



FIRST ENCOUNTER

What Do Human-Trafficking Victims Encounter in Victim Services?

By Teresa Green (pseudonym)

Relatively new to the Northern Virginia Human Trafficking Task Force, I find it striking how Task Force members are organized to provide safe harbor to victims. While employing diverse services to help each victim of trafficking in labor or commercial sex to stabilize and transition into a fully independent life, still the Task Force collaborates to combat illegal trade in human persons in the courts. How does this happen?

Recently, I explored the first step in this process. I talked about stabilization and transition with Bridget Perkins, Director of Victim Services/Case Manager, the [Northern Virginia Human Trafficking Initiative](#) and Laura A. Poole, Clinical Case Manager of the [Multicultural Center](#) in [Northern Virginia Family Services](#). Both Bridget and Laura manage first encounters with individuals turning to victims services in Northern Virginia.

Bridget's first intake involves crisis response services to domestic victims of sex and/or labor trafficking identified by law enforcement after their situation had deteriorated enough for law enforcement to intervene. Crisis response provides services the first 48 hours after a victim is recovered, and involves an assessment to determine emergency needs such as safe shelter, food, clothing, emergency medical/mental health needs, etc. For those staying in the area, long term case management services are offered *pro bono*, which includes a trained mentor who has gone through about 40 hours of training.

Laura works exclusively with foreign nationals. As with similar organizations such as [Ayuda](#), Catholic Charities in local dioceses and [Tahirih Justice Center](#), most referrals come to her from the [United States](#)

[Committee for Refugees and Immigrants](#) as it reaches out to regional service providers to support victims and their family members through the Trafficking Victim Assistance Program (TVAP). Foreign nationals have usually already received some basic care. The first step for Laura is to ascertain the legal status of the individual and family. From there, the victim may apply for the proper Visa to permit a legal stay during which they can recuperate and begin to make clear decisions about the future.

Once the status of a foreign national is confirmed, the degree to which they are eligible for various programs is clarified. Laura then begins to help them piece together a stable foundation on which to build. Bridget's and Laura's clients have access to similar options—such as food stamps, housing stipends, health care and therapy—although foreign nationals' access is more limited by the length of their Visa or extension thereof.

A main challenge both Bridget and Laura describe is earning a victim's trust. All victims have been betrayed by at least one trusted person who entrapped them, and potentially by many powerful people since then. Often, those abusers feigned affection, care and even love to impose their will. The cost of having trusted the wrong person is painfully real to each victim. It makes trusting even the most professional contact exceedingly difficult. The relationship Bridget or Laura begin during intake works in contrast to the abuse of the past and the wounds left lingering. It reflects what future, healthful relationships can be.

Working with victims requires skills for providing a sense of authentic safety. For example, basic physical needs are a priority, and victims need to discover these basic services are without *quid pro quo*. Confidentiality must be sacrosanct, and nothing is done without the victim's approval. The goal is to build a relationship of safety, giving each victim a sense of control over what is happening to them—to counter their experience as a commercially trafficked human being.

Work with victims is working against the tragically low self-esteem of victims who first come for help. Laura describes how she focused on identifying and building on each victim's strengths and abilities. She points to how NVFS and most local victim services use on some version of the Program for Survivors of Torture and Severe Trauma (PSTT), also known as the strength-based model. First developed in 1989, this model takes a holistic approach to meeting a victim's needs. What stands out are its emphasis on a victim having full self-determination and working collaboratively with their case manager to use resources to stabilize and move past the trauma.

Quick to express high regard toward their clients, both Bridget and Laura are well aware of victims' strengths. They are practiced in empowering victims at a gentle pace. As Bridget told me, it can take a long time for victims to grapple with the psychological manipulation of traffickers; her job is to be

patient and respectful as a victim recognizes, at their own pace, the scope of their own victimization.

Both Bridget and Laura also are quick to refer to strength in every victim. While every case is unique as every person is, but what seems to remain constant in victim services is how every victim is inspirational. Each one fights a courageous battle to free themselves of the terrible physical and psychological scars of the past and to begin again in a new, better life.

Looked at from the point of first encounter, the Northern Virginia Human Trafficking Task Force plays a key role in the process by which victims stabilize and transition into healthy lives. Meanwhile, Task Force members work to prosecute victims' traffickers and to prevent the expansion of human trafficking.

Teresa Hartnett founded and works with Spirit Fire, which promotes collaborations with survivors in Christ-centered restorative justice for adults, families and faith communities wounded by child abuse. Spirit Fire offers spiritual mediation, pastoral training and survivor partnerships to inspire and energize Catholic and all other Christian ministries. For our resources and services, see [SpiritFire.Live](#) today.

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