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## Nebraska Sex Trafficking Survivors Speak – A Qualitative Research Study


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# Nebraska Sex Trafficking Survivors Speak – A Qualitative Research Study

April 2016

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Submitted to:  
The Women's Fund of Omaha



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**Disclaimer:**

**The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of collaborating organizations or the funders.**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This exploratory, qualitative research study was conducted by researchers Dr. Shireen S. Rajaram in the College of Public Health at University of Nebraska Medical Center (UNMC) and Ms. Sriyani Tidball in the College of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln (UNL), and was funded by the Women’s Fund of Omaha. The purpose of this study was to document the perspectives of adult women survivors of sex trafficking about the “3Ps” paradigm: to identify strategies to **prevent** sex trafficking, provide **protection** and support for survivors and **prosecution** of the perpetrators to reduce the demand for sex trafficking. The Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000 defines sex trafficking as a commercial sex act that is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or when there is a commercial sex act involving a person below 18 years of age.

This study is the first of its kind in Nebraska that included the voices of survivors of sex trafficking. Qualitative research through one-on-one interviews provides information directly from survivors in their own words. Our goal was to ensure that the voices of trafficked women were included in on-going efforts to develop a comprehensive statewide plan to effectively combat sex trafficking in Nebraska.

While sex trafficking of children and males is a serious issue, this study only focused on adult female sex trafficking survivors (i.e., they were prostituted against their will), 19 years and older, who may or may not have been sex trafficked while they were minors. To avoid re-traumatizing, we only included women who had not been sex trafficked within the past year.

Through interviews, researchers obtained detailed, rich, and authentic descriptions from 22 women survivors of sex trafficking in Nebraska. Seventeen women lived in the Omaha-Lincoln area and 5 lived in rural Nebraska. Most women had children. Seven women were currently married. Thirteen women were white-Caucasian, four African American, three mixed race/ethnicity, and two Latino. As children, twelve of the women had been in foster care, and one woman had lived in a group home.

### KEY FINDINGS

The following are key findings from the study:

#### ❖ *Prevention*

##### ○ Lack of Awareness, Stigma and Lack of Trust

Participants indicated that a high level of ignorance about sex trafficking exists among all segments of society, including parents, the general public, and professionals such as law enforcement and healthcare professionals. They believe this ignorance is in part due to lack of knowledge of the issues, but also that people did not want to get involved in a subject as uncomfortable as sex trafficking. The women also emphasized that there is a lack of understanding of the difference between prostitution, where a person willingly takes part in the exchange of sex for money, versus sex trafficking, where a commercial sex act takes place through force, fraud, or coercion by a trafficker, and that this coercion is often experienced by the trafficked person at a very young age. As a result, women are often blamed, stigmatized, and held criminally responsible, despite being prostituted against their will. The lack of awareness of sex trafficking and the complex interplay of sex, money, and drugs, coupled with the public reluctance to discussing the issue, fuels both the proliferation and hidden nature of the problem. This intensifies the stigmatization of women and their lack of trust in the legal system, and makes it very

difficult and challenging for them to escape the sex trafficking situation, to reach out for help, or to obtain the social and material assistance they need to get back on their feet to resume or begin a better life.

- Education, Awareness and Training

To enhance prevention efforts, a two-pronged approach is needed. First, to stop sex trafficking from occurring and to reduce the stigma for trafficked women, there needs to be an increase in awareness of the issues among the general public, including among parents, youth, schools, and so forth. Second, to improve early screening and detection of sex trafficking survivors, it is essential to provide education and training of front-line professionals such as healthcare workers, law enforcement personnel, social service providers, hotel employees, and the like who may encounter survivors in their professional roles. The women we spoke with stressed the need for professional sensitivity and understanding in this process. Beyond education, training, and raising awareness, protocols and services need to be in place to meet the immediate and on-going needs of women who have been trafficked.

- ❖ ***Protection of Survivors***

- Immediate Needs

Survivors have unique needs in their short- and long-term recovery. Short-term needs include a safe house away from the reach of the trafficker, counseling by trauma specialists, and medical care to deal with all immediate repercussions of the experience. For example, many women are made to be dependent on drugs as a way to maintain control over them. Hence, substance abuse treatment may very likely be necessary in addition to other medical treatments.

- Beyond Immediate Needs

Survivors require: on-going trauma therapy and medical care; a support system of trusted individuals including peer-to-peer support groups and trusted friends and family where these exist; transitional housing and childcare; job training and job placement; and life skills training such as writing a resume, managing a budget, and the like. Inter-agency social services and medical collaboration is needed to ensure that both referral protocols and necessary services are in place to adequately meet the needs of women as they re-enter “normal” society. Survivors stated that paramount is the need for their records to be expunged of any criminal charges, given that they were trafficked and did not willingly participate in commercial sexual exploitation.

- ❖ ***Prosecution of Perpetrators***

- Stiffer Penalties

Women had different views on the issue of prosecution of perpetrators to reduce demand. Some women felt there needs to be stiffer penalties commensurate with the brutality of the offence of sex trafficking. However, other women felt that intensifying the punishment would not deter perpetrators.

- Better follow-up investigation of complaint  
Law enforcement needs to be diligent in conducting follow-up investigations, rather than unjustly blaming women for prostituting themselves. This would help get more offenders off the street, creating a safer environment for women who were trafficked to come forward with their complaints.
- Rehabilitation program for buyers  
Women also felt that the buyers should be made to go through a rehabilitation program such as a “John’s school” to allow them a chance to re-educate themselves and not recidivate into purchasing sex.
- Registry for sex trafficking offenders  
Some women suggested creating a sex trafficking registry so the actions of buyers and traffickers would be made public and people could be vigilant about protecting them from children.
- Other suggestions  
The women also suggested that buyers and traffickers should be shamed by posting their names on billboards and making their names public in media reporting.

❖ **Other Perspectives**

- Role of Technology  
The women felt that technology has helped sex trafficking flourish and remain underground and undetected. The anonymous nature of the Internet fuels demand. Traffickers use technology to advertise on sites such as *Backpage* and *Craigslist*, and maintain control over women by tracking their cell phones. Social media also puts unsuspecting children at risk for sex traffickers. Women stated that despite the downside of technology, it can also be used for education and outreach to raise awareness of the issue and reach out to women to help them escape and get access to community resources.
- Survivor-Informed  
Many survivors expressed that they would like to see more inclusion of their voices in the planning and implementation of statewide efforts to combat sex trafficking. They felt that including their perspectives would be beneficial in education and outreach, building trust with other survivors, and providing support through peer support groups. Survivors stated that partnering with survivors is needed to build collaborative teams that can work together to address sex trafficking in Nebraska.

Preventing, identifying, and serving survivors of trafficking, and addressing the demand for trafficking requires a multi-system, coordinated approach. Service providers need to be trained in trauma care, and services should be culturally appropriate, and individualized to address physical and mental health needs.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The study revealed the complexity of the issue of sex trafficking. The high level of ignorance about sex trafficking among all segments of society allows for it to exist and thrive, largely undetected. Currently, active planning efforts are underway to create a comprehensive statewide plan to combat trafficking in Nebraska. However, given that very little has been done in Nebraska, there is an urgent need to implement strategies to address prevention, protection and prosecution simultaneously. Focusing on only one without the others will not benefit survivors. We provide the following recommendations:

### ❖ *Prevention of Sex Trafficking*

- Develop, implement, and systematically evaluate programs to raise awareness of sex trafficking among all segments of society—the general public, schools, homeless youth shelters, and others.
- Develop, implement, and systematically evaluate programs to educate and train front-line professionals such as social service and criminal justice professionals (law enforcement officers, judges, probation officers, and so on), healthcare providers (especially emergency room staff), and hospitality industry workers and hotel employees on be alert for the signs of trafficking and to identify survivors. Training must also be culturally competent, survivor-centered, and based on knowledge of current trauma care.
- Develop, implement, and evaluate education outreach programs in places that are not traditionally screened for survivors, such as jails and strip clubs.

### ❖ *Protection of Survivors*

- Develop, implement, and evaluate referral protocols for support services for survivors
- Provide for the immediate needs of survivors and their children, such as safe houses
- Provide for a free recovery program for survivors and their children, including on-going wrap-around services for intermediate and long-term needs (for example, trauma informed therapy, substance abuse treatment, medical care and mental health care, job and life skills, and others)
- Provide a restitution program to compensate survivors for expenses such as rehabilitation services and medical care
- Expunge a woman's record of any prostitution charges once it has been established that she was sex trafficked
- All services should be free

### ❖ *Prosecution of Perpetrators*

- Institute and evaluate policies for harsher penalties, commensurate with the brutality of the crime of sex trafficking
- Conduct follow-up investigations of reported sex trafficking incidents
- Develop, implement, and evaluate shaming strategies such as a sex trafficking registry, billboards, and the like
- Develop, implement, and evaluate rehabilitation programs such as John's schools to reduce recidivism of buyers and sellers



❖ ***Other Strategies***

- Reach out to and collaborate with women survivors in all aspects of planning, implementation, and evaluation of comprehensive statewide efforts (for example, education and outreach, screening and assessment of survivors, peer-to-peer support, and policy advocacy)
- Establish inter-agency collaboration

The accomplishment of the above recommendations will require: 1) tailoring the existing practices and programs to meet local needs; 2) prioritizing and evaluating activities; 3) focusing on existing strengths; and 4) providing trauma-informed services that are culturally, LGBT, gender, and developmentally appropriate. We consider the above to be essential first steps toward achieving the ultimate goal of greatly reducing sex trafficking in the State of Nebraska.

## INTRODUCTION

The Omaha Women’s Fund contacted researchers Dr. Shireen S. Rajaram in the College of Public Health at University of Nebraska Medical Center (UNMC) and Ms. Sriyani Tidball at the College of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln (UNL) (the authors of this report) to conduct a study **to better understand the perspectives of survivors of sex trafficking** in the state of Nebraska. The purpose of this study was to obtain the perspectives of adult women survivors of sex trafficking about the “3Ps” paradigm: to identify strategies to **prevent** sex trafficking, provide **protection** and support for survivors, and ensure **prosecution** of perpetrators to reduce the demand for sex trafficking. Qualitative research through one-on-one interviews allows us to present information directly from survivors, in their own words.

Our goal was to ensure that the voices of women were included in the on-going efforts to develop a comprehensive statewide plan to effectively combat sex trafficking in Nebraska. Since 2012, the Nebraska State Legislature has put forth bills to combat sex trafficking in the state: in October, 2015, the State Attorney General’s office released a report titled, “Report and Recommendations Regarding Establishment of the Nebraska Human Trafficking Task Force (NHTTF).” The Women’s Fund of Omaha, an important leader of statewide efforts to combat sex trafficking, has as their key focus areas public awareness, responsible research, and service provision. The findings from this study will help inform on-going, statewide efforts to enhance prevention, protection, and prosecution, and to promote collaborative efforts to improve the lives of sex traffic survivors.

## BACKGROUND

Sex trafficking is a multi-billion dollar industry and has been reported in all states in the U.S. The Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000 defines sex trafficking as a commercial sex act that is induced by force, fraud or coercion, or when there is a commercial sex act involving a person below 18 years of age [1]. Other terms used to describe sex trafficking are modern-day slavery [2] and commercial sexual exploitation [3]. In this report, we will consistently use the term sex trafficking. While both genders are affected by sex trafficking, sex trafficking is often seen as a form of gender-based violence that mainly affects women [3,4]. Estimates indicate that the majority of survivors of sex trafficking are women and girls [4-6]. Thus, the focus of our report will be on women.

Sex trafficking is a serious public health issue and has long-term physical, mental, social, and economic consequences for survivors, their families, and communities [3,5]. In many cases, trafficking survivors are exploited by people that are known to them – neighbors, relatives, boyfriends, lovers, or fiancés – who take advantage of trusting relationships [2,3]. Once survivors escape or are recovered from their trafficking situations, they often require special services that encompass a wide variety of systems.

All the 3Ps—prevention, protection and prosecution—are essential to address the issue of sex trafficking [7,8]; they continue to serve as the fundamental international framework used by the United States and around the world to combat contemporary forms of slavery. The U.S. Department of State's Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons employs diplomatic, economic, political, legal, and cultural tools to advance the “3Ps” paradigm worldwide [7,8].

In the past few years, there has been increasing attention to sex trafficking in Nebraska, from diverse groups including grass-roots advocacy organizations and policy makers. However, despite this increasing attention to sex trafficking there is a dearth of research, particularly from the survivors' perspective, and this is the case both locally and nationally. The reasons are many [3,9]. The crime is underground, and occurs in the "shadows" of society, and thus goes largely undetected. Survivors may not be aware that they are being trafficked and may not identify as such. They may not trust the authorities and so do not come forward to reach out for help from them. Survivors are often blamed, stigmatized, and held criminally responsible for sex trafficking. Often their safety and that of their family is at stake. They may fear retaliation from the traffickers who control and exploit them. Also, those who may routinely come into contact with survivors, such as healthcare and social service providers, may lack the awareness or tools to identify and support survivors [3,9]. Lack of attention to the problem of sex trafficking in general results in further marginalization of survivors, and allows buyers and traffickers to evade detection by law-enforcement, or to continue without serious penalties.

The paucity of survivor-informed data and the lack of understanding of their needs makes it difficult to screen and identify them, or to tailor services to help them get or resume a better life once out of trafficking. Thus, the main objective of this study is to gather systematic data on the "lived experience" of adult sex trafficking survivors in Nebraska.

## **METHODS**

### **RESEARCH APPROACH**

We determined that a qualitative study, using a narrative research approach, would be the most appropriate and beneficial given that no research exists in Nebraska from the point of view of survivors. Narrative research is helpful in exploring the lived experience of a person's real life problems. Through one-on-one interviews, researchers obtained detailed, rich, and authentic descriptions from the survivors. We made every effort to include survivors from across Nebraska.

We also used purposive and snowball sampling [10] for the study. A purposive sample is a non-representative sample, focused on a specific purpose or research issue. While sex trafficking of children and males is a serious issue, this study only focused on adult female sex trafficking survivors (i.e., they were prostituted against their will), 19 years and older, who may or may not have been sex trafficked while they were minors. To avoid re-traumatizing, we only included women who had not been sex trafficked within the past year.

### **DATA COLLECTION**

We collaborated with "key informants" or trusted organizations and individuals who work with or are networked with survivors of sex trafficking, to identify and contact potential participants for the study. If interested, participants directly replied to the researchers to set up a convenient time and place for the interviews. The research study was approved by the Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) of both UNMC and UNL.

We conducted the interviews, either in person or over the phone. We are trained in qualitative research and experienced in conducting research projects involving one-on-one interviews with

vulnerable populations. Each interview started with one of the interviewers introducing herself to the participant. Next, the interviewer reviewed the informed consent form. Interviews began only after the study was fully explained and any questions answered to ensure that participants had a complete understanding of the study before they consented. Participants were not required to sign the informed consent form to maintain their confidentiality and were provided with a copy of the form. At this time, they were also given a list of healthcare services that provided mental health services at free or low-cost.

To avoid re-traumatizing survivors, we did not ask them about their personal experience of sex trafficking; however, women survivors were told that they were free to share any information with the interviewer even if not directly covered by the interview questions. Participants had the option to not answer any questions and they could terminate the interview at any time. The questions followed an Interview Guide broadly focused on the “3Ps” (again, prevention of trafficking, protection or the provision of support for survivors, and prosecution of perpetrators) to address the demand for sex trafficking. (See Appendix A for a copy of the Interview Guide.)

On completion of the interview, participants were provided a \$25 gift card as a token of appreciation for their participation in the study. Key informants were provided with cost reimbursement for assisting with recruitment.

Interviews were audio recorded with the permission of the participants and recordings were professionally and confidentially transcribed. These digital recordings and transcripts were uploaded to a secure, password-protected UNMC server. Transcripts were analyzed for key themes using *NVivo 11*, a software program for qualitative data analysis [11]. Pseudonyms are used in the reported results, and the names of people and organizations have all been redacted.

## **ANALYSIS**

Our analysis involved both a top-down and bottom-up coding approach. In a top-down coding process, key codes are developed based on the main goals and conceptual focus of the study, and on the interview guide. Bottom-up codes emerged during the process of analysis of the transcripts. Codes are a short word or phrase that represents the descriptive or analytical essence of a section of the transcript. The research team reviewed the transcripts and through discussion and consensus, developed the code-book that included the codes and definitions for each. We individually coded the same transcript using the codebook, and then compared codes, which resulted in a 90% level of agreement. This demonstrated reliability of the coding process; we allotted similar meaning to codes, and both of us were able to extract the same section of the transcript related to the different codes. Beyond this, themes emerged from a cluster of similar codes. Once the codebook was developed, the first author coded and analyzed the rest of the transcripts based on the codebook. During the process of data collection, we took field notes including insights and impressions of the interview process, and these field notes were also used in the interpretation of data.

## RESULTS

### PARTICIPANTS

	N	%
<b>Area</b>		
<b>Omaha-Lincoln</b>	17	77.3%
<b>Other</b>	5	22.7%
<b>Age</b>		
<b>19-25</b>	10	45.5%
<b>26-35</b>	7	31.8%
<b>36-47</b>	5	22.7%
<b>Have Children</b>		
<b>Yes</b>	19	86.4%
<b>No</b>	3	13.6%
<b>Education</b>		
<b>No GED</b>	6	27.2%
<b>GED/High School Diploma</b>	8	36.4%
<b>Some College</b>	5	22.7%
<b>College Degree</b>	1	4.6%
<b>Master's Degree</b>	2	9.1%
<b>Currently Married</b>		
<b>Yes</b>	7	31.8%
<b>No</b>	15	68.2%
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>		
<b>White-Caucasian</b>	13	59.1%
<b>Latino/Hispanic</b>	2	9.1%
<b>African-American</b>	4	18.2%
<b>Mixed Race/Ethnicity</b>	3	13.6%
<b>Living Situation while growing-up</b>		
<b>Foster care</b>	12	54.6%
<b>Group home</b>	1	4.6%
<b>Parents</b>	9	40.9%
<b>Employment Status</b>		
<b>Unemployed</b>	6	27.3%
<b>Employed (Part-time or Full-time)</b>	14	63.6%
<b>Disability (PTSD)</b>	2	9.1%

Table 1 provides information on the demographic background of participants. A total of 22 women were interviewed.

### KEY THEMES

The key themes presented below are based on the “3Ps”: a) prevention of sex trafficking, b) protection of survivors, and c) prosecution of perpetrators.

#### Prevention

Themes relating to prevention of sex trafficking include the prevention of trafficking from occurring in the first place, as well as reducing the impact of sex trafficking once it occurs through screening and identification of survivors.

#### *Lack of Awareness*

The women commented that there was a high level of societal ignorance and general lack of awareness in Nebraska about sex trafficking. In their opinion, the general public felt that it only occurred in other countries and not in the U.S.

*Shannon: We always relate...trafficking...with like other countries, we think about how terrible it is, you know or workers, kid workers in China and stuff. But when they hear about how prominent it is in our own state, people are just shocked. They're floored...Like they cannot believe like that it's here and it's just baffling to me that it can happen right in front of us and we have no clue.*

*Alice: I mean, we're just starting out. Everybody's finally just opening their eyes and, and realizing that yes, in fact, it does happen in the United States and yes, it does happen in the Midwest...like I said...it happened to me 17 years ago and up until probably a year ago, my story, people would look at me like I was, had four heads and must've had a really good trip*

*on some acid. Because yeah, they're like that doesn't happen. I'm like yes, it does. Way more than you think it does.*

Two women felt that people in the Midwest, especially in small town may be especially vulnerable.

*Alice: You know, they prey upon girls out here in the Midwest because we're naïve, because we don't know about the big cities... We're a lot more trusting...and they love to hit these small towns. I mean, that's a big thing. People don't realize. They think because in a small town, USA, population 1500, that they're safe. No! They're more vulnerable than anybody else. You know? You don't even lock your door.*

*Jane: No, I'm actually just finding out how bad it is out here, you know, in these small areas. I always thought it was in the big towns, in the cities, and stuff, and I'm just really finding out how bad it is here too.*

Most of the women themselves were unaware of the concept of sex trafficking and did not know that they were a survivor of sex trafficking.

*Becky: The first time it happened that's not what they called it and it wasn't even considered. I didn't figure out until like years later what had actually happened to me and what it was.*

*Sally: So...I really didn't even know what sex trafficking was until I told about my situation, and I was told that you know, "You were taken advantage of, and it just wasn't right."*

In addition to the lack of awareness, women felt that there was societal apathy towards the issue of sex trafficking and people either did not care enough or did not want to be bothered with matters that made them uncomfortable.

*Nancy: It's easier to – if you think that something's going on at your neighbor's house, we'll all just be quiet. Close your eyes to it, even though you know. Like people don't speak up. People don't stand up for each other...I mean, people have a blind eye, or they don't do anything.*

*Monica: People use discomfort as an excuse to not get involved or to not discuss it, to not talk about it...You know we're all individual and don't butt into my business and those kinds of things...but, the people who are vulnerable, the people who need us to speak up, we can't just keep walking past them every day and expect them to be okay. If we want to get to prevention we have to stop being passive by-standers in this.*

Nine women stated that society did not fully comprehend the complex inter-play of the sex, drugs, and money that is involved in sex trafficking.

*Tina: There are some that are going to be there, but most of the females out there are under age or they are of age and they're forced to do it. They're hooked on drugs and that's how they can't get out is because they're on drugs and they get that money to keep the drugs in the system...a man that's controlling them and abusing them...*

*Vicky: The way I was brought into it was by drugs... it's a lot of men who are on those, methamphetamine is that main drug that leads it into it. That's the number one drug out*

*here in Nebraska...and that drug is a drug that gets a lot of men, getting on like, turned on by women doing that to go make their money; it's their hustle.*

They felt that most people, including professionals working with survivors, were not “trauma-informed” (trained in psychological trauma care) and did not understand how threats, coercion, violence and psychological manipulation that are an integral part of trafficking could control an individual, making exit out of the life of being trafficked problematic and recovery challenging.

*Nancy: I, I was held out of fear, like, and they're going to think that their parents are going to be killed or, I mean, those are the kind of things that the trafficker, the pimp, holds over you. To threaten you, to make you submissive. And to do as they've asked, or told you...And it isn't just intimidation, it could actually be torture...its not just that they put you in a room and man after man after man come in. There's a whole lot more to it than that. They withhold things from you so that you just submit to them even more. So they have a heavier hand on you. So that when they say jump backwards, you don't hesitate but to jump backwards....Because it's -- there's torment, and we're not talking just the pimps and the traffickers. The clientele themselves want very odd, not always.*

*Shannon: Are we going to be killed? Like, I always thought, am I going to die, am I going to die, am I going to die. That was always my biggest fear is that is this guy going to kill me one day, you know.*

Thus, the lack of public awareness of both the existence of sex trafficking and the complex and toxic dynamics of coercion, sex, drugs, threats, and psychological manipulation made women and girls feel isolated and marginalized by society, and made reaching out for help very difficult.

### ***Stigma and Lack of Trust***

The women felt that they are often stigmatized, labeled and blamed for being sex trafficked. This stems from the lack of understanding among all segments of society about the difference between prostitution, where a person willingly takes part in the exchange of sex for money, versus sex trafficking, where a commercial sex act takes place through force, fraud, or coercion and where women cannot easily leave. Six women felt that there needs to be a better level of public awareness on the distinction between prostitution and sex trafficking.

*Shannon: I think it's really important that we make sure that we...try and separate the two. Like there's the prostitutes and there is traffickers – trafficked victims. Like, I really, really want to make sure that that's something that I've always [emphasized] when I talk to people...*

*Becky: I think for me that was, like, my biggest issue...They labeled me as a prostitute and not a trafficking victim. And, I had to explain to a lot of people, like yes, I might have been doing prostitution, but it wasn't my choice. It wasn't like, if wanted to stop, I could stop, you know? There were times where I wish I could've stopped and I tell people all the time. I say I'd rather have been dead than doing what I was doing a lot of times, but I didn't have a choice*

*Mabel: And I feel weird about even when I stand up and say I'm a human trafficking*

*survivor, because I feel like all of a sudden people think I'm a prostitute. And I'm not, and I don't know what's wrong with talking about being a prostitute, but it's just weird, you know, like the, the stigma.*

Because of the ignorance and lack of awareness, people are sometimes reluctant to take complaints of abuse of trafficking seriously. This even further re-traumatizes survivors and leads to further diminished trust of any outsider who might be available for help. Also, trafficked women are often hesitant to reach out for help for fear of being disbelieved, judged, and stigmatized.

*Becky: I find out about a lot of victims...we all have the same story. When we finally do break free and escape...it's not like...you're not breaking free, you're not escaping because you're still fighting. Now, you're trying to fight to prove your point...like I was done wrong and a lot of people don't see it like that. Maybe they do now better because there's more education, but for a while people didn't see that.*

*Sally: The time that it happened, I told my grandma. My dad's mom. First, she just looked at me. She was like, "So, you're really going to play this card?" That's exactly what she said to me. I said, "Grandma I'm not lying." She whooped me. She whooped me. My dad got off of work that day, and he took me home, and he whooped me again.*

*Jane: That's the problem, because nobody is really believing that it's happening...Nobody believe, even when your parents don't believe you, so you don't trust nobody else to believe you....Because you're taught, what happens in the house stays in the house. You know, you don't say nothing, but deep down inside, you know it's not right. But a lot of people are brought up like that, you don't talk, you don't say nothing. You know, or it's your fault it happened.*

### **Education, Awareness & Training**

To enhance prevention efforts, a two-pronged approach is needed. First, to stop sex trafficking from occurring and to reduce the stigma, shame and embarrassment, there must be increased education and awareness of the issues among the general public including among parents, youth, schools, etc. Second, to improve early screening and detection of sex trafficking survivors, education and training of front-line professionals (healthcare workers, hotel employees, and the like) who may encounter survivors in their professional role is essential.

#### Public Awareness

The women suggested that education was essential to address the lack of public awareness, reduce the stigma associated with sex trafficking, and create a safe environment for women and girls to reach out for help.

*Monica: People are shocked, super-shocked when you start talking about sex trafficking, especially when you start talking about in terms of children or people who were minors at one point in time being trafficked, and that by itself keeps people from talking....We need to be able to have those uncomfortable conversations...You know, to remove those barriers which is kind of what a stigma is, um, making it more upfront an issue instead of behind the scenes all the time. I think honestly, talking about it more is one of the best ways.*



*Nancy: I really think education, educating people, even at a younger age and starting at that point in time onward up to even the elderly and... I think everybody just needs to know. Educating. Being aware. Go back to looking out for your neighbor....Caring enough.*

*Alice: Giving better education, I think, is going to be, the, the biggest key. Ok. Because they're all, I mean, they're not creative. They're all the same. They use the same...bait. They do the same...they have their pattern and, you know, unfortunately, it's what works because most people are unaware of what their pattern is.*

Public awareness needs to include parents, family members, and children. One woman mentioned that she was trafficked from her home and her parents saw the signs but did not know what to do about it. Increasing public awareness will increase the likelihood that others might intervene to stop the trafficking from taking place.

*Jenny: I guess again awareness is the big- a big thing, a big part of it. Awareness for not just the girls that might be in the situation, but also for others to know and watch for signs... 'cause the victims might not always feel comfortable, speaking out, and then that way if everyone's aware, then others can also come in and try to help.*

Additionally, one woman stressed the importance of working with children to help them identify the safe adult in their lives that they could reach out to if they needed help.

*Monica: Helping kids especially understand you know who are the safe people in your life and what does a safe person look like...safe adults are people who are going to keep your confidence but also know to keep you safe, physically, emotionally, spiritually, sexually in all of those ways to keep you safe... if we are teaching our kids to recognize who those people are...if that's been something historically for them or perhaps not – that safety isn't a part of their vocabulary...So they need to be able to find a safe person that might not be a parent that they can talk to and confide in.*

The women cautioned that the trafficker or the buyers could be anyone, including a family member and they may not necessarily present themselves as a scary predator.

*Shannon: At least in my experience...we're not talking about just single men. We're talking about men that are married, men that have families...we're talking about pastors, doctors, you know people, not just you know... People think of a man who would, who would be someone who would solicit sex as someone who was either some perv or some old ugly fat guy. It's not the case. It's a regular old guy. It's a politician. It's a doctor. It's a lawyer. It's a lonely man whose wife is cheating on him...It's all kinds of people that you'd never believe.*

*Sally: Just like I said, in my eyes, there's a lawyer out there that's doing it to kids. There's a judge out there that's doing it to kids. There's an officer, an officer of the law you know that's probably doing it to the kids.*

The women shared that education needs to include the signs of trafficking, what to look for and steps that people can take to reach out for help.

*Katie: ...having even like a class type to where you can have people give you ideas on how it's happened or the signs of looking on if it's going to happen, and do I need to leave this*

*situation...showing them techniques, showing them words or signs...its knowing their expressions and knowing their words...*

In addition to signs of trafficking, the women felt that it was important to teach young girls and boys, about healthy relationships and provide them with the negotiation skills to resist falling prey to “grooming” overtures from traffickers.

*Monica: “...and healthy relationships especially, healthy romantic relationships, what that looks like and you know how to handle like the peer pressure that comes along with breaking up with someone when you’re seeing all those red flags. We’ve seen it happen a lot, that kids stay with someone that’s not positive for them because their friends like them or their friends think that it’s so cool that they’re older or they have money or a car or whatever, and if they’re seeing red flags and they’re not feeling comfortable, they need to have that – they need to be empowered to say no and to step away from that relationship, even if it doesn’t necessarily lead to trafficking.*

*Alice: So educate the parents, the teachers very much, girls, absolutely. But the signs, but also that they are valued. And don’t...depend on one person’s opinion of you. Your friends’ opinions, all of your friends, all, your whole social support network. Is worth more than one person’s word...And if you can communicate that and get that across to other kids, then I feel they won’t fall victim to not only trafficking, but violence.*

Three women felt that boys needed to be educated at a young age about respecting and valuing women.

*Tammy: I don’t want my boys to act, to even think about it, you know. I want my boys to make sure that they know that you don’t – you can’t treat a women any kind of way, you know. Like no way. The same respect you have for your mom, you better have for all these girls out here too. Like that’s real.*

*Susan: I think someone needs to reach out to the guys and let them know, like before they even get the idea, you know, before they start doing it, like pretty much just kill the idea and the thought...Because if you teach about and if a boy starts to have the thought in his head, and then once he actually learns that it's something that's like horrible and stuff, he might not even think about it no more.*

One woman stated that addressing the issue of pornography was important.

*Nancy: ... that men would no longer buy sex. They would no longer be into pornography and all of those things...I think by being exposed to pornography...I think that once you start opening the door to pornography or opening the door to seeing things, even if it’s on TV, just a little bit watching things are inappropriate -- gets your mind going and then you’re maybe on the internet searching for stuff, looking for stuff, it gets to be more and more, pretty soon, the normal thing...pretty soon that’s not enough and as, as they get older, you know, maybe they’re married and their wife doesn’t do the things that they want so they reach out a little bit...*

In addition to increasing of awareness and training, a few women mentioned that referral protocols need to be in place so people will know who to contact if they suspected that sex trafficking was occurring.

*Monica: I think that those pieces are critical, whether that's in health care, social services, juvenile justice, the education system, even transportation. I think really for me, that's one of my biggest wishes, is that we have those pieces in place. Kids can't protect themselves you know and if we really want to get to a place where we're actually preventing it, we need to have adults in place who are trained and know what they're doing and that we have a system with how to deal with that...there has to be a strategy. There has to be a plan, and people have to be trained in order to implement it and that's the big thing for me, but then also just that the general public is aware.*

Another woman discussed the need to have a standardized core curriculum to ensure that the right people in the community were getting the required information, keeping in mind that there are different groups involved in raising awareness in the community.

*Becky: Like, I know there's a lot of different things educating, but I feel like it's a lot of people learning different things. but, I just wish there was a, like, this is the standard, like this is like a broad...like, you know, how you have like a curriculum for...it's like here's the base. Everyone needs to learn – needs basic things because I feel like when different people do it you miss out on things. You don't catch things; but, if everybody's on the same, like learning, it's like, you know what to expect and I feel like that's not there.*

Increasing public awareness will help reduce the ignorance and misconception associated with sex trafficking and create a more welcoming environment for women and girl survivors to share their stories, reach out for help and access needed services to help them overcome their experience with sex trafficking.

### Schools

To increase public awareness, women stressed the need for schools to educate children on sex trafficking. Some felt that education about sex trafficking needed to occur in schools as early as the 4th or 5th grade, although many were aware of the sensitive nature of the topic and possible challenges in implementing it in schools.

*Becky: For me, I think like a center for like education and I feel like it should be something mandatory talked about in schools. I think, so, like, if we could like a curriculum – like if there if there was like a curriculum that was actually, I guess safe enough to be taught at schools at a certain, just like they teach sex education, because I feel like it's something a lot of kids don't know about.*

*Alice: I think education needs to start definitely as early as 5th grade...Every child needs to be educated, you know? The teachers need to educate. High school teachers need to be educated as to what to watch for. You know, if they're noticing a girl getting isolated and starting to look a little withdrawn, that's an important thing to notice....Boys definitely. Boys, boys are trafficked just as much as girls.*

*Susan: If the schools got more involved, I think it'd be able to like a lot more awareness and people would know that it's happening...Because that's how I had, it started with me, it was when I was in school. It was like me and six other girls...And like boys are thinking that it's cool now because they can do it to their girlfriends. And so that's, I mean middle, or high school is like my biggest like focus...I mean I was only 16 and I got completely fooled into it. I thought I was gonna be with the guy forever and everything else, and then I ended up having to do stuff for him and his friends... More high school now, but middle school I don't know because now I see like kids in middle school as just kind of, I see kids from how I was...*

One woman suggested that human trafficking be taught as separate class in schools, starting in middle-school. Another woman did not want the schools to be the first one to discuss this topic with her children and was of the opinion that it was the responsibility of the parent. Two, women felt that parents and the community need to be more involved in watching out for and protecting their children.

*Mary: [It] is hugely, hugely on the parents being open and talking to their kids about what goes on and not, not sugarcoating anything because nothing's to sugarcoat about it, it's, it's not fun to have to go through anybody forcing you to do any kind of any sexual act...So just the community pulling together and becoming more aware to what's going on and having people step up that's like if you see something, say something.*

Another woman emphasized that education at schools needs to be sensitive to the fact that children may have experienced sexual abuse. There needs to be sensitivity in the delivery of information. Additionally, trauma-informed protocols need to be in place to address any issues that may arise.

### Criminal Justice System

The women stated that the lack of awareness among law enforcement, judges and others in the criminal justice system led to the re-traumatization of women.

First, several women stated that they were blamed by law enforcement for partaking in prostitution due to a lack of understanding of the difference between prostitution and sex trafficking, as described earlier.

*Becky: The police officer automatically treated me like I was a prostitute, like I was doing something wrong, interrogating me and it was just like they never stopped and looked at my face. Never thought about let me look at her, like this girl looks like she's been through hell and back, no.*

Second, women stated that members of the criminal justice system lacked a trauma-informed perspective and were unaware of its effects.

*Shannon: But the judge wrote in my, in my actual paperwork [application for disability], in my three denials, I had to fight it three times, that there's no way that I'm disabled or could be disabled because I'm too smart, that I have too much education...That my anxiety couldn't be that debilitating if I'm, if I'm smart enough to figure out how to get through legal loopholes to fight this...Like, I was trying to explain to him and he looks at, he's looking*

*at me like I'm an idiot... Like I can't have PTSD because I'm not a veteran? That's ridiculous. That is the dumbest statement I've ever heard in my entire life.*

Third, referral protocols need to be in place with inter-agency collaboration (e.g., city police, state trooper, FBI, etc.), so women would get the help they require.

*Alice: But then also you have the um, law enforcement agencies that need to understand if a girl calls the sheriff's office and says this has happened to me, they should know who to contact for that girl to get her justice... Don't look at it like the girl's automatically coming off of some hare-brained drug trip story. You know? Treat her like she's a human being. She hasn't been treated like a human being in a while....*

*Nancy: Is it put out there to say, if you are a woman who has the opportunity to flee for your life, to flee to get out of something, you can go here or here or here, be it Target. They will report it. So the – you know. The hospital. You know? I mean, be at the fire station, be at, I mean, I don't know. If, if it goes to the fire station, so do they call the police and say, this and this and that's happened.*

Fourth, the sole focus on interrogation and information gathering at the time of reporting without consideration of the emotional wellbeing of women further traumatized them.

*Nancy: Then they [police] want to know the pimp and they want to know – it becomes more of an interrogation versus, oh, my gosh, let us get you off the street, let us get you in a safe place so you can think about it...It's no longer that you are the, a victim or anything else. You are the information center, and they want all your information, and it doesn't make a difference about torment and the, anything else...They're forgetting this is a human who has - just went through, yeah...This is somebody who has been murdered inside already. I think when these things happen to you, you begin to shut down, it doesn't take – take long at all before you die inside. You're just a shell. It's really what you become. And to go from that into you know...what sounds better? Is it better to go sit with a police – a bunch of police officers interrogating you?...It's not that you don't want that. But there's a time and place for that.*

Fifth, while women were anxious to provide information to law enforcement, they were fearful of retaliation by their traffickers and were concerned for the safety and well-being of their friends and family members.

*Nancy: And the more you share about your perpetrator, the more fear it puts inside of you because they've already made threats, they've already done this and that. So now if they think – you think that if they go and they get arrested or, or questioned, they're going to go to your family, they're going to go – maybe...they never really ever do...But the threat is still there. It's just as real as all the beatings and everything else that take place, you know?*

Education of and training of members of the criminal justice system including law enforcement from a trauma-informed perspective is essential. Also a survivor-centered approach will help to ensure that referral protocols are in place where survivors can go to seek help.

## Healthcare organizations

The women also mentioned the lack of awareness among healthcare professionals, and how this only served to re-traumatize them. Women emphasized that healthcare providers need to know both the signs of a trafficked victim and have the professional skills and sensitivity to talk about the issue with women.

*Becky: If I had a wand to wave it would be just the clinic for trafficking victims. Like, that would be the best thing ever because when I came home I went to the ER and it was the most awkward thing ever, um...they treated it more like – as like a rape victim and it's two completely different things. And I think a lot of people don't get that. And then, like the doctor was just like, so you were prostituting, and I was like, no. I was like well, I mean yes...And, I didn't want to go to a doctor ever again, like, for months after that... there was like no sensitivity. There was no bedside manner for it. I felt like they were treating me as I was just some girl that came in and she had been drunk or, you know, someone just took advantage of her.*

Some women felt that healthcare organizations (especially emergency rooms), hotels and other venues that women might come in contact with, could discretely provide information on community resources should they be ready and want to escape their life of being sex trafficked.

*Alice: And there's a point which you separate them [in the ER] to give her that information...And she may not take it. The first time or the second time. You know? But at least she knows. You know, [name of organization redacted] actually puts out lipsticks with their, with their numbers on, on there...You know getting that kind of information to a girl is just priceless...So yeah, emergency rooms need to be knowing of ways to more discreetly give information...Here, here's some clothes, and some makeup and there are numbers on the makeup so if you need to call – he's not going to look. He's not going to search the makeup...So when they get that moment that they can call, they can call. They got the information...Nothing obvious.*

## Hotels

Women indicated that in addition to healthcare organizations, hotels would be a good place to increase awareness among employees since many women meet their buyers in hotels. Training hotel employees to recognize signs of trafficking would be of direct help in identification of survivors. Women suggested that hotels could discretely provide anti-trafficking materials in rooms and that women can safely obtain them.

*Susan: The hotel that I used to work at, I'd see girls come in there all the time, and you could tell that they were not wanting to be there....And I mean I know the stuff that goes on in those rooms. I mean I just, I lived there for almost two years, so I know like stuff that goes on in there and everything...I think if people knew like what to look for, it would help a lot too.*

*Alice: Yeah. Hotels? Hotels would be really great, I mean, they put the Gideon bible in there you could very much well put in, you know, the hotline information somehow some way, you know....Many hotels I have been in...it would be a perfect place to put information*

*in...Even if it's just the hotel worker seeing this situation, getting that feeling and going, oh, hey, you know what? I got this little, you know, travel-sized pocket for you, you know, and it's on a shampoo bottle or, you know. A toothbrush or something...Things I wish were there for me...Huge impact. Huge impact...Eventually everybody wants to leave...They want to go home. They want to live normal [lives].*

### Organizations Serving Homeless Youth

Many women received tremendous support from two organizations -- one in Omaha and one in Lincoln -- that serve homeless youth. These organizations are well networked with youth, especially vulnerable homeless youth who are at-risk of being trafficked, and can be an important venue to raise awareness.

*Shannon: Yes, so-and so [name redacted], but they are an incredible and amazing program...for the youth and young adults who are homeless in Nebraska offering, I mean, anywhere from drop ins to getting you know toiletries, clothing, a hot meal every day...they also serve...the LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender] community because they are, since they are non-religious affiliated...they were amazing...and just being able, you know, to get a hug or to get a meal, to get some clean socks...you can shower alone, like all by yourself. And that's, and that's huge. I mean, that's really huge. It's, it's a huge thing to have privacy, to have dignity.*

### Other Venues for Outreach/Education

*Jails.* The women said that jails would be another ideal place to reach out to women and provide them with education on what sex trafficking was, and where they could obtain information on community resources if they wanted to leave their pimp. The women also stressed that their record should be expunged of any legal wrongdoing with respect to sex trafficking.

*Susan: Like with the jails, like girls that keep getting arrested for prostitution and things, I think if someone actually sat down and talked to them...if there might have been like a class or something, you know, like an awareness thing put in the jails...if there was more people...reached out to them, that, there'd be a lot more people coming and talking about it, and there'd be a lot more, people getting in trouble....if there was more education about it...it wouldn't be happening as much, and girls would be able to know who to talk to and where to go.*

Although one woman did not think that incarceration was appropriate for survivors, she felt that providing assistance for survivors in jails might increase the likelihood of survivors leaving their traffickers.

*Alice: Jails...because: a), it removes her from the men; b) it cleans her up. She dries out. I mean, it's just like another safe house. And by the time she gets out, he's already moved on to new merchandise. She's now free to, you know, free to move wherever she needs to move, you know?...I mean, going in and saying hey, you know, when you get out, we, we've got this place for you where you can start to kind of rebuild your life, get the education you need...Telling that to them is going to be huge because they get out of jail, they don't know what to do. They got no money, they got no home... you work on a program to...make them*

*see that no, this man did not take care of you. This man gave you, yes, what you needed, but the large majority of the money you made went into his pocket. You survived only because he said yes or no.*

**Strip Clubs.** One woman mentioned the need to educate women in strip clubs.

*Mabel: I haven't heard of anybody doing it, I think that people should be going into places where women already at risk, like the um, uh, exotic dance kind of clubs that there's a great potential there to reach women that are at risk. I think that's, that's where I encountered my traffickers and I think that's a great venue to stop things... Um, first of all, I think that there should be kind of, if you're going to have a, a strip club in Nebraska, I think you should be certified that you're giving presentations to prevent exploitation of women and sex trafficking. If they were required to have that by their license, I think that a lot of education could take place and reach vulnerable women.*

Such a two-pronged targeting, in both an increase in public awareness of sex trafficking while focusing on training and education for front-line professionals who may encounter survivors in their routine activities, is seen by these women as essential and inseparable.

### **Protection of Survivors**

The second of the “3Ps” involves protection or the provision of support for survivors. A great deal of support is needed for Nebraska women who escape being sex trafficked by traffickers who may include family members. Support is needed in the immediate aftermath of leaving a sex trafficking situation, but also for months and years afterward as trafficked women rebuild their lives.

### ***Immediate Support***

#### **Safe House**

Women have short-term needs that include a safe place away from the reach of their pimp, one that allows them to work through the immediate aftermath of their experiences. Hotlines were helpful, but the women emphasized that they needed to know that there was a place they could safely escape to, away from the trafficker, and to be assured that they would be provided free and basic needs along with crisis mental health services.

*Nancy: Yes. A place where they could feel safe...they don't have to fear about their trafficker or their pimp coming after them...they could have basic needs met without any obligations, but it clothes, especially food, warm bed...a comfortable place to sleep...I've heard that if you, if you don't want your child, you could take [the child] to the safe house and no questions asked. What about the girl trying to get off the street? Is there a safe house for that?...There is a help line...but sometimes the phone isn't the thing that you need. Sometimes it's knowing the place that you could go to.*

*Susan: I know there's hotline and stuff, but I think if there was that one place where a girl could go and be like look this is a situation and then they could get the help from there...like safe haven place for them to go...even if it's for a night, like a safe place for them to come and hide away.*



*Alice: Safe house is one of the biggest things, you know, trying to get the girls a safe, secluded area for them to debrief. I think immediately, they need to be put in a place where they feel safe. Because they're in shell-shock. And until that dissipates, they need to be just somewhere where they know they're safe. Where every sound doesn't make them jump under the bed, where you know, a certain car driving by doesn't, you know. That would be safe houses.*

*Yolanda: There's no, when I wanted to get out, there's no one I could go to. Like there was nobody I could talk to, there was nobody, there was nothing. There was me and my thoughts. That's all there was...there needs to be, there needs to be a place where women can reach out and they can go there. And then maybe they'll start wanting to talk and tell people more stuff of what's going on and why these places are underground, that they came from. If they have safe haven to go to.... Yeah.*

Four women did not think that a domestic violence shelter or a homeless shelter were options for those who have been sex trafficking. They felt that their needs were different from those of a domestic violence survivor and thus their needs might not be met at a regular shelter, and that a lack of understanding at such a shelter might easily lead to their re-traumatization. Also, domestic violence shelters may not be readily available to meet their immediate needs for safety.

*Alice: I would not have gone to a shelter. Ever. Yeah, that's not an option. It's just too traumatizing. A program to rebuild is a very different thing.*

*Tammy: There's not a lot of actual shelter here....Like you have to be on a waiting list to get into a shelter...he was still at -large, you know, and they were trying to find him and did you know, let me tell you, I was right next to him in an apartment complex...where I was staying with a friend...And I didn't even know it. And I was in fear for my life. I was in fear for, like, you know, because they were out there looking for him, and he was on the run...not having a place to go...that's what women are faced with; there's no actual room for you to come right then, at that time, when you actually needed it, you know.*

One woman stated that in addition to a safe place, substance abuse treatment is a significant need for them. Drugs are often involved in sex trafficking which a trafficker uses to maintain control over the women.

*Tina: Yeah, like a safe house. Yeah, a safe house with counseling but it should have rehab in it for the ones that are, you know, they got addicted to drugs because there's a lot of females out there that have just done cocaine because their pimp got them on that so they don't leave. It's a way of...it's controlling the women with the drugs.*

As stated earlier, women felt that the information about the safe place should be readily available so they would be assured that if they reached out for help, there would be a protocol in place, and they would be connected to the right organizations and receive the support that they require.

### Build Trust

While the existence of a safe house is the first step, women also felt that they would have to trust the authorities before they decided to reach out for help. They did not feel comfortable going into

an environment where they would be judged or, worse, criminalized for being sex trafficked. Women emphasized that it was hard for them to trust anyone after experiencing sex trafficking.

*Becky: Yeah, I think it needs to be an assurance of, like, for me my biggest fear was okay, so if – so whatever they'd ask me like are you just feeding me a dream?...Like, I want to be able to go somewhere safe that he can't find me, that he can't just go wait for me to come out one day and snatch me right back up and I have to pay for it all over again, so...*

*Tina: A lot of women, they don't believe that there's a safe place. They feel like they're being set up, you know? I think – I think once they're – they realize that there's help out there, and I know a lot of these females are underage and I know a lot of them do want help. They do want help they're just really scared...*

The women stressed that sex trafficking survivors may not be ready to reach out for help. A survivor-centered approach would require building trust with women by being patient, supportive and non-judgmental about their life experience of being sex trafficked, and provide them with information on community resources if they decide to leave.

*Vicky: Honestly, it would take the first step of them wanting help...so pretty much you can't lead somebody some way in and then expect them to talk. What you, you kind of got to like take it slow and them be patient and let them, let them ease into trusting you to get them to talk...They got to take the step to want help. And it took me a long time to ask for help. It did.*

*Tina: You have to just – it's a way of talking to the females, and not only just talking to them but letting them know there's help and that they're – they're gonna be, they're not going to get hurt...*

Three women articulated that rescuing women against their will was not a good idea.

*Alice: No. No, no, no, no. Not unless they want, not unless they're asking for it [to be rescued]. You know, and you can ask them, but if they say no and they're not ready, don't, don't force it, you know? Just, you know, go like, okay, well, look, it's on, the numbers are on there. There you go. Call us if you need it, but.*

Five women articulated that sex trafficking survivors would be more effective in building trust with other survivors, compared to professionals, especially in the crisis period right after women leave their life of being sex trafficked.

*Mabel: Yeah, and you know, like, there's studies that people that have the experience of a person, peer support, gain trust faster initially. So in crises, where it's real critical to gain trust, I think a peer could gain that trust faster and get assistance for that person, whereas they might just say, "No thank you to someone else." It just seems like there should be more involvement of survivors, period, in every venue.*

Two women said that they would like to see more inclusive services, so all women, irrespective of their religious background, sexual orientation, gender identity, national origin, and the like, felt safe and comfortable reaching out for help.

*Nancy: A lot of the programs are, are more religious based, and that's okay because they're, that's what they're you know wanting to do...I mean, because I, I, I'm a Christian myself and I, that's what I love to do is to, to help girls when they come off. I love to pray for them, I love to tell them how, you know, God changed my life. But I also don't, you know, want to, um, to put someone, who say is an atheist and who comes out, and doesn't want that religious based program to say, "Oh well, I don't want to go there because they're going to push Jesus on me." I want it just to be more where it could be where everyone's welcome, they know it's there, it's free.*

### **Beyond Immediate Needs**

The women said that once they move beyond the initial crisis situation within a safe environment, they need to be involved in a transitional recovery program that would provide them with skills to re-enter and function in normal life. This program can include mental health services and job and life skills.

*Shannon: As time passes, it just becomes your life, it becomes what you do when you wake up, and it just becomes who you are. And it was hard to break free from that. So having a place where survivors can [go] and to live I think, a...program, would probably be most beneficial.*

*Alice: And then getting them back into a program that will integrate them back into what normal life is again. And then I think you'll have a lot more success at the girls not recidivating...*

Interestingly, to help her get back to normal functioning, one woman considered checking into a drug rehab facility, even though she was not addicted to drugs.

*Alice: I mean, I often actually thought about checking myself into drug rehab and saying I had a drug problem. [laughs] Because I fit the symptoms, and I knew that treatment would probably help me learn how to get back into normal life. I was so separated from what normal life was and so beat down from it, that I forgot how to live everyday life. And that was one thing that drug treatment programs try to teach them, you know. You make your bed every day, you do this, you do that. You know? This is how you live in, within the community again. That same thing needs to be for girls that have been trafficked, because they don't have that anymore.*

### **Mental Health and Medical care**

The women indicated that intensive psychotherapy was needed to help them cope with the trauma of their experience. Mental health services need to be free of cost since most women did not have the means to support themselves until they were able to get back on their feet.

*Shannon: I would definitely drive home the issue of getting survivors, especially early on, psychotherapy immediately, like hardcore strong psychotherapy. Not just you know, you see a therapist and you get to digest those [experiences] a little bit. No, there are some, I mean for my own personal like experiences, there are some traumatic and horrible events that could have happened in a survivor's life whether they've been trafficked for one month or whether they've been trafficked for 10 years. The things that we've experienced and*

*gone through is something on a whole other level. So psychotherapy is super, super, super important. And having them there and available whenever they need it.*

Four women suffered from debilitating post-traumatic disorders; two women were currently on disability resulting from the psychological trauma of trafficking that kept them from working and fully participating in day-to-day activities.

*Becky: I wasn't able to work for a long time. I wasn't able like to go to a job because I wasn't mentally stable. I couldn't...my mind, like, I have triggers left and right. I didn't like dealing with people, like I was afraid of people and just as much – at one time, like as much counseling as I was needing three times a week...*

*Shannon: And I think for so many years, I just pushed it out of my head and then I had a "nervous breakdown."...and that's when everything came to a head...I had to start dealing with these emotions...My life is different. I became agoraphobic. I began, I couldn't work anymore. I couldn't leave my house. I couldn't, you know, I'm on disability now. I can't even, you know, hold a job. And I used to have -- I was going to graduate with my...degree....I had worked at the...hospital for seven years and I was, you know, making really good money for someone my age before...not being able to work is hard. It's humbling. I had to ask for help...I would love to just go back to being who I used to be.*

*Sally: You know. But every day I wake up, and I have a daughter. And she'd just be playing in the next room, and I just have like these outrageous thoughts. Of stuff like that happening to her, and I wouldn't know what to do. I wouldn't wish that on nobody, ever. I wish there was a way that you know I could gain my trust back for people. I still have troubles trusting my boyfriend. Any boyfriend. I don't like my daughter to go with her dad. He's a great father...I don't want this anymore. I don't want to be afraid for my daughter.*

Five women stressed that their need for therapy was not short-term and might be something they would require for many years, given the psychological trauma of their experiences.

*Shannon: So and so [name redacted] talked about the average trafficked victim spends the rest of their life in therapy. I don't know if that's going to be true for me. I, I would hope to think that maybe in a couple of years that I'll be able to have processed everything and to move on. I don't know if that's going to be true...I don't know that kind of trauma that was inflicted upon me at such a young age, what it did to my brain...We know that trauma to a child at a young age ultimately can, can alter their brain, and as far as abuse and neglect and all that stuff.*

*Jenny: Well, for sure like counseling is I think would be really big, especially if it's, um, if they've gone through it and they're survivors, even after they've been taken out of the situation, you still need the aftercare like counseling and support....I know like in my situation, um, I received counseling, but it was just until they thought I, I didn't need counseling anymore. So, you know, it- you- I think it's important to know that you should still have counseling even after that. You know, not just immediate counseling, but even you know, some six months a year from then.*

The survivors shared that it took a specially trained professional to be able to deal with the trauma of sex trafficking. Beyond the academic credentials, a particularly keen understanding of the issue is needed.

*Alice: I went through many psychiatrists who would um, when I would tell them my story, literally sit on the edge of their seat. Like well, what happened next? What would your parents say? You know, and I'm like, would you like some popcorn with this story? So, you know, that was a major clue to me that they were not going to be helpful for me.*

*Nancy: I think that it would really just have to be somebody who's, very educated or experienced to be able to handle that. I don't know that education necessarily is "educated"...then to think of whatever range of age that they are...a 14-year old child, a 12-year old child...that went through all this...*

*Sally: Yeah, just because you have a PhD, doesn't mean that you can help me communicate about my problems. I need you to actually feel where I'm coming from....*

The women also wanted the services to be free and include children, since most of them had children and did not have the resources to pay.

*Yolanda: There need to be a whole program designed and available with housing and security. People don't have to worry about the money issues while they get their life together...they can be in a safe spot to get their life together and out of harm's way...*

*Jenny: First of all the program should be something that's available to everyone, because I know, I guess I don't know how most of them work, but, if they...involve like you know, registering or signing up or paying or that kind of thing, but it should be something that's free for all, and, no questions asked kind of thing.*

One woman mentioned that there needs to be a restitution program that compensates women for expenses for rehabilitation, such as medical care.

*Tammy: I think maybe just providing something like that, like, maybe restitution...for medical bills and stuff like that. Cause, I mean, going to the ER and stuff like that, it costs a pretty penny. You know? And I have bills on bills on bills, back from that. Like, MRI's...that's, if you don't have no type of insurance and stuff like that...*

### Job & Life Skills

The women stressed that it was important for them to receive assistance to enhance their education and job skills so they can move towards a state of better psychological, social, and economic stability.

*Mabel: I'd like to see people get education, primarily. Because I feel like education is the reason I could go forward with my life...if you're involved in sex trafficking...if you have education, it's easier to walk away. And so I think that building education primarily is really important for women...*

*Alice: Some of these, some of these girls are taken before they even get a high school education. You know? I mean, I had a high school education, so that didn't apply to me, but*

*a lot of these girls are taken at 12, 13, 14 years old. You need to be able to get them their GEDs, you need to be able to give them opportunities to learn some trades, some skills, you know, and there's so much that they get taken away from them. And people just don't realize. What all it, it entails to bring a person back from being demoralized to [being] human again.*

In addition to education and job skills, the women underscored the need to provide training in life skills and job placement as an important aspect of recovery.

*Becky: Because I feel like I know – because girls that I know that are victims they don't know how to pay a bill, balance a checkbook, go to a job, you know, do a budget, like all that stuff they say normal people know how to do, they don't. Just how to cook a meal, how to plan something, like how to be a normal person and live a day to day life most victims don't know that because, like, your life is completely different – you don't know what's going to happen, you have no stability, you're doing what someone tells you to do ...*

*Shannon: And...doing things like teaching life skills. Like because a lot of us girls coming out, we don't have the life skills. Budgeting – how do you write a budget...when all you've done is been a prostitute? You don't know how...maybe get a job, especially some of the girls who have criminal offenses. Who's going to hire a felon...and programs that would help them to again become self-sufficient... it's the simple things like I didn't have a license, a birth certificate. All of those things that you, are stripped from you because you're no longer yourself. So getting all of those things back, your identity, getting those things back so that you can go out and get a job or apply for jobs. Computer skills...all these things...teaching...girls real life skills, having trainings...*

*Yolanda: That was my hardest thing when I was leaving the situation, is what am I going to do for money...You see no way of paying your bills and eating and taking care of your kids when you don't have a job...So job placement is a huge thing...Huge, job placement.*

*Susan: I think a lot of girls if they had jobs and they were able to actually like have something to look forward to...I think if there was something like...where you got companies involved where they hired girls that were in that specific situation, it would help everything a lot better too, because helping them get a job, housing, counseling like that....I think if girls like me were able to go and get jobs, that it would help them a lot better to get away...*

### Support-system

The women also said that peer-to-peer sharing would be very beneficial. They felt that only another survivor would be able to fully understand their experience and provide support.

*Alice: The best people to know are people who've been there... And so when you get other people who have been through it there, the girls are much more likely to open up. Much more likely to share and, and be willing to go through the program...That, that, that the guard goes down considerably more than if you just have somebody who's just like oh, you know, I've been to school for this.*

*Jane: Like a little friendly-type atmosphere...people can come, and just talk...just to let them know like you're not alone, we're all here. We're all here together, and you know, we can all uplift each other at the same time.*

The support provided did not have to be tangible support, but involved an acknowledgment and understanding of a similar harrowing experience of being sex trafficked.

*Wendy: If I had a group, it would be anybody's welcome to, you know, there's no judgmental, you know, say what you need to say, it's not going to go anywhere, you know? If people have the exact same stories you've been through the exact same thing, being mentors to each other and [like a] support group.*

*Mabel: But you know, I still have to live with that and I still have to figure that out, and I'm doing it on my own. It just seems like if I were able to talk to more survivors, there could be more that could happen...for healing....I'd like to see a certification program for survivors...for peer support nationally...so that you know...all these people can employ peer support along with social workers...A lot of people have, gone back afterwards, and I think that peers could gain trust faster and, and, stop some of the recidivism.*

*Wendy: So just a lot more support groups and I guess that's just my number-one is at the time, I didn't really have a support group, so kind of led into doing a lot of other things to get away from having to deal with it.*

*Shannon: Time has passed and I have worked through it, but now I'm no longer, I'm no longer a slave to that per se. I am now someone who can go out and do something about it. I can speak to people... then to help them see, like to start dreaming for themselves, to dream for their life, to dream for you know a better future and you know a tomorrow because a lot of us live with an "I don't know what's coming next."*

In addition to peer-to-peer support, the women felt that having a good support system of friends and family was important.

*Tammy: Just you know, having good support...I kind of just, you know, stepped back and was like, okay, I need to, I need my family. That's what I need is my family and my real friends. You know. And that's what I learned that there's a lot of people that, like, I mean, out on the streets, there's not, you know, they're not your friends. That's what I definitely learned, I learned. You know. It's more your family and people that, you know, you call your actual friends.*

Several women mentioned that psychological support needs to be also provided to the survivors' support system including friends and family members to help them deal with the survivors' trauma, and be educated on the signs of mental anguish and depression to look for down the road. The survivor's support system also needs to be provided with the tools to deal with the ups and downs, including having protocols in place to reach for help.

*Jenny: So I think that [counseling] would be really important and also, maybe not just for the victim, but also like anybody that was close to them and that might have been effective from the situation as well, because it affects others too, so I think that would be very*

*important and just, just knowing that you can confide in people and it's going to be kept in that place with the one person and not...the privacy, yes, I think that's very big.*

*Nancy: It's very possible that three months down the road, you can become very depressed. This is how, these are some signs of depression, let's look out for this. You know, have somebody accountable with you or that you can talk to...They need to know that, you know, this is a possibility. Depression. They're withdrawing, you know? What, what can you do, you can seek help or you can suggest this or, yeah.*

*Tammy: So, I think maybe, like, maybe something, some kind of support, like, for the, like, the actual parents, too. You know. Like information, like, letting them know that it's okay to go ahead and come forward.*

The women stated that the risk of going back to the sex trafficked life, increases without a safe house followed by further support such as education, job placement, having access to mental healthcare, and the like. These, they felt, are the services needed to help them re-enter normal life.

*Becky: Like, I know a lot of girls because they don't have nowhere to go – They go right back to what they were doing. They go right back to their pimp. And it's like people want to stop it, but you can't if you don't have nowhere to send these girls like after you rescue them. I know there are some girls [that say], like, I was in a better situation then than I am now, so...*

#### Decriminalization of survivors of sex trafficking

Eight women expressed that they should not be criminalized for being sex trafficked since they were coerced. The fear of being held legally responsible does keep some women from escaping. Traffickers often use the threat of arrest to maintain control and prevent women from leaving.

*Monica: ...and I think that that's really incredibly critical because the likelihood of one of them being able to come forward, and that mental block, that I can come forward and say, like, this person is forcing me to do this is much – it's a lot more removed when they know across the board that they're not going to be held legally responsible for that...because that's one of the threats that we hear all the time. "Well, you're prostituting yourself, so you're going to go to jail." And we see it happen, and we see it happen a lot...*

Having a felony on their record makes it harder for them to get a job or even volunteer at an organization.

*Tina: In human trafficking they get "tickets" and that's on their records for the rest of their lives. I think those should – I really think those should go away because I don't think that – that's not fair at all for them women to have to have that on their record...because most of the females on the street that I have known from working on the streets they're not there to be there, you know?...They can't get a good job with that on their record...if there is proof of the women being in human trafficking and being forced into it I think...you know, erase that from their files.*



*Mabel: And if we don't have expungement in Nebraska, we look bad, because we're really further punishing survivors...it seems like that's an important part, too, that expungement for the victims. And I don't know how often youth get punished, but hopefully that's a thing gone by for Nebraska, but.*

*Alice: I think they need to offer them expungement. Expunge their record for those crimes so the girls get their lives together and can function in society again.*

Protection of survivors requires being responsive to their immediate needs including a safe house and substance abuse treatment. Beyond their immediate needs, women stressed the importance of a transitional living program to include mental health care and job and life skills training. They stated their ultimate goals and desire is to become or return to being fully functioning members of society.

### **Prosecution**

The third of the "3Ps" is prosecution. As a society, we must address the demand side of sex trafficking by finding and prosecuting the buyers and sellers of trafficked persons. Strategies mentioned by the women we interviewed included stiffer penalties, better follow up investigations of sex trafficking incidents, rehabilitation program for buyers, establishing a registry for sex traffickers, and shaming of buyers.

### ***Stiffer Penalties***

Women had different points of view on punishment for perpetrators. Some felt there needed to be stiffer penalties for both traffickers and buyers of sex. One woman said that, in addition to going after the traffickers, it was important to address the demand or buyer side of sex sales.

*Monica: I like those pieces...the Nordic type models [of prosecuting buyers] that you're seeing, the buyers are the ones that get hit the most, um. Really it's a business...It's a business model though and if you don't have that demand...the buyers are the ones that drive it and if they're not doing that anymore, if it's too risky for them, if it's – if the cost is too much, then they're going to find something else...We have to do something different and we already know that just going after the sellers in not going to work...As far as models go, I would say the Nordic model is probably one that's captivated my attention and seems to be working.*

The women stated that the current punishment was seen as a slap on the wrist and did not serve as a deterrent against the crime. One woman mentioned that you could get more jail time for shoplifting than for forcing a person to have sex with another person.

*Jane: I mean, they say, it's not murder, but it's a form of murder. So let them get charged like it's a murder charge. Let them not [say], oh, I'm going to give you a year in jail, and six months' probation. No, you're going to get 10 to 20 years, when you touching somebody's child, or your own child, or, you know...Let them feel it... Like, if it were like the olden days, and you did something like that, they'd castrate you, they'll just take it off. Then what are you going to do? You're not going to have it...they really need to be punished some way, to make them stop.*

*Yolanda: I think there needs to be...harsher punishment for the men that are getting caught for doing any of these crimes and um, because when people start getting punished, other people aren't going to want to do it...So if no one's getting punished, it looks like an open field for play for everybody....Higher penalties.*

*Shannon: And these pimps need to be, actually need to be prosecuted, not just given probation or given you know community service or getting off time served. They're not. It's not a criminalized crime. It's people that, you know, that sell drugs get more time than someone who is, you know, kidnapping and forcing girls to have sex for, to have sex for money. And so it's, it's crazy...it's something that I believe in so passionately about is that there needs to be stricter laws across the board.*

*Becky: I know most Johns it's like a \$99 ticket. It's just a little ticket and it's just enough so that it's not on public record. And I feel like they're just as bad as a pimp because they're supplying, like they're the demand so they're making more supply....There is no fear, you know, a little \$99 ticket or whatever it says is not going to scare these people. They're like oh, that's nothing; but, if it's like okay, here's a \$350 ticket, you have to do community service...treat it like it's a real issue and not just a little slap on the hand because they're the ones making it bad for us. Oh, yeah. And I think they're [the pimps] the worst ones. I feel like they get off way to easy. They get in there and they get right out.*

One woman felt that stiffer penalties should go beyond larger fines since, in her opinion, many of the men had the money to pay the fines.

*Yolanda: Obviously, they have extra money, so a fine's not going to do them any problem 'cause you know, they have money to pay women, they have money to pay a fine.*

However, a few women were skeptical and did not think that stiffer penalties would make a difference. They felt that both the traffickers and buyers had full knowledge about their actions and would still continue with their illegal activities despite stiffer penalties.

*Alice: Oh, yeah. They're aware. They're not dumb. I don't care what they say...It [harsher penalties] might deter some of the guys who will attempt it. But, they actually refer to the guys who regularly do it as "hobbyists." Those guys I just don't foresee being afraid of it. They, they've done it for so many years without getting caught...I mean it's like, you know the life, life in prison for selling cocaine. Yet how many people are still selling cocaine?*

*Sally: There is not that much pain in somebody's heart to where you have to do that to somebody, ever. So...I wouldn't even have a program. I would have a concentration camp for them [traffickers and buyers]. Really. I'm so serious, because when you do that to somebody you hurt them. You don't just hurt them physically. You hurt them emotionally, mentally. I'm 23 years old, and I'm still living with that...I don't want to think about putting them type of people in any type of facility or home, because they don't deserve that...Those kind of people don't need to live...Wasn't there a law back in the day where they used to chop off your jimmy?!*

Women felt that proper punishment of traffickers and buyers would decrease women's reluctance to come forward and report such crimes, and would also serve to reduce the demand.

### **Better follow-up investigation**

Many women felt that there needed to be better follow-up of complaints. Law enforcement needs to conduct a diligent follow-up investigation rather than unjustly blaming women for prostitution. This would create a safer environment for trafficked women to come forward with complaints.

*Katie: I don't know if they ever will try it...I think there should be more enforcement of laws and stuff.*

*Tina: My first wish is that the police be more – more on top of it on arresting these males... my main concern of helping reduce human trafficking is getting the pimps off the street. That is the only way these females are going to be able to get safe...But, I think getting them off the streets will help these women a lot better and, I feel like if...they're [pimps] locked away I feel like they're going to open up about it, you know, they're not going to be scared to say nothing because now he's – he's already locked up.*

### **Rehabilitation program for buyers**

A few women felt that there must be something emotionally and psychologically wrong with the buyers for them to resort to paying for sex, especially from a minor. They felt in some cases buyers might benefit from a treatment program such as a “Johns-school” or psychological therapy. Seven women felt that for those men who were not aware of the brutality of the lives of women who are sold for sex or the repercussion of their actions, further education might help them think twice about buying sex.

*Monica: If we're ever going to get ahead of it, we have to stop making excuses for the buyer and maybe that's something where first offense you're on the registry for X number of years, and you can make that less of an issue or whatever if you do XYZ things, like the John school or something like that. That's kind of been thrown around and I don't really know the success rates of those things, but I can't imagine that there wouldn't be at least some success with the John school type of an idea... And it may not necessarily be something where they were intentionally seeking out a minor... just in those cases, I think that we should be able to then educate them, and some kind of therapy or something to kind of help process like what's their thinking and help with those thinking errors, really and give that back to them...it's not going to help if we continue to you know slap those things on people without giving them that extra piece -- addressing and assessing, you know, where are they going to go from there.*

*Shannon: There's something physiologically wrong with you I think in my head if you think that a woman is of little value to only pay \$100, \$200 to have sex with her, especially if you're married in a relationship. If there's something going on, you need to go seek therapy, counseling, something to where you feel like you're not being fulfilled or whatever is going on.*

*Mabel: People that buy sex are sex abusers, that there's something wrong with people that want to purchase sex from the get-go, and if you think about our most intimate relationships, the people who want to enter money into our most intimate relationships with people, there seems to be something wrong...Well, I think that they should align*

*people that are purchasing sex -- should get some type of offense to their name and that should be aligned with some type of treatment. They have a problem, they need treatment.*

*Tammy: Making sure, like, before, rehabilitation, you know, before they get out of jail, so they don't go and do it again... I want to make sure that he's rehabilitated and knows what he put me through, you know....like, keep re-offending and re-offending, there needs to be something.... maybe that should be looked at, you know? Like, they have to go to a certain, maybe a certain program after.*

Yolanda felt that the traffickers were fully aware of their actions, but that many buyers were not educated about what they were doing. She said that “a program just like a, a domestic violence program where someone get an, an assault charge of something...put them in some type of program for men that need education on the system and what's really going on.”

### **Registry for sex traffickers**

Five women suggested creating a sex trafficking registry so the actions of the buyers and the traffickers would be made public and that people could be vigilant about protecting them from children. They felt it not logical for those who purchased sex from a minor to be treated more leniently than other sex offenders.

*Monica: Honestly, there is no reason in my mind that those people who are charged and convicted with purchasing sex from a minor shouldn't be on a registry. They need to be on a registry. If someone is in a position where they think that purchasing sex from a minor is a great idea, that person does not need to be walking around, hanging out with children in a job where they're teaching children or something like that. That's completely inappropriate and I don't pretend to know the law or the ins and outs of the law. What I do know is that's completely bogus that we don't charge them that way and we don't require them to be on a registry. They should be. It's rape. I mean plain and simple and in any other situation, they would be on a registry, but because there's an exchange of money, suddenly they're not and to me, that sends an entirely wrong message to the seller, to the buyer and to the victim...*

*Shannon: Oh. Oh, yes. There's definitely, that is something I've never understood is why there's a sex offender registry but there's no registry for people who are, who are convicted and caught you know selling women...I mean, the sex offender, we know where they live at. They have to register every time they move. We have to know where they're at because they're a danger to society just like anyone who has bought sex is. You're still a danger to society.*

However, one woman felt that such a registry would not help. She mentioned that we have a sex offender registry and that has not stopped people from committing the offense.

### **Other suggestions**

Other suggestions to reduce the demand for purchasing sex included shaming buyers by publicizing their crimes either in the media or by posting their names on billboards.

*Shannon: So I think that shaming would be amazing you know. I don't care about anyone's feelings when it comes to that. If you're willing to buy a child, a teenager...They don't lose their jobs. They don't lose their families, their houses...there's no repercussions from it. But for us, there are scars. There are scars that are left internally for us girls who are, you know, the ones who are bought and sold, that for me at least. All the men that I was with over those years, I don't know any one of them...had anything negative happen to their lives. My life is different...they get away with it and they get off scott-free. I mean, there needs to be way more like I said a shaming, a registry. Put their faces on a billboard, I don't care. You want to buy sex, then you go up on a billboard and let the whole world know that you're a perv because you bought sex from a 14 year old, you know...*

*Jane: If the woman are getting in trouble for it, how come the men aren't...Like shame them...put them on the front page for buying it, and that might stop them from doing it, because they don't want it to happen again.*

*Yolanda: I think they're doing a better job in Nebraska lately of making like it more announced when people get caught, because before, people could get caught and do a sting and they didn't have, you know, their pictures on the TV....Maybe if they showed their faces on the news and people were embarrassed for their actions, because it's being hidden underneath. They need to be exposed so they are embarrassed for what they did and if there's no exposure brought to it, they're going to continue to do it.*

However, one woman did not think that shaming alone would make a difference.

*Mary: Honestly, no, because that just, that just tell you what they've done. But I mean, they still have access to the same stuff they had before.*

Most women felt that prosecution of the perpetrators was critical but had different opinions of how to go about it. Some felt that stiffer penalties would help reduce the demand, while others did not think that this might help, and providing a rehabilitation program (for example, John's schools) and shaming of buyers of sex were mentioned more than once.

### **Other perspectives**

#### ***Role of Technology***

The women were very clear that technology has helped the sex trafficking business both proliferate and remain underground. The anonymous nature of the Internet fuels and supplies the demand.

*Becky: I mean it drives – I think the internet drives the demand.... And just the internet makes it such an easier way to purchase. There's more and more and more because it's so easy and I think that's the thing. It's just so easy for them to find a girl. It's not like you've got to search or anything. It's right there on Craig's List, it's right there on Backpage.*

It also allows sex trafficking to operate undetected.

*Becky: You don't have to get out there and work...you don't have to walk corners no more so it's not obvious.*

The women emphasized that in some instances technology allows traffickers to have more control over the women.

*Nancy: Is the tracking system and stuff like that, because I have, I've heard that these days, that pimps put trackers on their phone to keep up with where the girls are and things like that, so that's...It can be a good thing. Could be a pro thing if it's the parent who had the tracker on their kid's phone or whatever and their kid came up missing.*

Women stated that despite the downsides, technology including social media could be used to raise awareness among all segments of society, and allow women to get help.

Three women suggested using text messages and social media to increase awareness and help women leave the life.

*Mabel: I've been thinking a lot about text message campaigns to...a woman who's in the lifestyle of...you have all these messages in your head about who you are and what defines you and you know, lot of those messages keep you there. If you could give people, like, text messages of encouragement, something that will give them the messages they need. You know, I know people have physical needs, basic needs and so forth, but there's cognitive needs that women need to, to change their, their world, too.*

*Shannon: I think that we could use the internet against them and have more awareness by creating pages that are used as tools for awareness, to spread awareness, to put the resources out there. You know, having either like a text service...Or if a woman needs help, she can text something to do a number and they can find her location...I mean, it may be she finally gets access to a phone to do that. I don't know. You know, some type of text service if you want to you know get more information on how to get out.*

One woman suggested using social media such as *Facebook* to educate people, but also to shame the men. Some women wanted to see better tracking of nefarious activity over the internet and were fully aware of the challenges in maintaining people's privacy.

Two women felt that it would be a good thing if sites such as *Craigslist* and *Backpage* were completely taken down. Although survivors may not be the ones trolling these sites, Susan mentioned that these sites would be a good place to reach out to women.

*Susan: Like if someone was to go throw in there like a couple of different ads talking about you know if you need help, an outreach, like this is what you need to do and this is where you need to go, I think that would be like technology wise, and like even making an app you know for your phones to where if you're in a situation or something that you can just press one simple button and it's going to, you know, alert somebody.*

The women also mentioned that social media increases the risk of children falling prey to sexual predators, including sex-traffickers. They said predators often reach out on the Internet and thus educating young people about the possible dangers was critical.

*Tammy: Yeah, 'cause my daughter...she put up there she was, you know, 19 and she was of age, and she wasn't. She was only 14 and she had, like, different men. And I looked up one of them, one of them was a sex offender. And I'm telling you I about hit the roof. You*

know? I'm like, "Oh my gosh!" You know? And, I don't know, like, that, would, not only if that would, you know, that, what I went through, when it happened to me, but if my child, you know, how my child, well, man, if that happened like that to one of my daughters, I'm telling ya, they'd better be ready, you know what I mean? I mean...making sure that young women are educated about it...to teach them how to be careful. Because suddenly, maybe, the person they are inviting to be your friend is a sex offender.

### **Inter-agency collaboration**

Three women expressed that there were many agencies involved in provision of services, education, and awareness, and how beneficial more collaboration and inclusiveness would be.

*Shannon: And then definitely I'd love to see us as a state just become like the catalyst of you know really spreading awareness and having, you know, some type of center... But we all need to be able to join up and I think pool all our resources and our, our efforts and what we're doing and work together instead of all working on separate things so that we're not all working against each other when we all could be one big giant driving force to do that.*

*Monica: I think that we're getting to a place where we are recognizing that one program can't do everything, so that collaboration between programs is becoming so much more evident because one program can't handle it all, and we shouldn't expect them to, but being able to say okay, this is our specialty. This is your specialty. How can we work together to make sure that all the needs are being met?...so kind of just our biggest thing right now is just teaching everyone to work nice together, to play nice in the sandbox um and recognize that your organization does great work with this, so let's help you with the bigger picture piece.*

### **Survivor-informed strategies**

In addition to providing peer-support, as noted earlier, women felt that it was important to include their voices in all aspects of the planning process to combat sex trafficking in Nebraska. Several women felt that involving sex trafficking women survivors in the educational process, and hearing directly from them would be beneficial.

*Kate: I think there should be a lot more programs that would be more beneficial and maybe having people that have been through situations like that or traumatic situations like that kind of, kind of help out with the program in a way, if they feel up to it. Just to give them a sense of what the program should be, what there should be specific things to talk about...I think could help along with programs and networking with people that have been victims, because then there's certain people now, younger kids now that can see this is not what you want to be put through, this is not what you want to happen to you.*

*Vicky: From the survivors, from the ones who have been out here. I think listening to them and their stories, I think, would be a whole lot better for them to realize, like, maybe this is a cold cruel world out here because honestly, it is hard...nobody, nobody cared about how you feel out here in the streets. ...from one who's been through it since 19, I mean, honestly, I can tell you like, it's not fun when you get taken advantage of. It's not, it's really not.*

Eight women were anxious to have their voices heard so they could prevent trafficking from happening and to make a difference in the lives of other survivors.

*Alice: Finding victims who have decided to become advocates. You know, such as myself. You know, I'm all for, you know. I'll tell them, I swear I'm talking about it if it'll take me one girl.... No problem. I, I can talk to anybody that wants to listen. I'm willing to try my best to give as much information as I can...So you know, until the higher up people are ready to listen to the victims, and ready to hear what they feel would be better, I think there's just going to be [flying] blind.*

*Susan: I'm really good at this stuff [raising awareness of sex trafficking], and I like try to talk about it a lot. Like at my job when we're hiring for people, like I won't even tell other people. I'll call [name redacted] and ask her if there's girls that need jobs, and then I'll pass it along to my boss. Like that's my thing.*

*Sally: I am ready to fight. I really am... But I mean if women don't stand up for each other there's nothing that we can't really do for each other. One voice may speak a lot, but a thousand voices together...That's just how I see it.*

*Monica: Honestly, the voices of the survivors get forgotten a lot, and we look to professionals in whatever industry we're talking to, to answer the questions that they've never thought about asking....I honestly would look to have a survivor that's trained and has a good support system in place to be in some kind of leadership in every part of the state....there's a piece that gets missed a lot, that even though professionals might know certain things more, there's some things that they don't know and that's okay, but let's include the people who do know...we need to be more welcome to say something and to be listened to.*

*Mabel: And you know, when people [survivors] speak, I usually see the same faces...Are people not willing to stand up? Are people not being found? Why are women so afraid to speak? And there should be support there... Um, it just seems like there should be more involvement of survivors, period, in every venue...I think having a speakers bureau where people can be more visible would be really important...It needs to be more than rescue. It needs to be about, allying and partnering. As long as you're not partnering with survivors, then you're helping them. And by helping someone, you're implying they're helpless and kind of disempowering them. If you are partnering, then you're putting them on the same level as you. And more is possible.*

## **STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS**

This research study is the first in Nebraska that included the voices of survivors of sex trafficking through a qualitative research approach. We used one-on-one interviews to obtain detailed, rich, and authentic descriptions from survivors. The sample size was twenty-two, robust for a qualitative study, but we may not be able to generalize the results to all sex traffic survivors in Nebraska or the Midwest. The study also only focused on adult women survivors who may or may not have been trafficked when they were minors, and the majority of study participants lived in



the Lincoln-Omaha urban areas. Future studies could focus on different sub-groups of survivors, including women and girls under 19 years of age, rural residents, boys and men, and LGBT persons.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **CONCLUSION**

Our results revealed the complexity of the issue of sex trafficking. The high level of ignorance about sex trafficking in all segments of society allows for it to exist and thrive, largely undetected. Increasing public awareness and understanding, and training professionals such as law enforcement and healthcare professionals who routinely encounter sex traffic survivors will help reduce the stigma of being trafficked and increase the identification of survivors. Two essential needs are ensuring that comprehensive support services are available and establishing referral protocols through multi-agency collaboration. Currently in Nebraska, planning efforts are underway to create a comprehensive, statewide plan to combat sex trafficking. However, given that thus far, very little has been accomplished in Nebraska, there is an urgent need to implement strategies to address all 3Ps -- prevention, protection and prosecution -- simultaneously. Focusing on only one without the others will not help persons who have been or are at risk of being sex trafficked. For example, without support services and proper referral protocols, enhancement of screening and identification of women through training and education of professionals will do little to build trust with women or provide them with necessary services. Likewise, a sole focus on prosecution that is not survivor-centered and does not meet the short- and long-term needs of survivors may not be effective.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

We provide the following recommendations based on our study results:

#### ***Prevention of Sex Trafficking***

- ❖ Develop, implement, and systematically evaluate programs to raise awareness of sex trafficking among all segments of society—the general public, schools, homeless youth shelters, and others.
- ❖ Develop, implement, and systematically evaluate programs to educate and train front-line professionals such as social service and criminal justice professionals (law enforcement officers, judges, probation officers, and so on), healthcare providers (especially emergency room staff), and hospitality industry workers and hotel employees on be alert for the signs of trafficking and to identify survivors. Training must also be culturally competent, survivor-centered, and include the special circumstances of trauma survivors.
- ❖ Develop, implement, and evaluate education outreach programs in places that are not traditionally screened for survivors, such as jails and strip clubs.

#### ***Protection of Survivors***

- ❖ Develop, implement, and evaluate referral protocols for support services for survivors
- ❖ Provide for the immediate needs of survivors and their children, such as safe houses

- ❖ Provide for a free recovery program for survivors and their children, including on-going wrap-around services for intermediate and long-term needs (for example, trauma informed therapy, substance abuse treatment, medical care and mental health care, job and life skills, and others)
- ❖ Provide a restitution program to compensate survivors for expenses such as rehabilitation services and medical care
- ❖ Expunge a woman's record of any prostitution charges once it has been established that she was sex trafficked
- ❖ All services should be free

### ***Prosecution of Perpetrators***

- ❖ Institute and evaluate policies for harsher penalties, commensurate with the brutality of the crime of sex trafficking
- ❖ Conduct follow-up investigations of reported sex trafficking incidents
- ❖ Develop, implement, and evaluate shaming strategies such as a sex trafficking registry, billboards, and the like
- ❖ Develop, implement, and evaluate rehabilitation programs such as John's schools to reduce recidivism of buyers and sellers

### ***Other Strategies***

- ❖ Reach out to and collaborate with women survivors in all aspects of planning, implementation, and evaluation of comprehensive statewide efforts (for example, education and outreach, screening and assessment of survivors, peer-to-peer support, and policy advocacy)
- ❖ Establish inter-agency collaboration

The accomplishment of the above recommendations will require: 1) tailoring the existing practices and programs to meet local needs; 2) prioritizing and evaluating activities; 3) focusing on existing strengths; and 4) providing trauma-informed services that are culturally, LGBT, gender, and developmentally appropriate. We consider the above to be essential first steps toward achieving the ultimate goal of greatly reducing sex trafficking in the State of Nebraska.

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## APPENDIX -- A

IRB#: 552-15-EP

### Interview Guide – Nebraska Sex Trafficking Survivors Speak

**Introduction.** Thank you for meeting with me today. As you know, we are working on a research project on women survivors' perspectives on sex trafficking in Nebraska. Here, we have defined sex-trafficking to be a sex act where there is an exchange of money and that happens through the use of force, fraud or coercion. Also, sex-trafficking occurs when the person made to perform such acts is below 18 years of age.

We want to know what ideas sex trafficking survivors have about preventing sex trafficking, providing better services to survivors, and finding and punishing perpetrators.

Including the perspectives of survivors will help shape research, policies and programs to combat sex-trafficking in Nebraska.

Please feel free to skip or not answer any question if you do not wish to do so.

#### QUESTIONS:

1. Please can you think of programs that effectively **prevent sex trafficking**, and can you share with us, what that might look like? [Prompt: What does prevention of sex trafficking look like when it is working well?]
  - a. Do you know of any such programs (such as increasing education/awareness of sex-trafficking) in Nebraska or across the country?
2. If you could have your way with 3 (or more) wishes for things that would make Nebraska the best state in preventing sex trafficking, what would they be? (Prompt: What kinds of programs would you like to see to prevent women from being recruited into sex-trafficking in Nebraska?)
3. Please can you think of programs that effectively **meet the needs of survivors** of sex-trafficking, and can you share with us, what that might look like? (Prompt: What does provision of support for victims of sex trafficking look like when it is working well?)
  - a. Do you know of any such programs in NE or across the country?
4. If you could have your way with 3 (or more) wishes for things that would make Nebraska the best state in the country in providing support for victims of trafficking, what would they be? (Prompt: What kinds of programs would you like to see and what do you think should be available for survivors in Nebraska?)

5. Can you think of **programs** that effectively **reduce the demand for sex-trafficking in Nebraska**, and can you tell us what that might look like? (Prompt: What do programs that reduce the demand for sex-trafficking look like when it is working well?)
  - a. Do you know of any such programs (e.g., shaming, Johns schools) in Nebraska or across the country).
6. If you could have your way with 3 (or more) wishes for programs that would make Nebraska the best state in reducing demand for sex-trafficking, what would they be? (Prompt: What kinds of programs or policies would you like to see geared toward reducing demand for sex-trafficking in NE)
7. If you can think of **policies** at the state or national level that effectively **reduce the demand for sex-trafficking in Nebraska**, what might they look like? (Prompt: What does policies' that reduce the demand for sex-trafficking look like when it is working well?)
  - a. Do you know of any such programs (e.g., the Nordic Model where prostitution is decriminalized but buying is criminalized) in Nebraska or across the country?
8. If you could have your way with 3 (or more) wishes for policies that would make Nebraska the best state in reducing demand for sex-trafficking, what would they be? (Prompt: What kinds of programs or policies would you like to see geared toward reducing demand for sex-trafficking in NE)
9. In your opinion, how does **technology** such as the internet, mobile phones, and social media being used as a tool becoming for sex-trafficking?
  - a. What are ways by which we can use technology to prevent trafficking and provide better services for women.
10. **Anything else you** would like to share with me about your perspectives on sex trafficking.

And finally we have a few **background demographic** questions.

11. Where do you currently live? (Probe: Which county [state] do you live in)?
12. Do you have any children? (Probe: What ages and gender? Do they live with you?)
13. How old are you?
14. Have you ever been married? (Probe: Legally, civilly, where, when?)
15. What is your education level? (Probe: How many years of schooling have you had)?
16. Are you currently employed? (Probe: Full-time, part-time, and if unemployed...how long)?

17. What is your country of origin? (Probe: How long have you lived in the U.S.)?

18. Have you ever been in foster-care?

19. Which category might best describe your racial/ethnic background? (Probe: Would you consider yourself to be Latino/Hispanic? Would you consider yourself to be African American, Asian American, Native American, White-Caucasian or of a mixed-racial background)?

**Thank you** so much for your time in participating in this research study. We very much appreciate your assistance and insights.