



Authentic Community Engagement in Safe Harbor

Executive Summary

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A comprehensive multidisciplinary response to trafficking and sexual exploitation requires meaningful collaboration with community members. This report aims to identify how Safe Harbor stakeholders can increase their capacity to center marginalized voices and survivors through interviews with culturally-specific service programs and youth who have lived experiences of trafficking and sexual exploitation to improve systems response.

Between February and May of 2021, the project lead interviewed a total of 24 participants. Interviewees comprised of eleven youth along with thirteen staff members from culturally-specific organizations representing regions from across the state of Minnesota. A total of six culturally-specific organizations were interviewed who offered community-specific services to the following populations: Latinx, Southeast Asian, Immigrant, Native American, LGBTQIA+, and Black. Youth shared their experiences interacting with service providers and what they considered were the best strategies for implementing their voices. Staff members were encouraged to shed light on discrepancies in systems response and how Safe Harbor stakeholders can authentically engage with those in the community.

Results from interviews with youth showed that the majority only interacted with Safe Harbor service providers such as shelters and law enforcement. In addition, youth were split on whether or not service providers took into account their culture and background. When asked to share positive and negative experiences with service providers, youth identified shelters being associated with positive experiences while the most negative interactions happened with law enforcement. In terms of implementing youth survivor voice, youth advisory boards proved to be the most common response. Overall, youth interviews revealed that centering youth survivor voice could greatly benefit service providers and those with lived experiences of sexual exploitation and trafficking.

The most reported discrepancy among culturally-specific organization participants included a lack of meaningful relationships with other systems. This feeling was compounded with other barriers such as feeling like an afterthought, consistent misunderstandings of offered services, and a general disregard for their work. When reflecting upon authentic engagement between Safe Harbor stakeholders and culturally-specific organizations, participants advocated for diverse community representation without representatives speaking on behalf of entire populations.

A number of unique themes were also revealed by participants. Nearly all of the youth interviewed shared a need for autonomy. Importantly, this represented a desire for

empowerment and highlights the need for strengths-based approaches. Culturally-specific organizations also emphasized how severely underfunded they are despite the fact that the majority of survivors come from marginalized identities.¹ Finally, participants acknowledged how survivors and culturally-specific organizations alike must face widespread and deep-seated forms of systemic oppression and the roots of white supremacy.

The following recommendations based upon feedback from interview participants are strongly encouraged to improve systems response and community collaboration:

- 1 Authentic community engagement begins with having critical conversations
- 2 Develop meaningful partnerships with the community
- 3 A clear line of communication extending from the multidisciplinary team to all facets of the community
- 4 Propose for greater allocation of funding for culturally-specific organizations
- 5 Boldly work to eradicate white supremacy and systemic forms of oppressions

The valuable expertise and perspective shared by youth survivors and culturally-specific organizations represent avenues for change and improvement. Safe Harbor stakeholders can implement practical recommendations to bring a more youth- and survivor-centered approach to their response while also working to meaningfully engage with their community. In turn, such actionable steps also work to challenge systemic forms of oppression that continue to harm those impacted by sexual exploitation and trafficking.

1. Atella, J. & Turner, L. (2019). An Evaluation of the Safe Harbor Initiative in Minnesota – Phase 3. Wilder Research. https://www.wilder.org/sites/default/files/imports/SafeHarbor_EvaluationReport_9-19.pdf

