

Runaway and Homeless Youth Training & Technical Assistance Center



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TIPSHEET: Peer-to-Peer Human Trafficking Recruitment in RHY Settings: Trauma-Informed Response

This tipsheet discusses key strategies to address, prevent, identify, and intervene in situations of peer-to-peer human trafficking recruitment within Runaway and Homeless Youth (RHY settings).

Positive Youth Development (PYD), a prosocial evidence-based approach that focuses on identifying youth strengths, increasing protective factors, and building resilience, provides a foundation for this tip sheet. Strengthening family relationships, peer support, positive self-esteem, and opportunities to lead are all aspects of PYD linked to effective human trafficking prevention and intervention, including in situations of peer-to-peer recruitment. Additionally, the strategies presented in this tipsheet are drawn from trauma-informed and public health perspectives, which ensures that responses to peer-to-peer recruitment are supportive of youth by understanding their unique experiences.

Understanding the Issue

What is peer-to-peer recruitment?

Peer-to-peer recruitment occurs when a youth recruits other youth for trafficking or exploitation purposes. Traffickers commonly use youth who are being exploited to recruit other youth because they have easy access to peers and can more easily form close relationships with peers. Recruitment of youth by their peers may take place in schools, group homes, residential treatment facilities, homeless services settings, substance use services settings, on the street, online, or in other situations. Youth of any gender, race/ethnicity, cultural identity or community may be involved in peer-to-peer recruitment, and may represent a wide spectrum of sex and/or labor trafficking dynamics and experiences.

Why would a young person become involved in recruiting other youth for trafficking?

There are many factors and complex dynamics that lead youth to recruit their peers in human trafficking situations (sex and labor trafficking). Each situation is unique, and youth may experience varying levels of trauma, as well as have different degrees of understanding of peer-to-peer recruitment.

Contributing factors may include:

- Threats or coercion from a trafficker
- Increasing their own safety
- Lowering their quota or gaining status (e.g. preferential treatment or becoming the “bottom”)
- Believing that the situation is a helpful option for their peer(s), or not understanding the situation as exploitative

It is important to avoid assumptions about why a young person is involved in recruitment to ensure that you can approach them with curiosity and empathy. Remember that youth recruitment their peer for trafficking are also victims of human trafficking, exploitation, and violence.

System Adaptations

The first step is to develop a response at the program and organizational level. It is important to be proactive in creating a prevention and response plan for situations of peer-to-peer recruitment at all levels. Establish clear and coordinated policies, procedures, and practices based upon a shared philosophy and ensure that staff at all levels of the organization are prepared to integrate and practice a trauma-informed response.

- **Philosophy**
 - Discuss and integrate a trauma-informed response with all staff and address differences in views related to needs of individual youth balanced with the responsibilities to all clients.
 - Ensure all staff are effectively trained to identify, respond, and evaluate efforts related to prevention and intervention of peer-to-peer human trafficking recruitment in your program.
- **Policies**
 - Review, and revise as necessary, policies regarding peer-to-peer recruitment and intervening in youth behavior and establish clear, coordinated written policies, procedures, and practices based on trauma-informed principles.
 - Set clear expectations regarding the involvement of law enforcement and other justice entities, and carefully consider the impact on youth, families, and other clients.
 - Ensure that policies address labor and sex trafficking.
- **Procedures**
 - Incorporate evidence-informed screening and assessment processes and strategies to identify vulnerabilities and potential recruitment activities as early as possible.
 - Build prevention and education activities into individual and group activities with youth.
 - Ensure all staff are on board and understand the protocol for identifying potential recruitment behavior and addressing this behavior from a trauma-informed perspective.
- **Practice**
 - Conduct regular reviews of cases to identify risks for both trafficking and peer recruitment.
 - Embed human trafficking and peer-to-peer recruitment training in orientation, on-going training, and professional development.
 - Review policies and procedures annually, and as program changes occur.
 - Use scenarios to conduct “What would you do?” sessions to enhance readiness to respond.
 - Discuss human trafficking with youth and provide resources in case they need help (i.e., youth hotlines, shelter hotline, case manager’s number).
 - Programs may consider the development of specialized services for youth who have engaged in peer-to-peer recruitment.

Identification

When identifying peer-to-peer recruitment situations in RHY settings, remember to avoid taking any behavior out of context. Some indicators for peer-to-peer recruitment are also associated with youth who have had other types of traumatic experiences. In addition, youth who are recruiting their peers may exhibit red flags for labor and sex trafficking as they are likely being trafficked themselves. Utilize a trauma-informed approach and engage with curiosity and empathy to avoid shaming or blaming youth for their experiences. Youth who engage in peer-to-peer recruitment are frequently in need of trauma-informed, non-judgmental support and services, while the safety of other youth is maintained.

Potential indicators of peer-to-peer recruitment may include:

- Extreme “us” versus “them” interactions
- Flaunting expensive possessions around peers
- Encouraging a peer to run away or go absent without official leave (AWOL) from a program
- Befriending, and grooming a peer who is more vulnerable in some way (much younger, developmental or other disability, mental health or substance use concerns, lack of support network)
- Exerting status or dominance over a peer (e.g., controlling how peers talk or dress) acting as gatekeepers for resources or sleeping arrangements
- Glamorizing the commercial sex industry, drug trafficking, or gang involvement to peers
- Telling peers that they know ways to make easy money or offering lucrative and easy job opportunities

- Pushing a peer to talk to or meet with someone they know outside the program (i.e. “connection,” “boyfriend,” “boss,” “employer” “job recruiter”)

Utilizing A Trauma-informed, Strengths-based, Positive Youth Development Approach

A trauma-informed, strengths-based approach that integrates positive youth development (PYD) has proven to improve outcomes for all youth, regardless of the type of adversity they have experienced. However, when engaging with youth in conversations about peer-to-peer human trafficking recruitment, this approach is essential to building trust and avoiding re-exploitation. Training and skill building in Motivational Interviewing (MI), an evidence-based practice, may also increase staff comfort and effectiveness in engaging in conversations about human trafficking, and peer-to-peer recruitment. Throughout every engagement, staff are encouraged to be transparent, approach with open, non-judgmental curiosity, emphasize youth voice and choice, and to identify and build on youth strengths.

Prevention

Successful prevention of peer-to-peer human trafficking recruitment involves the utilization of proactive strategies to increase youth protective factors and decrease risks. It is important to train all staff and youth to identify early indicators, and to develop engaging programming in partnership with youth to prevent trafficking and peer-to-peer recruitment. Specific strategies include:

- **Training, education, and supervision**
 - Professional Training Development and new staff training should include training on the intersection of human trafficking and youth homelessness. The training topics may include practical strategies in prevention, identification, and intervention in situations of human trafficking and peer-to-peer recruitment.
 - Provide guidance on policies and procedures related to peer-to-peer recruitment to ensure consistent responses, address peer recruitment in staff meetings and supervision, and share effective strategies.
 - Provide training on trauma, complex trauma, and trauma-informed care (TIC).
 - Create trauma-informed policies and practices within the program and continually assess and improve TIC approaches.
 - Provide trafficking education and prevention programming to all youth. Prevention activities must include labor and sex trafficking.
- **Peer-to-peer recruitment prevention programming**
 - Host peer discussions about healthy and unhealthy relationships and boundaries
 - Address issues of peer pressure and bullying within the program; cultivate an atmosphere of mutual respect and support among staff and young people.
 - Utilize youth-driven programming to increase empowerment and group cohesion.
 - Encourage individual counseling or other therapeutic support.
 - Integrate mentoring to increase positive support and connections.
 - Focus on engagement with youth who are joining the program to build an alliance and actively address risk factors and implement these practices with all youth on an ongoing basis.
 - Provide specialized programming for youth with a history of exploitation to prevent re-trafficking or peer-to-peer recruitment (e.g. specialized counseling, mentoring, secondary prevention groups).

Responding To Potential Peer-to-peer Recruitment

- **Keep basic principles in mind**
 - Use a trauma-informed, relational approach.
 - Emphasize safety of all youth in the program and as part of the organizational response.
 - The response should reflect a positive youth development perspective.
- **Information gathering**
 - To ensure safety of all youth, separate the young person who is showing signs of peer-to-peer recruitment while a plan of action is developed and implemented.
 - Approach the young person who shows signs of recruiting with empathy and open up a conversation with them to try to understand the situation.
 - Talk with youth who are suspected targets of recruitment using curiosity and empathy to try to better understand the situation.

- **Team approach**
 - Establish a staff meeting with all involved staff members to review findings from conversations with involved youth, and seek information from staff who may have witnessed relevant peer interactions or have other important information (from known history or drawing from perspectives of clinical and direct care staff).
- **Risk assessment**
 - Assess the risk anticipated from the young person showing signs of recruitment on the safety of peers within the program. Consider the spectrum of peer-to-peer recruitment, including variability in intentionality, power differential with peers, previous incidents, and overall safety concerns.
 - The staff should determine whether it is safe for the young person to remain within the program; if so, individualized programming should be developed to ensure safety of all youth within the program.
- **Collaborative responses**
 - Staff should work collaboratively with the young person suspected of peer recruitment to develop an agreement with clear expectations, resources, and consequences. Responses from staff should be predictable and consistent across staff members, guided by language within the behavioral contract.
 - Programmatic activities should be directed towards re-establishing safety for young people after experiencing a peer-to-peer recruitment situation.
 - If it is determined that the young person can remain in the program, increase monitoring of interactions between youth if possible.
 - If it is determined that it is not safe for the young person to remain within the program, a case manager should work with the young person to identify alternative potential resources. For instance, a young person who is not able to safely access a congregate care setting may be able to access ongoing case management or outreach services.
 - Runaway and homeless youth (RHY) programs should make continued efforts towards engagement with youth who may have been involved in peer-to-peer recruitment.

Additional Resources

Peer-to-Peer Human Trafficking Recruitment in RHY Settings - A Trauma-Informed Response

This virtual training explores strategies to prevent, identify, and intervene in situations of peer-to-peer human trafficking recruitment in RHY settings. Facilitators discuss the impact of complex trauma on youth and share practical strategies to address these situations based on public health, trauma-informed, and positive youth development principles.

Human Trafficking Prevention Strategies for RHY Programs

This Issue Brief outlines recommendations to integrate human trafficking prevention into RHY settings. The recommendations were developed based on RHY grantee feedback (i.e. current practice perceptions on human trafficking prevention for young people experiencing homelessness and housing instability), existing research and resources, CDC's prevention principles, and the RHY programmatic framework.

Human Trafficking Prevention Strategies for RHY Programs (Recording)

Based on the Issue Brief, this virtual training explores the integration of sex and labor trafficking prevention strategies grounded in public health, trauma-informed, and positive youth development (PYD) principles. This session also highlights the root causes and social conditions related to RHY and human trafficking.

Building Trauma-Informed Runaway and Homeless Youth Programs (Online Learning Modules)

This two-part, online module series is designed to support RHY grantees and all youth-serving agencies in adopting a universal, trauma-informed approach to serving youth experiencing unsafe or unstable living situations, homelessness, or housing instability. Module one, Understanding Trauma and Its Effects, helps programs build a shared understanding of trauma and its impact on youth. Module two, Adopting a Trauma-Informed Approach, builds on the learning from the first module and provides leaders and staff with a framework and strategies for building a trauma-informed program.

Sex Trafficking Among Youth: What Adults Can Do

The Family and Youth Services Bureau (FYSB) released this tip sheet which provides information and guidance for adults to prevent and address peer-to-peer sex trafficking recruitment.

Guiding Principles for Agencies Serving Survivors of Human Trafficking

Southeast Regional Human Trafficking Advisory Group: An Initiative of HHS' Administration for Children and Families (Regional 4 Office) created this resource to share best practices and guidance for service providers, community partners, funders, and others who serve survivors of human trafficking.

Trauma-Informed Organizational Self-Assessment

The National Center on Family Homelessness developed this assessment to provide programs with a roadmap for becoming trauma-informed. The toolkit offers homeless service providers with concrete guidelines for how to modify practices and policies to ensure that they are responding appropriately to the needs of families who have experienced traumatic stress.