

INTRODUCTION

COMMUNITY-BASED RESPONSES AS THE NEXT STEP IN ANTI-TRAFFICKING REFORMS

TEN YEARS AGO, THE JUST RESPONSE COUNCIL WAS FORMED WITH THE GOAL OF gathering a diverse group of leaders, including those with lived experience, to address the greatest barriers in effectuating transformative anti-trafficking efforts and shine a light on best practices for connecting impacted children and youth with safe, accessible, and comprehensive services. The JuST Response Council has focused the last decade of work on identifying *promising* responses to child and youth survivors and shaping the development of needed policies and practices to support adoption and implementation. A vast majority of identified responses were born out of, and built within, the confines of systems, as that is historically where funding and children have been directed. More recently, however, the JuST Response Council has contemplated what is required to design and provide the *ideal* response, one that reduces the tremendous burden on systems, is premised in cost-effectiveness, and, most critically, supports survivors in achieving short and long-term safety, healing, and success. Leaning on lessons learned from intersecting spaces, field engagement, desk research, and the wisdom from those who know best—survivors—it is evident that responses rooted in, and provided within, communities will achieve the goal of developing and providing an ideal response to young people and their families.

The work of defining, building, and providing an ideal community-based response requires the collaborative and concerted efforts of all members—community organizations, leaders, policymakers, systems, funders—to reform *what is* into *what can be*. And what can be stands to benefit all.

HOW WE GOT HERE: A ROADMAP FOR FURTHER REFORMS

Since the passage of the earliest Trafficking Victims Protection Act in 2000, United States federal, state, and local governments have rapidly developed policy to protect victims, criminalize offenders, and increase safeguards for vulnerable communities. In less than two decades, every state radically transformed their laws, regulations, and practices to prohibit and respond to the exploitation of individuals for sex or labor, including the commercial sexual exploitation of children and youth. The inherent structure of the U.S. government, coupled with the realities of necessarily hurried public policy development, have resulted in patchwork services responses, most of which have been born out of, and rooted in, government funded and directed systems, specifically child serving and justice systems. Due to increased structural capacity and funding available to support these governmental systems, the reshaping of system processes to respond to trafficking has resulted in an unquantifiable number of child survivors being identified and offered services that would typically be unavailable through status quo system responses. Importantly, broad policy changes enshrining these approaches in statutes and regulations have called child serving stakeholders to the table, recognizing that those tasked with supporting and interacting with young people and families play a critical role in interrupting and preventing child and youth sex trafficking.

Yet, the reliance on child serving and justice systems as the primary mechanism for responding to children and youth with lived experience or those at high risk for commercial sexual exploitation have come with significant costs to children, families, communities, and the systems themselves. The JuST Response Council has consistently recognized the harmful effect of utilizing punitive measures, particularly those within criminal and juvenile legal systems, to connect child survivors with safety and services; every publication has called for the development of Safe Harbor laws and practices, including the elimination of arrest, detention, and prosecution of survivors. Extensive research supports what survivors have long made clear: practices rooted in blame, shame, coercion, and punishment are not only unjust and unproductive, but also further cloak survivors in trauma and vulnerabilities that make attaining power, healing, and long-term wellbeing an uphill battle.

However, an emerging concern arising from the effort to address the harms of punitive responses is the need to uncover and address the equally consequential use of child welfare in providing safety and services to impacted children. Outside of the anti-trafficking field, an increasing body of literature and lived experience voices are illuminating the often-irreparable harm and long-lasting trauma caused to families as a result of child welfare investigations, service plans, and, for some, the permanent severance of the family unit. This is most true for Black and non-Black families of color, including Indigenous and Latino families. Coupling racist legacies that inhibit economic mobility and social equity with pervasive societal biases results in the families of color being overreported and disproportionately involved in a system that, by design, utilizes a microscope instead of a healing hand. This is particularly pertinent in light of the demonstrated racial disproportionality among child sex trafficking victims; when Black and non-Black children of color are at highest risk for trafficking victimization, we must construct and utilize responses that prevent racial harm and facilitate healing for the child and their family.

Safe Harbor responses that designate child welfare as the primary entity for identifying and serving child survivors also place the system in a particularly precarious position. Child welfare is increasingly tasked with responding to some of the most complex challenges within communities, often attempting to solve macro-level and public health issues with budgets and staffing shortages that make fulfilling statutory and regulatory mandates dangerous, demoralizing, and futile for stakeholders. Child sex trafficking cases are some of the most complicated, time intensive cases referred to child welfare, often demanding from the system what is it unable to provide.

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CONNECTING THE DOTS: HOW ROOTING ANTI-TRAFFICKING RESPONSES IN THE COMMUNITY RAISES ALL SHIPS

In addition to the financial, societal, and individual price tags attached, system-based responses to child sex trafficking victimization are failing to produce outcomes that justify the investments required. This is most notable in the increasing recognition within the anti-trafficking field that system-involvement itself creates a vulnerability factor to commercial sexual exploitation. Yet, the system that generates vulnerabilities to trafficking is the same system tasked with responding to the resulting harm of exploitation. And the cycle repeats itself.

To the contrary, developing and sustainably funding community-based responses reduces the crushing load on systems, increases the return on investment, and, most importantly, strengthens positive and enduring outcomes for impacted children, youth, and families. Communities have long demonstrated the inherent ability, when sufficiently resourced and supported, to care for those within that community that have experienced harm, including trafficking victimization. Through strategic investments, capacity building, and bolstering efforts, we can position and support community-based organizations and responses to effectively unburden systems, support families, and ensure young people are provided the safety, services, and supports needed to fly.

The Roadmap Report is rooted in the belief that all communities are positioned to care for their members, including child and youth trafficking victims. This Report aspires to equip community leaders, organizations, and system stakeholders with customizable tools and supporting materials for identifying existing resources, outstanding supports, and designs necessary to build and im-

plement a comprehensive, survivor-informed service response led by and, embedded within, the community. Leaning on the invaluable expertise and work of the JuST Response Council, lessons learned from providing years of technical assistance to states, and demonstrated outcomes from parallel and intersecting spaces, The Roadmap Report is a novel framework for supporting communities in ensuring the provision of Safe Harbor responses that are holistically safe, accessible, and inclusive for all impacted young people and their families.

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