

# YOUTH LISTENING SESSIONS

**SHARED HOPE IS DEEPLY GRATEFUL TO THE YOUNG PEOPLE WHO INFORMED THIS REPORT**, for their time, their wisdom, and their authenticity. In addition to bringing a critically important perspective to how the systems and responses they experienced could be improved, the insightful feedback we received from youth elevated four key principles that should guide and remain at the core of any protocol or procedure developed using the resources in this report.

## THESE YOUTH-INFORMED GUIDING PRINCIPLES ARE:

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### 1) YOUTH NEED TO BE HEARD.

Being youth-informed means actively and meaningfully listening to youth regardless of their current or past circumstances. Therefore, it is critically important that young people's perspectives be centered in developing and implementing a Safe Harbor response. This often involves intentionally slowing down and pausing to check in, asking for feedback, and creating space for young people to share their perspectives. Listening to young people does not have to be (and sometimes should not be) accomplished through a formal process; instead, it is important to continually look for opportunities to seek input, accepting that it may not always be forthcoming while also being prepared to really listen when a young person is prepared to engage.

As we learned from the listening sessions, young people place great value on being heard, and an important part of being heard goes beyond adults listening to what young people are saying to actually implementing their feedback and responding to their concerns. Even when implementing or addressing feedback is not immediately possible, it is important to have the conversation and share reasons that certain changes may not be possible and/or acknowledge the barriers that may exist in addressing the problems raised. As adults and professionals, it can be quite difficult to remember exactly what it felt like to be a young person. However, we can always remind ourselves that young people are experts on their own experiences and that they are often an overlooked resource in overcoming the challenges that we encounter in our efforts to assist them.

### QUOTES FROM THE LISTENING SESSIONS THAT CAPTURE THIS GUIDING PRINCIPLE:

*"...act quickly on what [she] has to say and what her needs are—actions speak louder than words."*

*"Give survivor time and space to process before sharing their story."*

*"Talk to her, believe her, ask her what she needs."*

*“Ask ‘What do you need from me?’”*

*“Ask ‘Are you feeling safe?’”*

*“Whoever Jordan was talking to when she said if they send her home she would just run away again I feel like they should have looked more into that. Like why are you going to run away again if we keep sending you back, what’s going on?”*

*“...once that 7pm marker comes and I got to go back to my reality, playing basketball has only helped me for like an hour. What happens when I go back home and I have no other alternatives, because when you get to those community places, there’s nobody there to actually talk to you. There is nobody ... to ask you how you are feeling or what’s going on at home.”*

*“So if I did something last night because I gotta survive, but I can’t tell you about it, but it is messing with me mentally, but if you ask me about it, I feel like just because you have a legal obligation not to tell nobody my business I am not going to tell you what I did last night because that is my freedom that I am risking.”*

*“A year, 365 days it took me to talk.”*

*“I feel like some of the parents deserve understanding too. Even the ones that are being uncooperative. They still deserve to be heard and stuff like that instead of what their child is doing, they shouldn’t be defined by that. I feel like there should be some type of understanding on both sides. If she is in a toxic household, it shouldn’t be like choosing a side, I feel like both of them deserve to be heard.”*

## **2) YOUTH NEED TO BE GIVEN CHOICES.**

Working with youth, whether it involves providing direct services and supports or designing the systems and protocols that shape how we respond to young people, can often present a conundrum as to what we expect youth to be able to handle as emerging adults and as to when to step in and protect them from the consequences of their own or even others’ choices. This is not just a challenge for professionals working with young people, but also for parents and even their communities, which engage in policymaking that impacts youth. However, as adults and professionals trying to help young people, there is often a tendency to lean into a protective role that can undermine young

people's autonomy and deprive them of choice in decisions about their own lives. Providing young people with the opportunity to make choices is not just important in big decisions, but also in any context where having a choice could help them feel more engaged and comfortable. This is especially important when they are pulled into a process that they do not have a choice about engaging in, such as involvement in the child welfare system or participation in the criminal justice process as a victim-witness. It is critically important that, as professionals, we do not assume that young people are not able, or not interested in, making choices in challenging circumstances like these. Similarly critical is believing young people when they share their experiences and perspectives and trusting them to make choices, especially when the decisions being made directly impact their lives.

**QUOTES FROM THE LISTENING SESSION THAT CAPTURE THIS GUIDING PRINCIPLE:**

*“Work to keep families together but ask and consider where the child feels safest.”*

*“Remember to ask [her] if she wants to tell her mom. Give [her] the option and allow her to tell her own story if she wishes to.”*

*“Allow her to share her story however she feels most comfortable (written, spoken) with whoever she feels most comfortable – her CHOICE”*

*“Don't bring her back to the group home – she left for a reason”*

*“Ask her how [you] can best support her”*

*“Instead of asking where do you want to go, ask them where they feel safe at. Or where they feel like they won't do that again.”*

*“Ask her where do you feel safe in the community. Is there somebody you feel safe with.”*

**3) YOUTH NEED MORE THAN A RESPONSE. THEY NEED A PATH FORWARD.**

Many youth shared concerns about the inadequacy of programs in meeting their needs and the difficulty they faced in changing their circumstances when they need support. Making services available only after they had experienced harm, or were funneled into a punitive system that required them to engage in services, left them feeling disillusioned about trusting people who are supposed to be helping them and feeling like they had to fend for themselves. These themes likely reflect the challenges that systems and service providers face in responding to young people when the point of intervention is only after youth are already in crisis and/or have been given too many reasons to distrust the programs and resources that may be available to them. As this key principle so effectively highlights, when youth receive a response that is not holistically addressing their needs, they are likely to keep funneling back into systems that are equipped to respond to immediate or narrowly defined needs but not necessarily to equip young people for moving beyond that system and forward with their lives.

#### **QUOTES FROM THE LISTENING SESSION THAT CAPTURE THIS GUIDING PRINCIPLE:**

*“You get to come to this 1 day out of the week, you’ve still got six days where you have to deal with stuff.”*

*“I think the problem is she’s not given the option until she’s in trouble, like before she got caught sex trafficking or whatever the case may be, nobody said, well here’s other alternatives or here’s other programs so I would also encourage you to write that too. Try to come up with resolutions before the problem happens. Have the resolution before it gets to the point that stings get involved or she gotta go to jail.”*

*“A lot of these programs are not easily accessible unless you’ve done something to where you have no other choice but to come here.”*

*“A distraction sometimes isn’t a solution. Definitely not a permanent one. Just cause you are distracting me from my reality doesn’t mean I don’t ever have to face my reality again. You just temporarily took me away.”*

*“Your life may be put in the hands of someone who had an agitated morning.”*

*“I feel like once they feel like they helped, they just take their hand off her and are like, ‘okay I did my part.’”*

#### **4) YOUTH NEED PROVIDERS TO COMBAT BIASES AND STIGMAS.**

One of the biggest barriers to holistic responses, and one of the most persistent drivers of misidentification of trafficking victimization, is the role of stigma and biases held by those on the front lines of interacting with, and making decisions about, young people. The listening sessions highlighted a wide range of biases and stigmas that both influence providers’ responses as well as the degree to which the young people felt safe in sharing their experiences, including disclosing their experiences of trafficking victimization. For any providers, systems, or decision makers involved in developing and implementing responses to young people who have experienced, or are at-risk of experiencing, trafficking, active and meaningful efforts must be taken to recognize and reject biases and stigmas regarding race, gender, sexual orientation, housing status, and other harmful beliefs about a youth’s identity or circumstances that can impede the provision of holistic, youth-centered and trauma-responsive services.

#### QUOTES FROM THE LISTENING SESSION THAT CAPTURE THIS GUIDING PRINCIPLE:

*“When you look at this male stigma where you have to be this, you can’t show any emotion, that all this stuff, it plays a huge role. Even from the beginning when they’re like oh you’re having altercations and things, some dudes would be like why are you as a dude having an altercation with your mom. Come on, you have to do better. Now taking away from him and treating him like he’s the problem. If you were looking at him getting un-enrolled in school it would be like ‘you were doing so good for yourself. Why did you just let it go’ Like come on, it takes away from that. Being trafficked, it’s the sad truth it’s like oh why are you doing that gay stuff, you’re weird. Like no one will truly see that guy as the victim. They will always be the problem.”*

*“Where it is coming from and the folks that do it, it can be anybody. It can be anybody, it can be females, even little girls can get trafficked by women and boys can be trafficked by dudes.”*

*“Another thing I want to add too is personal bias when it comes to us. If you look at what make up a lot of our government it is Caucasian males. When someone goes against their views and their beliefs and something like that, whether it be they’re black, they’re gay, they’re Asian, whatever, you see it’s no longer about I want to help this person. It’s about I want to get this person out of my face. Like whatever happens, happens. Oh well.”*

*“When you look at a runaway, someone being told get out of my house is not a runaway. They are not a runaway. When it comes down to police actually questioning you once you’re found I feel the parent has already said- my child ran away, this that, I didn’t kick them out, they’re very disrespectful, a problem, trouble, you know. Once that police already has that thought in their head, they’re no longer perceiving with ‘this child is a victim.’ This child is a trouble. This child is a problem.”*

I feel like the police shouldn't do anything because she isn't committing any crime they should be trying to find other ways to help her instead of trying to throw her in jail.

She's probably doing whatever she have to do to survive.

no because most female and boys go through the same feeling

What's actually going on & they should look deeper into it. I think she's feeling angry and careless because she's over everything.

Is she is very overwhelmed right now. Inward upset and going through a lot of things. Misunderstood.

Every day let her know you're there for her. Show moral support.

Doesn't feel safe at home. I think Jordan feels like she is trapped. Not just physically but also mentally because she is going through so many things and emotions at once so overwhelmed.

No because boy or girl you still could feel the same way and keep everything in which will ~~drain~~ drain you physically or emotionally.

her mother and follow-up on the change to see if it is effective.

communication, like state what's going on and issues. I'm not sure some parents like turn situations on you. like you're wrong. Ask questions (each other) might not know what's what each other.

No they should punish the men that were trading by program for this little girls body trusts.

Excerpts of youth participant notes from youthSpark Youth Listening Session. See page 61.