emergency department. Discuss the other hospital areas that might see victims.

Victims of human trafficking are just as likely to present in ambulatory care settings, community health centers, school health clinics and private offices as in the ED.

Does a program typically require outside funding?

Developing a response to trafficking can readily be integrated into a hospital's community benefit activities and outreach. There may, however, be opportunities for additional funding from community and even national organizations. Other funding streams include state Victims of Crime Act funding and grants from the Department of Justice's Office of Victims of Crime.

Where can clinicians view model policies?

The AHA's Hospitals Against Violence initiative has a partnership with HEAL Trafficking (Health, Education, Advocacy and Linkage), which is a multidisciplinary group of over 3,100 survivors and professionals in 35 countries dedicated to ending human trafficking and supporting its survivors, from a public health perspective. HEAL Trafficking provides toolkits (<https://healtrafficking.org/protocols-committee/>) and other resources to aid caregivers and organizations to begin creating policies and procedures. ♦