



## **Supporting Survivors of Trafficking with Intellectual Disabilities: Prevention and Response Through Multi-Systems Collaboration**

Individuals who live with intellectual disabilities often experience marginalization in society which increases the risk of vulnerability to exploitation and trafficking<sup>1</sup>. Further, in anti-trafficking efforts, the unique factors facing this community are overlooked and resources are inadequate. To ensure appropriate, effective survivor-centered support, it is critical to examine factors that impact survivors with intellectual disabilities.

To better understand the unique variables surrounding supporting survivors with intellectual disabilities, Futures Without Violence (FUTURES) partnered with experts in the field of anti-trafficking supports for survivors with intellectual disabilities on an in-depth [webinar](#), held in January 2024.

The goals of the webinar included:

- Identifying individual and systemic factors influencing the risk of vulnerability of individuals with intellectual disabilities to exploitation and trafficking.
- Recognizing factors that contribute to creating a plan of support for survivors.
- Exploring methods of balancing institutional responsibility for ensuring safety and respecting individual autonomy.
- Determining how to initiate and facilitate multisystem collaboration.
- Applying a survivor-centered response when working with survivors of human trafficking, domestic violence, and sexual assault with intellectual disabilities.

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<sup>1</sup> Jagoe, C., Toh, P. Y. N., & Wylie, G. (2022). Disability and the risk of vulnerability to human trafficking: An analysis of case law. *Journal of Human Trafficking*, 1-15.

## **An Intersectional and Person-Centered Framework of Intellectual Disabilities**

Each person living with intellectual disabilities is unique in their experiences, abilities, the barriers they face, and most importantly their strengths. Society and the environment play a major role in the marginalization of people living with intellectual disabilities, which inherently increases risks of vulnerability to trafficking. The individual characteristics of a person do not inherently make them more vulnerable. However, the impact of barriers, stereotypes, and biases does increase risks of vulnerability for people with intellectual disabilities. Intersecting marginalized identities increase risks of vulnerability further.

For a person to be diagnosed with Intellectual Developmental Disorder (intellectual disabilities for short), consistent features must be present. These include deficits in mental and adaptive abilities which occur prior to the age of 22<sup>2</sup>. Mental abilities include comprehension, memory, and practical application of learned information. Adaptive abilities include a wide range of daily activities including securing basic needs like housing, food, medical care to hygiene and mobility. Each individual's experience with ability level is unique, may fluctuate over their lifetime, and occurs on a spectrum of severity.

### **Societal Factors Impacting the Risk of Vulnerability to Trafficking:**

- Exclusion from community and social isolation
- Lack of sexuality education
- Increased rates of sexual and physical abuse
- Increased rates of poverty
- Communication barriers, especially in health care and the criminal justice system
- High turnover rate of paid support staff
- Stripping of individual rights, autonomy, and choice-making

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<sup>2</sup> American Psychiatric Association. (2013). Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (5th ed., text rev.).

## Individual Factors That May Impact Risk of Vulnerability

- Difficulty comprehending new information
- Generalizing information to new situations or environments
- Recognizing dangerous people, situations

These individual factors coincide with societal factors to increase the risk of vulnerability. Specifically, when social isolation occurs, the need for human connection and feelings of connectedness increase. When paired with impaired judgement and comprehension, social isolation becomes one of the most significant risk factors for vulnerability facing individuals with intellectual disabilities.



Image Source:  
Disabled and Here

## Identification of Potential Survivors

Identification of trafficking survivor status and disability status should be a personal choice of the survivor. If a potential survivor consents, screening for intellectual disability can lead to increased access to specialized supports, including opening new funding and support service options. One tool which can be used to quickly screen for potential intellectual disability is the Learning Disabilities Screening Questionnaire<sup>3</sup>.

If a survivor is identified as having an intellectual disability, the first step is to determine what immediate action needs to be taken. Prioritize basic needs like medical care, food, and water. Next, it is essential to determine reporting mandates. Most states require the reporting of abuse of a person with disabilities. After basic needs have been evaluated and met, collaborate with the survivor to create a person-specific action plan. This includes having an identified point-person to help coordinate services and resources. Each state has a state agency of developmental disability services. Contacting the state agency can help link a survivor with disability specific supports. If a survivor has a court-appointed guardian, the guardian

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<sup>3</sup> McKenzie, K., Sharples, P., & Murray, A. L. (2015). Validating the learning disability screening questionnaire against the Weschler Adult Intelligence Scale. *Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities*, 53(4), 301-307.

must be involved and approve all services and supports. If the guardian is the suspected trafficker, the legal system must be involved to determine if the guardian can be replaced.

When communicating with a survivor with intellectual disabilities, it is essential to evaluate communication style. General tips include:

- Use concrete language
- Use visual aids
- Leave ample time for a person to process information and respond
- Avoid “baby-talk” or “up-speak”
- Ask about sensory preferences
  - Ex: are the lights too bright, is the environment too noisy?

## **Creating Strengths-Based, Survivor-Centered Supports**

To create policies and procedures that attend to the needs of survivors with intellectual disabilities, begin by initiating conversations and collaborations with self-advocates and survivors. Examine in-house policies and procedures to include disability specific information in agency mission, trainings, materials, and accessibility. Pay close attention to language, assumptions, and unconscious ableism.

Working with other agencies, specifically disability focused agencies, can bridge gaps in practice and knowledge. Agencies may have different roles and movement-specific goals, however finding commonalities strengthens the anti-trafficking movement and supports for survivors. Additionally, work to identify additional civil and criminal legal supports. Engage in conversations with these supports about survivors living with intellectual disabilities.

Finally, remember that services should be designed to support the highest level of autonomy that is safely possible for survivors.

## **Service Coordination**

There are many considerations when coordinating holistic, accessible supports for survivors with intellectual disabilities. These include:

- Working with a guardian (if applicable)
- Safety planning
- Shelter
- Transportation
- Accommodations (ex: supported employment)
- Paid personal support providers/direct service providers
- Financial support or money management services
- Linkage to self-advocacy groups

## **Call to Action and Commitment**

We ask your consideration in committing to support survivors of trafficking with intellectual disabilities. If you are ready to act, a checklist of actions is below to support your agency:

- Establish relationships with disability rights programs and experts
- Identify individuals and develop referral list for service providers with expertise
- Incorporate accessibility and accommodations into policies, protocols, and practices
- Incorporate disability-specific considerations for intake
- Modify safety plan and access plan for persons with disabilities
- Clarify confidentiality and privilege
- Create appropriate outreach plan for persons with disabilities
- Organize training and capacity building on disability awareness and justice

## Resources

- ❖ Webinar: [Supporting Survivors of Trafficking with Intellectual Disabilities: Prevention and Response Through Multi-Systems Collaboration](#)
  - [Webinar Recording](#)
  - [PowerPoint Slides](#)
  - [Resources List](#)
  - [Worksheet: Call to Action](#)
- ❖ The Arcs [www.thearc.org](http://www.thearc.org)
  - Paid personal support providers/direct service providers
  - Day programs and supported employment
- ❖ State Agencies of Developmental Disabilities [www.nsaddds.org](http://www.nsaddds.org)
  - Single point of entry for all long-term services, housing, case management, funding
- ❖ [Resource Guidebook for Human Trafficking Victims & Survivors with Disabilities, Adult Advocacy Centers of Ohio](#)

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**Visit the web page with resources and past recorded webinars:**  
[Building Collaborative Responses to Trafficked Survivors of Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault](#)

<https://www.futureswithoutviolence.org/organizational-leadership-training/building-collaborative-responses-to-human-trafficking/>

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