

Creating Safe Environments for Youth Survivors of Exploitation

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All program areas have the potential to work with youth survivors of exploitation. Finding ways to create safe environments for these youth is a primary aim of the Department. Listed below are some general ways Foster Parents, Case Managers (CMs), Investigators, and Supervisors may work together to build safe environments for these youth:

- Avoid placing custodial youth in areas where they have ever been exploited or in the presence of their trafficker, especially if they have recently been rescued. **This may mean not placing youth within their home county— at least not initially.** Only after treatment will some youth identify as victims. In the meantime, these youth have been brutalized and routinized to seek their abusers and perform “work.” Traffickers rely on evoking both fear and love from their victims, so rescued youth can be manipulative, erratic, and dangerous in their attempts to return to their abusers.
- Offer these youth prompt medical care. Local emergency rooms carry the immediate, health-saving medications that can prevent HIV and other infectious diseases. **If a youth was likely exploited within the past 120 hours (i.e., 5 days), they need immediate medical care.**
- Engage foster parents in thorough safety planning. This could include alarms being placed on the doors and windows, and restricted access to social media, telephones, and internet. Visibility in the community should be well-regulated (e.g., posting pictures) as it could connect traffickers to the youth’s location. Most importantly, establishing short-term positive incentives for safe behaviors is a must. **Foster parents and DCS need to contact Law Enforcement immediately if a trafficker is trying to access the youth and also call immediately if the youth goes missing or absconds.**
- Plan ahead for the possibility of sexually reactive behaviors. Foster parents need to understand these youth have been trained to behave in highly sexualized ways, and these behaviors were often rewarded with basic needs (e.g., food, clothing, shelter, affection) being met. Foster parents need to be ready to respond assertively yet compassionately to youth who may walk around the house naked, masturbate frequently or publicly, and/or seek inappropriate sexual behaviors with others.
- Case Managers and Foster Parents alike should be certain of a person’s identity before giving away information about the youth. Traffickers often disguise their identity to acquire the location of their victims. Remember, traffickers can be family members. Even if not the primary trafficker, family members may encourage exploitation or be afraid themselves.
- Be mindful to start counseling and other treatment supports as soon as possible, and be patient during their early months... Healing is a process and can be frustrating at times. **Connecting quickly with the local anti-trafficking organization to support the youth is vital.**