Evaluation of the National Human Trafficking Hotline

Referral and Partnerships Brief

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Prepared by:
Hannah Feeney
Jennifer Hardison Walters
Samantha Charm
Kathleen Krieger

ADMINISTRATION FOR CHILDREN & FAMILIES
Office on Trafficking in Persons

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OVERVIEW

Introduction

The 2016–2021 evaluation of the National Human Trafficking Hotline (NHTH) was conducted by RTI International through a contract from the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE), Administration for Children and Families (ACF), US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), in collaboration with ACF's Office on Trafficking in Persons (OTIP).

Purpose and Research Questions

The overall purpose of this project was to develop and execute an evaluation of the NHTH, with the following specific objectives of the evaluation:

- Describe the activities, procedures, and organization of the NHTH, including staff training, staff capacity, and service delivery.
- Describe the customer service of the NHTH.
- Describe the immediate outcomes of the NHTH, specifically regarding experiences of contactors.

Methods

All evaluation data were collected by or in collaboration with the NHTH from 2016 through 2021. Eight data collection methods were used to inform the findings of the evaluation. Data collection methods are presented in the order in which they were conducted:

- Review of NHTH database records
- Interviews with NHTH staff
- Interviews and focus groups with key NHTH partners
- Observational listening of NHTH contacts
- Case study interviews with law enforcement agencies receiving tips from the NHTH
- Assessment of the NHTH's referral directory
- Case study of other similar national hotlines
- Follow-up survey with individuals contacting the NHTH

Dissemination

The project team developed a series of reports and briefs to document project findings and inform future NHTH services:

- Evaluation Technical Background Report to provide study background and descriptions for each data collection method. This technical report will be used as a reference point for subsequent reports and briefs.
- Internal Operations, Protocols, and Training Report to document the NHTH's organizational structure, procedures, and training approaches.
- Contactor Population Brief to provide detailed information regarding the demographics of the contactor population.
- Referral and Partnerships Brief to describe the NHTH's partnerships with service providers and law enforcement.
- Contactor Help Seeking and Hotline Response Brief to provide detailed information regarding help-seeking behavior among hotline contactors, including the reasons they access the NHTH and what types of help they seek.
- Contactor Follow-up Survey Brief to describe contactors' perspectives on the NHTH.
- Evaluation Findings and Considerations for Future Practice to include a high-level executive summary, as well as synthesize lessons learned and considerations for future practice made across previously described reports and briefs.

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEF

This brief provides detailed information on the National Human Trafficking Hotline's (NHTH's) referral directory and partnerships with local hotlines, service providers, and law enforcement. Multiple data collection modes were used to systematically evaluate the NHTH from 2016 through 2021. The findings included in this brief were primarily informed by the following:

NHTH staff interviews (n = 2 leaders, 13 staff)

Partner interviews and focus groups (n = 6 law enforcement officers, 8 service providers, and 8 individuals who have experienced trafficking)

Law enforcement agency case study (n = 5 distinct agencies with 1 representative per agency)

Assessment of referral directory

In addition, the evaluation team pursued member-checking activities throughout 2021 and 2022, in which initial findings were presented to a small subset of NHTH staff to review for accuracy and relevant additions (e.g., updates to practice since the data collection period). Please refer to the *Evaluation Technical Background Report* for in-depth descriptions of all methodology and data collection activities.

Like all evaluations, this project presents unique limitations. This evaluation was conducted over 5 years, and results reflect specific points in time. The NHTH seeks to consistently evolve and update its practices to improve its quality of service. As such, some results may not accurately represent current hotline practices.

TERMINOLOGY

Throughout this brief, we will use the following terms and phrases:

- **Individuals who have experienced trafficking/survivor:** These phrases will be used interchangeably to refer to individuals who are experiencing or have experienced human trafficking. At the time of data collection, the NHTH used the term "potential victim of trafficking" and thus, this phrasing may be present throughout the reports and briefs.
- **Contactors:** Individuals who have accessed the NHTH via phone, text, webchat, or email. Contactors may or may not be survivors of human trafficking. At times, when specifying contactors who connected with the NHTH via phone, the word "callers" may be used. The NHTH refers to contactors as signalers but endorsed the use of contactors for the purposes of this brief for increased clarity.
- **Contacts:** Contacts are the individual level calls, texts, webchats, or emails received by the NHTH.
- **Cases:** Contacts are stored at the case level, whereby a case represents all calls, texts, webchats, and emails received regarding a particular circumstance of sex or labor trafficking. For example, if two independent community members contact the NHTH with two separate tips regarding the same potential victim, both contacts will be placed in the same case.

INTRODUCTION

The NHTH partners with local hotlines, local service providers (e.g., anti-trafficking organizations and programs that offer emergency, transitional, or long-term services to victims of human trafficking), and law enforcement agencies across the United States to support contactors who access the hotline. The NHTH efficiently provides referrals to these partners through the use of its extensive national referral directory.

NHTH NATIONAL REFERRAL DIRECTORY

Hotline Advocates seeking to identify services or referrals for contactors have access to over 2,900 service providers and reporting resources through the internal referral directory, with 667 of these service providers included in an external-facing, public referral directory. The public database is narrower than the internal database and includes only trafficking-specific organizations. Service providers in the internal directory span multiple categories (e.g., anti-trafficking, domestic violence, sexual assault, general shelters) and represent all areas of the United States and its territories.

To provide referrals, Hotline Advocates assess a contactor's needs and determine the appropriate service provider category (e.g., shelter, mental health counseling). Then, the advocates access the customized database by which service provider organizations can be searched by category and location. Advocates select the appropriate provider or providers and share all necessary information with the contactor. As needed and appropriate, the advocates make contact with a service provider or law enforcement on behalf of the contactor, providing a warm handoff and expediting the contactor's access to services.

As they are able, Hotline Advocates clarify what kinds of information a service provider offers in advance of sharing the referral, but do not attempt to answer questions they do not have answers for (e.g., the Hotline Advocate may not know a shelter's rules). Additionally, Hotline Advocates do not provide assurances that a specific referral will have a specific result (e.g., that a mental health counselor will solve the contactor's challenges).

If there are no services in the contactor's area, the Hotline Advocate will seek to engage other agencies as is appropriate for the contactor's needs (e.g., shelters in neighboring communities, child protective services, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children).

Law enforcement personnel are also included in the NHTH's referral directory. Hotline advocates may leverage these law enforcement referrals when 1) contactors request to connect with law enforcement personnel with human trafficking experience in their area, 2) contactors request that a hotline advocate learn more about reporting on their behalf (e.g., asking law enforcement about the implications of reporting victimization with undocumented status), or 3) hotline advocates are seeking trusted information from the community. There are times, such as when the NHTH is filing a report on the contactor's behalf, where hotline advocates may bypass the referral directory and simply focus on connecting with the appropriate, local law enforcement agencies. Additional law enforcement–specific protocols are available for hotline advocates to use when a contactor requests assistance reporting to law enforcement (see *Internal Operations, Protocols, and Training Report* for information on contact processing).

The Hotline Partnerships Team includes a Hotline Partnerships Manager, Hotline Partnership Specialists, and a Hotline Partnerships Associate (see *Internal Operations, Protocols, and Training Report* for additional information about the organizational structure of the NHTH). This team is responsible for updating and maintaining the NHTH's national referral directory.

New Additions to the NHTH National Referral Directory

Service providers and law enforcement may join the referral directory in one of two ways: they can self-submit their information for inclusion in the database, or they can be identified proactively by the Hotline Partnerships Team. NHTH staff review all submissions to determine appropriateness for the database and confirm that all necessary information has been included with the submission.

For service providers seeking to be added to the directory, each agency undergoes a vetting process to make sure that its addition "strengthens the response" to trafficking, as opposed to fracturing it. This vetting process includes confirming that the organization can serve victims of trafficking and has training for supporting victims of trafficking, reviewing the organization's mission statement for congruence with Polaris's values,[1] reviewing funding sources, and determining whether there is a staff member whose dedicated focus is human trafficking. Organizations that meet all these criteria can be included in the public-facing directory. Organizations that do not meet these specific criteria (e.g., domestic violence organization without trafficking-specific programming) may be considered for the internal database to be called upon for urgent situations when a preferred agency cannot be accessed. Faith-based organizations may be included on the directory; as such, advocates inform contactors when making a referral to ensure that the provider is a good fit for their needs.

For law enforcement personnel seeking to be added to the directory,[2] the vetting process looks slightly different. The Partnerships Team reviews the nominated law enforcement personnel on their training and background working trafficking cases. They interview the officer using behavioral questions, particularly around what their response would be to a typical or particularly nuanced trafficking situation (e.g., issues with immigration status, related prostitution charges or other trafficking-related criminal charges). Also, while not an official criterion, NHTH staff reported that they prefer engaging with law enforcement personnel who have the endorsement of service providers they trust.

Once selected to be a part of the database, NHTH staff determine internal tags and categorize agencies as more general organizations, organizations that serve victims of crime but are not specific to trafficking or trafficking specific organizations. This categorization allows advocates to identify the most appropriate service for each contactor.

Ongoing Maintenance of the NHTH National Referral Directory

Historically, the NHTH has experienced challenges with making its referral directory as efficient as possible. For example, the NHTH referral directory is disproportionately representative of certain regions of the country. At the time of this evaluation, it was unclear whether this is due to out-of-date information or to an actual dearth of services available.

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[1] Polaris, a nonprofit in anti–human trafficking work, has received federal funding to manage the NHTH since 2007 (see *Internal Operations, Protocols, and Training Report* for more information). Source: https://polarisproject.org/

[2] The NHTH uses the referral directory to connect with law enforcement when seeking to provide contactors with services or additional information. The NHTH may bypass the referral directory when responding to a crisis or filing a report on the contactor's behalf. In these scenarios, the NHTH will focus on connecting with the appropriate local law enforcement agencies, regardless of whether they are included in the referral directory.

The referral directory is also difficult to maintain and quickly becomes out of date, limiting advocates' ability to provide the most useful connection to any given contactor. For example, Hotline Advocates or the contactors they're working with may learn that an agency in the referral directory is no longer funded to serve survivors of trafficking or has closed very recently. The law enforcement directory specifically is sometimes impacted by turnover and changes to protocols between agencies and community partners.

For the first few years of this evaluation, updates to the directory were often reactive (e.g., a Case Analyst learns of a change and must go back into the database to formalize it in the system) rather than proactive. However, during the course of this evaluation (2021), the NHTH instituted an annual audit of their referral directory, whereby the hotline pushes out an opportunity, via email, for all agencies listed in the directory to provide updated information. If an agency responds with updates, a hotline staff member will manually input these in the database. If the hotline receives a bounce-back email from its request for updated information, or some other indication that contact information is out of date, a hotline staff member will seek further information (e.g., internet search for an updated contact, connecting with others in the community to learn more). If an agency is determined to be no longer active or serving trafficking victims, it will be removed from the referral directory.

Additionally, the NHTH conducted a referral directory gap analysis to understand where they have limited services available, as well as what types of services are limited. As of 2022, the NHTH was working with service providers in these communities to learn how these gaps might be filled.

Finally, the NHTH has also enhanced its vetting and grievance process. When contactors indicate a negative experience with a service provider in the community, Hotline Advocates alert a Supervisor, who will in turn make the Partnership Manager aware of the feedback. The Partnerships Team explores the nature of the challenge reported by the contactor and addresses concerns with the local service provider. If necessary, the agency can be temporarily suspended.

The Partnerships Team is responsible for conducting the annual audit and for otherwise maintaining the referral directory. Staff report that the institution of this auditing process has been successful in culling and streamlining the referral directory.

Reflecting Back and Looking Forward

Individuals with lived experience of trafficking reported that working with the public-facing law enforcement directory is challenging because they are often not able to connect with the correct human trafficking unit or investigator. Additionally, individuals with lived experience noted that, although the NHTH's referral directory is often out of date, other referral directories found online are often more out of date. Thus, they reported that the NHTH's referral directory remains helpful, despite its challenges.

Member-checking activities conducted in 2021 and 2022 highlighted how the NHTH is continually seeking to update its processes for keeping its referral directory current.

LOCAL PARTNERSHIPS

Partnerships With Local Hotlines

The NHTH works with local hotlines (e.g., trafficking hotlines run by local agencies that are intended to serve a city or county) to supplement its services. The NHTH prioritizes partnering with local hotlines that offer 24-hour emergency service coordination, as the NHTH finds this service to be particularly helpful for connecting contactors with shelters or other services during non-business hours.

Service providers and law enforcement officers noted that the greatest benefit of the NHTH's partnership with local hotlines is that the NHTH is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and typically has greater capacity to respond to contacts than local hotlines do. Service providers shared that the NHTH is reliably trauma informed and more familiar with varying types of trafficking cases, when compared to local hotlines. Law enforcement appreciated that there is one nationwide hotline number that is professional, trauma informed, and available 24/7. Law enforcement noted it would be challenging and expensive to re-create this approach with local hotlines.

Partnerships With Local Service Providers

The NHTH works with local service providers in a variety of ways, including (1) offering warm handoffs between contactors and local service providers, (2) facilitating referrals for contactors who are relocating, (3) providing service providers with tips[3] and follow-ups on tips as appropriate, (4) vetting service providers in the area, and (5) providing service providers with technical assistance for trainings and webinars. Additionally, in emergency scenarios when contactors do not want to engage law enforcement and criteria do not meet the threshold for mandatory reporting, the NHTH engages with a subset of service providers who have been tagged for this purpose (e.g., emergency shelters).

Service providers who were interviewed for this evaluation expressed generally positive sentiments about the NHTH. For example, service providers shared that a single number available 24/7 has increased identification and streamlined processes that were previously fragmented.

Hotline staff shared their beliefs that some local service providers lack confidence in the NHTH's ability to adequately serve at the national level because NHTH staff are not able to know the intricacies of every community.[4] Given this, the NHTH noted that its relationships with local service providers are important for keeping its referral directory up-to-date and ensuring that its emergency response protocols are most effective. Hotline staff highlighted that they rely on local actors to understand what specific challenges different parts of the country are facing, where the critical gaps in service delivery are in those locations, and how communities are working together to best serve individuals experiencing trafficking. Interviewed service providers shared that they feel the NHTH is helpful in supporting their work. They also noted that being able to provide feedback (and having the NHTH be receptive to that feedback) is important for providing the best services possible.

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[3] At the time of data collection, the NHTH used the term "tip" to refer to contacts that were made by members of the community (e.g., individuals with known or suspected information about a trafficking scenario) with the purpose of sharing information about potential trafficking situations. This phrasing may be present throughout the reports and briefs.

[4] This sentiment was not necessarily reflected in interviews with service providers, but it is possible that other local service providers hold these beliefs.

Partnerships With Local Law Enforcement

The NHTH partners with local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies throughout the United States, including immigration authorities. The NHTH and law enforcement work together to (1) communicate tips made by contactors based on specific criteria (described below), (2) ensure that tips are updated as needed and sent to the correct people or agencies, (3) ensure that the NHTH's emergency response protocols are up to date, and (4) provide information and trainings to law enforcement and relevant task forces.

The NHTH has established criteria for communicating tips to law enforcement, and tips are kept confidential until certain criteria are met to trigger a report to law enforcement or child welfare. Such scenarios include (1) when the NHTH is required by law to report the contact (e.g., mandatory reporting requirements), (2) when a person is in immediate danger, or (3) when a report is requested directly by the potential victim or contactor themselves (see the *Internal Operations, Protocols, and Training Report* for more information on contact processing).

Additionally, NHTH Case Analysts may work directly with law enforcement on specific, nuanced contacts. For example, if the NHTH receives a tip with concerns related to immigration status, an NHTH Case Analyst may connect with the responding law enforcement agency to communicate the concerns and understand their implications.[5] When information is deemed appropriate to share with law enforcement, tips are provided to law enforcement via email, and only NHTH staff with additional relevant training may facilitate a report (see the Internal Operations, Protocols, and Training Report for more information on contact processing). NHTH staff described how contactors sometimes have incorrect assumptions about the hotline's relationship with law enforcement and that Hotline Advocates explain that they need to receive the contactor's consent before making a tip.

The NHTH provides tips and referrals to law enforcement agencies, including…

- State and local law enforcement
- Human trafficking task forces
- Internet Crimes Against Children (ICAC) task forces
- Department of Homeland Security
- Department of Defense, Office of the Inspector General
- Department of Justice, Criminal Division, Child Exploitation and Obscenity Section (CEOS)
- Department of Labor, Office of the Inspector General
- Department of State, Office of the Inspector General
- Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)
- Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)

[5] With contactors for whom immigration status in unclear, Hotline Advocates communicate what they learned from law enforcement, making clear all of the contactor's options, and underscore that it is up to the contactor whether their case is reported to law enforcement on their behalf.

Upon receipt of the tip, law enforcement first seeks to assign the case to the appropriate agency and ensure that all relevant parties are made aware of the tip. This process typically involves deconfliction among agencies (e.g., local police departments and the Department of Homeland Security). Next, law enforcement begins to explore key elements of the tip, including whether the case includes sex or labor trafficking, the age of the individual experiencing trafficking, and the person's national origin (from the United States or foreign born). The NHTH does not receive follow-ups from law enforcement agencies about the status of tips. It does, however, receive requests for additional information as needed.

Almost all law enforcement respondents reported that the hotline is valuable because its staff are an extra set of "eyes and ears" for information, particularly among those who may be fearful of contacting law enforcement directly. They also noted that NHTH staff are professional, trauma informed, and able to provide specific, detailed information very quickly. However, interviewed law enforcement conveyed that most tips do not actualize into investigations or convictions (although some tips result in the recovery of individuals who are experiencing trafficking).[6]

Although NHTH can provide information quickly, law enforcement described how receiving a tip from the NHTH can become an inefficient process. First, deconfliction is the responsibility of the responding agencies. The NHTH sends tips to all relevant agencies at one time, of which there may be several, depending on the circumstances of the case. Law enforcement noted that it can be challenging for agencies to determine who is or is not working a specific tip. NHTH staff reported that it is sometimes difficult to determine which groups should receive which tips, as each state and region has different protocols. Law enforcement also shared how the NHTH receives contacts from individuals who may be facing mental health issues, thus sending law enforcement on "wild goose chases."[7] Law enforcement reported they would like to have more personalized communication with the NHTH, including liaisons with different units and updates on the NHTH's ongoing efforts.

Similarly, hotline staff shared that they wished there were formal processes for offering and receiving feedback to and from law enforcement agencies. Some NHTH staff noted that law enforcement will, at times, express frustration when the NHTH has additional information on a contact that cannot be shared because the victim has not provided consent to do so. NHTH staff reported being confident in being able to relay the hotline's confidentiality policies to contactors and to describe how they are different from law enforcement policies.

Individuals with lived experience of trafficking shared that the NHTH was unable to reliably connect them with the appropriate individuals at law enforcement agencies without the NHTH staff members' making the tip themselves (i.e., the law enforcement referral directory was out of date). Additionally, they noted that when tips were made, they did not necessarily receive any follow-up on next steps (from the NHTH or law enforcement).

[6] None of the law enforcement agencies interviewed for this evaluation maintained metrics on the outcomes of tips made by the NHTH. Thus, this evaluation cannot confirm the number of tips that resulted in recoveries, investigations, or convictions.

[7] The NHTH seeks to provide tips to law enforcement only when the Hotline Advocate is able to confirm specific incidents of trafficking.

Reflecting Back and Looking Forward

Generally, NHTH partners noted that the greatest benefit of the NHTH is that individuals have one number they can contact for support, regardless of their location. Interviewees highlighted that this feature is particularly important for a crime when survivors may be moved to different areas or states. Law enforcement also underscored that the NHTH does an excellent job at providing timely, detailed tips.

Reported challenges were related primarily to the NHTH's inefficiencies (e.g., outdated information, deconfliction among agencies due to sending tips to multiple agencies at once) or inability to provide certain kinds of information to partners (e.g., protocols in place to protect contactor confidentiality, lack of follow-up from law enforcement that can be communicated to service providers or contactors).

The NHTH may consider ways to continue to develop personalized relationships with its partnering agencies, including having dedicated liaisons for key partners or stakeholder groups. This approach may help streamline communication and allow for the development of more efficient processes.

Submitted to:
Mary Mueggenborg, Project Officer
Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation
Administration for Children and Families
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
330 C Street, SW, 4th Floor
Washington, DC 20201
https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre

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Project Director: Hannah Feeney
RTI International
3040 East Cornwallis Road
P.O. Box 12194
Research Triangle Park, NC 27709-2194

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