

A Journey in Healing: The Role of Victim Advocates in Serving Human Trafficking Survivors

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The role of victim advocates is multi-faceted, as their daily work is to serve survivors of crime by working to restore their autonomy and capacity to thrive, while simultaneously providing support in navigating complicated legal systems. Survivors of human trafficking have often faced repeated exploitation from perpetrators and the recovery journey can be fraught with challenges and hardships, making additional guidance and support critical for recovery.¹ Although there is no single path for a victim to navigate in order to heal from abuse, the empathetic support of a victim advocate can lay the groundwork for an individualized journey to be successfully forged.

The International Labour Organization estimates there were nearly 25 million individuals worldwide forced into labor in 2016.² In the U.S., more than 7,500 human trafficking cases came in through the Polaris Project's National Human Trafficking Hotline in 2016 alone.³ Labor trafficking and sex trafficking occur across Utah in both rural communities and metropolitan centers. To actively combat human trafficking in our state, we must enhance multi-disciplinary partnerships that emphasize the role of victim advocates in the criminal justice process and on a survivor's journey of healing.

The Utah Office of the Attorney General (OAG) is dedicated to the fight against human trafficking via a multi-disciplinary approach. The OAG's SECURE Strike Force is composed of specially trained law enforcement agents that routinely conduct labor and sex trafficking investigations with the goal of dismantling and eliminating human trafficking operations in the state of Utah. The OAG also employs a dedicated prosecution team that actively works to bring justice to the perpetrators of this horrific crime. Both law enforcement agents and prosecution team members apply a victim-

centered approach in their efforts. Being victim-centered means placing an emphasis on meeting the needs of human trafficking survivors through advocacy, comprehensive services, and meaningful empowerment efforts.⁴ The well-being of trafficking survivors is essential; the bulk of this work is often carried out by victim advocates and like-minded allies.

OAG works to ensure victim advocates and service providers are involved early in the criminal justice process in order to provide survivors with the resources and assistance they need to address trauma and begin the recovery journey. This multidisciplinary approach has proven effective at helping victims and stopping traffickers. The number of investigations and prosecutions in Utah have increased in recent years due to additional resources with which to address this issue. Human trafficking awareness is increasing across the state through coordinated outreach efforts by partnerships within the Utah Trafficking in Persons (UTIP) Task Force and community-based organizations. But it still is not enough. More can be done and more must be done in order to combat the issue and, most importantly, serve the victims of this crime. I believe that victim advocates play the most vital role in a survivor's journey to rebuild their life.

I have witnessed the transformational impact a victim advocate can make on the life of a human trafficking survivor. Whether it is an individual being reunited with their family in another country after years of exploitative work, or receiving guidance in navigating mental health systems, or having support when facing their trafficker during the legal process – victim advocates passionately serve those who have suffered beyond our understanding. All victims deserve to have their autonomy restored, their voice empowered, and their needs met with an empathetic hand by skilled

victim advocates.

Supporting the work of victim advocates via a multi-disciplinary approach takes not only a shift in mindset for many who are unfamiliar with the issue, but also a shift in funding allocation. Additional funding is needed to create positions for more victim advocates across the state, allowing survivors to be served at every point in their healing process. The measure of success in the criminal justice system hinges not solely on the punishment of perpetrators, but also on the healing and prosperity of survivors.

Victims of human trafficking need more support than only words can offer – they need the services, empathy, and the support grid that a victim advocate can provide. Once a victim advocate enters the life of a survivor, that individual is empowered to take the next steps in the path to recovery. All of us can contribute in different ways to help survivors of human trafficking on their path towards healing traumatic wounds, however, I believe the most important facet in recovery is the ardent support and skilled guidance provided by victim advocates.

¹ The Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000 defines human trafficking, divided into two categories, as "(A) sex trafficking in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age; or (B) the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services, through the use of force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of subjecting to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery."

106th Congress (1999-2000). (n.d.). H.R.3244 - Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000. Retrieved November 24, 2017, from <https://www.congress.gov/bill/106th-congress/house-bill/3244/text>

² International Labour Organization. Statistics on forced labour, modern slavery and human trafficking. Retrieved October 15, 2017, from <http://www.ilo.org/global/topics/forced-labour/statistics/lang-en/index.htm>

³ Polaris. 2016 Hotline Statistics. Retrieved October 15, 2017, from <https://polarisproject.org/resources/2016-hotline-statistics>

⁴ U.S. Department of Justice. Victim-Centered Approach. Retrieved October 15, 2017, from <https://www.ovcttac.gov/taskforceguide/eguide/1-understanding-human-trafficking/13-victim-centered-approach/>