

Iowa Department of Health and Human Services  
**Preventing Sex Trafficking in Foster Care**

**Prevent Human Trafficking: Protecting Children from Trafficking and Identifying and Addressing the Needs of those who are Victims of Trafficking**

A coordinated statewide approach is critical across agencies, entities, and providers (e.g., Iowa Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), law enforcement, education, mental health therapists, substance abuse professionals, etc.) to ensure that each has the knowledge, skills, and resources to effectively implement strategies to protect children from trafficking and to identify and respond to victims of trafficking.

*Human trafficking (also known as trafficking) means participating in a venture to recruit, harbor, transport, supply provisions, or obtain a person for:*

- a. Forced labor or services that results in involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery.*
- b. Commercial sexual activity through the use of force, fraud, or coercion, except that if the trafficked person is under 18 years of age, the commercial sexual activity need not involve force, fraud, or coercion.*

*Note: While the focus is primarily on victims of sex trafficking, victims are trafficked for a wide variety of purposes, including labor trafficking. This can be for commercial sex that is not limited to, but involves prostitution, production of pornography, and performance in strip clubs or forced labor or services, such as for agricultural work, and for housekeeping purpose.*

**Characteristics of Children who have been Victims or are at Risk of Being a Victim of Trafficking**

- 12 to 17 years of age
- Most enter foster care after the age of 12
- More than half enter foster care at age 15 or older
- Have three or more foster care placements
- Children that run away at 15 years of age or older are more likely to be gone for more than a month
- Girls and young women are more likely than boys or young men to run
- African American and Hispanic youth are more at risk of trafficking than other racial/ethnic backgrounds

**General Warning Signs that a Child or Youth may be Involved in Trafficking**

- Signs of physical abuse
- Unexplained absence from classes or overly tired in class
- Dressing in a provocative manner
- Sexualized behavior
- New tattoos of a name or “branding” symbol
- New friends or an older boyfriend/girlfriend
- Signs of gang affiliation

### **Risk Factors that may Lead to a Child Running Away**

- Reason why child is placed out of home (e.g., child kicked out of their parents'/relative's home)
- Substance abuse or mental health issues
- Youth identifies as LGBTQ
- Undiagnosed substance abuse or mental health issues
- Interpersonal issues with the biological family or caregiver from whom the child was removed, resulting in a desperate urge to reconnect or stay connected in some way with them
- History of physical and sexual abuse
- Sex traffickers that recruit outside schools, group homes, and shopping malls
- Systemic foster care placement challenges:
  - Lack of a suitable placement (e.g., waiting in shelter care)
  - Extended lengths of stay in placement or unstable placement
  - Type of placement (elopement is more likely from group care placement vs. foster home placement)
  - Unstable placement
  - Placement that is terminated due to child's behavior

### **Expediently Locating a Child Missing from Foster Care**

- Direct foster care and facility providers to immediately inform HHS upon learning the child has run away
- Obtain as much information as possible about the circumstances regarding the child's run
- Immediately contact law enforcement and provide the child's name, date of birth, height, weight, and any other unique identifiers such as eyeglasses and braces. Tell them when the child went missing and what clothing the child was wearing
- Contact the child's parents
- Contact the school, parents, relatives, friends, or others for information or possible location of the child
- Search diligently and regularly for the child at places she or he frequented
- Notify juvenile court
- Identify and contact individuals who the child may contact for assistance while on the run, encouraging them to help locate the child and/or to return the child to foster care
- Contact the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) regarding their Recovery Service Team that is available to assist HHS staff when we come across victims or potential victims of trafficking. They also provide training and other resources

## **Youth in Foster Care Should Potentially be Screened for Sex Trafficking Risk if the Child:**

- Has a history of running away/homelessness/couch surfing
- Has a substance use history
- Has a history of truancy or is not enrolled in school
- Gives false identification, lies about age, or is not in control of their ID/documents
- Was physically or sexually abused or neglected at home
- Has been exposed to domestic violence
- Expresses an interest in an older adult or is in a relationship with an older man/woman
- Has a history of or is currently placed in a group care, residential treatment, shelter care, or other such setting
- Suddenly acquires expensive items such as a cellphone or clothing, has large amounts of cash or unexpected travel
- Frequents Internet sites or physical locations known for commercial sex
- Contracts sexually transmitted diseases/infections
- Has tattoos, cut marks, or burn marks which could be a sign of branding

## **Trafficking Screening Tool**

Screen the child to determine if the child is a possible trafficking victim based on the child's experiences while absent from care. Upon locating the child, ask the following critical questions:

**How long they were on the run?** The longer a child is exposed to the streets the more likely they are to fall victim to commercial sexual exploitation and human trafficking.

**Where have they been staying?** The more places the child has been and the greater the distance the child has traveled may be indicators that they are a potential victim.

**Who has helped the child or provided for them during their absence?** A reluctance or fear to identify who they were with may be an indicator.

**Was the child threatened, abused, or assaulted during their absence?** Look for physical and emotional signs of abuse.

## **Responses to the Primary Factors that Contributed to a Child Running Away for Current and Subsequent Placements**

- Determine if the child needs to be placed in a secure facility or shelter to ensure their safety.
- Determine if the location of the child can be shared.
- Notify the parent or caretaker as soon as possible when the child is found unless there a reason to believe this may further endanger the child.
- Notify juvenile court when appropriate.
- Assess the child's safety, trauma exposure, and need for services.
- Offer services to the child and parent/caretaker.

- Develop and implement a safety plan with the child. This should include identifying who they can contact if they are feeling unsafe/wanting to run and safe locations they can go temporarily as an alternative to running.
- Address any medical needs of the child.
- Involve the child in selecting the placement setting.
- Develop the permanency plan in consultation with the child when appropriate.
- Refer possible incidents of human trafficking to Child Abuse Intake.
- In cases of human trafficking, determine if the perpetrator still has access to the child.

### **Report Trafficking**

Human Trafficking is a crime under US and international law, as well as state law. When a child has believed to have been trafficked, immediately contact law enforcement and provide the child's name, date of birth, height, weight, and any other unique identifiers such as eyeglasses and braces. If applicable, tell them when the child went missing and what clothing the child had on. Contact the child's parents.

Child Sex Trafficking is child abuse. Report suspected abuse to 1-800-362-2178.

### **Needs of Trafficked Children**

Victims of sex trafficking have a high level of need for comprehensive and intensive therapeutic services. Victims may have symptoms indicative of post-traumatic stress disorder, dissociation disorder, depression, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and other mental health issues. It is critical they be provided trauma-informed care and services. Victims are also at high risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases and may be in need of immediate medical services. In addition, the educational needs of these children have oftentimes been ignored.

### **Working with Trafficked Children**

When working with these children and youth it is critical that case workers and service providers understand they may be fearful of talking or cooperating because of the abuse they suffered from the trafficker. Many victims don't see themselves as victims. They might be hostile and/or not willing to tell the truth. It is likely they have had issues in their lives that contributed to being victimized. It is imperative that workers consider and respect their history, demonstrate patience, and provide the support these children require.