Open Doors: A Statewide Network for Victims of Sex Trafficking

POLICY BRIEF
JUNE 2016

“Human trafficking is the third-largest global criminal enterprise, exceeded only by drug and arms trafficking. Florida ranks third in calls received by the National Human Sex Trafficking Research Center.”

- U.S. State Department & NHSTRC 2015 Annual United States

Florida ranks third in calls received by the National Human Trafficking Resource Center, behind only California and Texas.¹ This is caused by factors other than high population, including transportation patterns, tourism, location and large numbers of vulnerable residents. The number of children living in foster care and the large transient population aggravate the human trafficking problem, as they become targets for “pimps” and other traffickers.

In response, Florida passed landmark legislation, in 2012 called the Florida Safe Harbor Act,² which specified that sex trafficked children be treated as dependent children needing therapeutic services, rather than as juvenile delinquents. The new measure, though, allocated minimal funding. The Act also required all safe houses serving this population to provide services such as counseling, food, clothing, health and dental care, transportation and security.

A Statewide Council on Human Trafficking, led by Florida Attorney General Pam Bondi, was created in 2014 to bring together state and community leaders to explore progressive tactics and treatments.

During the 2015 legislative session, HB 369 became law, mandating human trafficking signs be placed in public places to educate broader audiences, including potential victims. In 2016, HB 545 specified that sex trafficking victims shouldn’t be charged with prostitution, and also criminalized the use of tattoos to brand victims.


The Safe Harbor Act was a remarkable step, but its implementation has lacked continuity of care and resources to provide adequate services to victims. Florida is not unlike other states in addressing this complex issue. Large gaps have remained in trauma-focused crisis intervention and therapeutic services after victims are recovered.\(^3\)

Sex trafficked children experience substantial psychological and behavioral issues.\(^4\) The survivor-mentor model has been identified as a best practice for not only identifying children who have been sexually exploited, but also in their successful treatment. In addition, survivor-mentor models also can increase the number of pimp prosecutions by giving victims the support and empowerment necessary to testify against their captors and abusers.\(^5\)

Minnesota’s “No Wrong Door” program utilizes many best practices in identifying and treating sexually exploited youth, which include providing regional navigators to connect them with services for emergency, transitional and permanent housing and other services.

In Massachusetts, a survivor-led mentoring model called “My Life My Choice Services” prevents the commercial exploitation of girls by empowering them with knowledge and skills. It also trains service providers to recognize girls who are being commercially exploited, and improves the community response to girls who have been exploited.

Georgia has initiated the “Georgia Cares” program, which provides critical services for victims of trafficking through victim support and restoration, emergency response and assistance, training and awareness and coordination and collaboration. The program functions as the single coordinating agency for Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking (DMST) survivors.

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**A Florida Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC) workgroup recently called for a variety of funding priorities based on extensive review of published research and best practices nationwide:**

- A sanctioned, statewide coordinated care approach for funding and care management including survivor-mentoring as a component;
- Funding should follow the survivor as they move through the system for specialized services for substance abuse, mental health and trauma-related treatments;
- Specialized services for boys and LGBT youth;
- Multiple types of placements for survivors beyond safe houses;
- Prevention education for at risk youth, potential “johns,” and the professionals working with children; and
- Prioritizing building the service networks in Miami, Broward, Hillsborough, Orange, Palm Beach and Duval counties.\(^6\)

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**A Promising Practice: The Open Doors Statewide Service Delivery System**

Dr. Lawanda Ravoiria, CEO of Delores Barr Weaver Policy Center and Roy Miller, President of The Children’s Campaign envisioned and developed *Open Doors: A Statewide Network for Sex Trafficked Children.*

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\(^3\) The Florida Senate Committee on Children, Families, and Elder Affairs Staff Analysis and Fiscal Impact Statement for SPB 7088, March 14\(^{th}\), 2014.


\(^5\) Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children Services Workgroup Convened by Florida’s Department of Children, Families, and Department of Juvenile Justice, Restoring our Kids: An analysis of Florida’s continuum of care and recommendations to improve services for commercially sexually exploited children, November 13\(^{th}\) 2015.

\(^6\) The Florida Department of Children and Families and the Department of Juvenile Justice released the CSEC Services Workgroup report: Restoring Our Kids: An Analysis of Florida’s Continuum of Care and Recommendations to Improve Services for Commercially Sexually Exploited Children, November, 2014.
It adapts the best practices learned from Minnesota, Massachusetts, Georgia and other states for use in Florida.

An initial general revenue appropriation was secured from the 2016 Florida Legislature. Direct service dollars are being sought from federal, state and local sources to bring Open Doors online before the end of the 2016 calendar year.

The goal of Open Doors is to provide a framework and program designed to assist victims immediately and expertly through the improved delivery and coordination of existing services, as well as the development of a statewide service delivery network.

Phase 1 of the pilot is projected to be implemented in five target regions including Northeast Florida (Nassau, Duval, St. Johns, Baker, Clay), North Central Florida (Leon), Central Florida (Orange, Osceola), Southwest Florida (Collier, Lee) and the Suncoast (Hillsborough, Manatee, Sarasota). Additional counties and contracted providers will be identified for the Phase 2 implementation to establish a statewide program.

The Open Doors Network will utilize a public-private partnership approach and will be administered by a single contract non-profit organization, Voices for Florida. The administration of the Open Doors pilot program through a single contractor allows for uniform protocols in the delivery of effective services and the increased efficiency in the sharing of information and resources and data collection. Improved processes and outcomes expected include increased care coordination for sexually exploited and trafficked children by developing and implementing emergency response and assistance, victim support, survivor-mentors, screening, access to clinical services, research-based assessments, safety planning, individual care plans, coordination of mentoring services, training, public awareness and collaboration.

As part of its commitment to the Safe Harbor Act, the Florida Legislature passed training requirements for organizations and facilities working with CSEC placements. Open Doors presents an opportunity to leverage training resources and reduce administrative burden while ensuring compliance with state laws.

Open Doors places rescued or referred sexually exploited and trafficked victims in the care of a team of professionals, including highly trained survivor-mentors, regional advocates and clinicians that work in concert with law enforcement and community partners at every entry point where a victim is identified. The regional advocates will work collectively with the systems in their targeted area to provide services based on the individual needs of the children. Survivor mentors, because they understand what the child is going through, will establish connections and build trusting alliances. Through this trust, victims are less likely to have episodes of running away. They are also more likely to engage in therapy and other aspects of their recovery plan. The clinicians will provide specialized, trauma-informed, therapeutic care to the victims when they are ready to receive services as aligned with the total care management plan.

Other features of the model include that the survivor-mentors will serve as first responders, on call 24/7 to provide immediate crisis intervention and assistance for victims, along with day-to-day care management services under supervision of the regional advocates. According to experts, “peer-provided services can improve the effectiveness of the traditional mental health delivery system.”

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Open doors: How it Works

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They will also accompany victims to court hearings and verify the recovered child’s eligibility for services, coordinate these services, provide support and ensure victims are safe and able to participate in services. In one study, the addition of a peer specialist to a care management team resulted in improvement in quality of life measures, fewer significant life problems and improved self-esteem and social support. ⁸

The regional advocates will work collectively with the various systems and stakeholders to provide access to multiple services and troubleshooting based on the individual needs of the children, youth and families. Each regional advocate will develop and submit a work plan that contains:

- Regional needs assessment, including an examination of the population at risk;
- Regional strengths and areas for development;
- Goals and measurable outcomes; and
- Regional action plan with activities and timelines.

**Policy Recommendations**

In general, public policies need to continue the shift away from blame, shame, discrimination and isolation experienced by victims toward a model that offers validation, support, acceptance and relational safety. Funding and services must align with the needs of sexually exploited and trafficked victims and provide a logical starting point for implementing services in a thoughtful, cost effective manner. These new policies will create a solid foundation on which all other service needs will be identified and considered.

**Open Doors Administered By:**

[Image]

Specific policy recommendations for the near future include:

- Continue to support public policies that strengthen laws against perpetrators of sex trafficking and support for services to CSEC victims; and
- Support the Open Doors pilot project and its eventual expansion, as well as develop and secure funding for continuity of care statewide for child victims of sexual exploitation and trafficking.

**Fast Facts**

- Florida leads the nation in the strength of its sex trafficking laws, according to national advocacy organizations. The laws are weakened by inadequate planning, resource allocations and implementation.
- Florida ranks third in calls received by the National Human Trafficking Resource Center, behind only California and Texas. ⁹
- Florida ranks second nationwide for having the highest transient population and fourth for the number of children in foster care – vulnerable populations for human trafficking.
- National data shows that 85 percent of confirmed sex trafficking incidents involve U.S. citizens.

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