



# HOW TO TALK TO YOUTH ABOUT HUMAN TRAFFICKING

*A Guide for Youth Caretakers and Individuals  
Working with Youth*

THIS GUIDE IS NOT INTENDED TO BE DISTRIBUTED DIRECTLY TO YOUTH



## ABOUT THIS GUIDE

As a youth caretaker or individual working with youth, you are in a unique position to reach those considered vulnerable to exploitation and human trafficking: youth. You play an important role because you interact with youth regularly, you learn about their lives, and you often gain their trust. You may also help connect youth with their peers and/or communities, which may help protect them against exploitation.

You may also be able to recognize when something is wrong in a youth's life. This guide includes information about:

- » What human trafficking is
- » How to recognize it among youth
- » Tips for talking to youth about general exploitation
- » Information about building life skills that may help prevent youth from being trafficked
- » Reporting options if you suspect a youth is affected by human trafficking or being exploited

**This guide can be used by any adult who is a caretaker of a youth or individuals who work with youth through formal or informal programming** in classrooms, camps, community or faith-based programs, sports leagues, mentorship programs, and more. The information in this guide can be incorporated into existing activities, lessons, or conversation that you use to engage the youth in your lives. This content can be adapted to best meet the unique needs of your program and/or the youth you interact with. This guide was created with a focus on middle and high school-aged youth (11- to 17-years old).

## WHAT IS HUMAN TRAFFICKING?

**Human trafficking involves the use of force, fraud, or coercion to obtain some type of labor or commercial sex act.** Causing someone under the age of 18 to engage in a commercial sex act, regardless of using force, fraud, or coercion is human trafficking under U.S. law.<sup>1</sup> Human traffickers use various forms of force, fraud, and coercion to control and exploit victims. These forms include imposing of debt, fraudulent employment opportunities, false promises of love or a better life, psychological coercion, and violence or threats of violence.<sup>2</sup>

**The crime of human trafficking hinges on the exploitation of another person.** People often falsely believe "human trafficking" implies victims must be moved from one place to another to qualify as a victim. Human trafficking does not require transportation to be considered a crime.<sup>3</sup> It is a crime that can be committed against an individual who has never left their hometown.

**Human trafficking victims can be any age, race, gender identity, sex, ethnicity, nationality, immigration status, and socioeconomic class.** In many cases, victims do not come forward to seek help because they are vulnerable, potential language barriers may exist, they have a fear of law enforcement, or they do not identify as a victim.

<sup>1</sup> See 18 U.S.C Chapter 77 for precise definitions

<sup>2</sup> See 18 U.S.C Chapter 77 for language on elements of the crime

<sup>3</sup> Learn more about the difference between human trafficking and human smuggling: [dhs.gov/bluecampaign](https://dhs.gov/bluecampaign)





## HOW TRAFFICKERS OPERATE

Traffickers often prey on victims with little or no social safety net. They look for victims who are vulnerable because of their lack of social or family support systems, unstable housing, previous traumatic experiences or abuse, immigration status, limited English proficiency, and inability to decipher exploitative situations. Traffickers recognize these factors, along with other risk factors (mentioned on page 5), may make someone more likely to take risks to access opportunities and stability. Youth may also be targeted by traffickers simply because they are young and may be less equipped to make informed and sound decisions when presented with a situation that may lead to trafficking.

### Who are Traffickers?

There is no single face of traffickers, they can be any gender, age, or race. To victims, they can be:

- » “Pimps” or a romantic partner
- » Employers or other professionals
- » Community leaders or people of prominence
- » Family members
- » Friends or peers
- » Strangers
- » Connected by mutual friends

In some cases, there is no trafficker controlling or benefiting from youth victims, but only the buyer who is committing a crime. Based on federal law, minors (under the age of 18) cannot consent to a commercial sex act, so once this occurs, they are considered a victim of this crime.

### Where Are Traffickers Reaching Victims?

Traffickers often go to locations where they can reach vulnerable individuals. Some of these locations include:

#### SOCIAL MEDIA, ONLINE, AND DATING APPS

Targeting youth online has become increasingly common tactic among traffickers. They will look for vulnerable young people who are receptive to their advances.

#### POPULAR MEETING PLACES

Locations where youth may frequent such as malls, parks, concerts, community centers, public transit centers, house gatherings, etc.

#### SCHOOLS

To potentially identify and intersect vulnerable students. Peer-to-peer recruitment may take place in schools. This is when traffickers coerce or force their victims into recruiting their peers with promises of more payment, better status, or less abuse.

#### GROUP HOMES, DETENTION CENTERS, SHELTERS, AND FOSTER CARE HOMES

Traffickers know that individuals at these locations are experiencing hardship and they can play to those challenges by offering financial or emotional support to gain trust.





# HUMAN TRAFFICKING MYTHS

There are many myths surrounding what human trafficking is and what it looks like. These myths may cloud the judgement of youth caretakers and individuals working with youth to recognize exploitation and human trafficking among the youth they interact with. Below are examples of common myths surrounding human trafficking:

MYTH	REALITY
When someone is trafficked, they are kidnapped and held against their will.	<b>Being trafficked may be a gradual process.</b> It may take weeks or months of grooming and manipulation by the trafficker before a victim is exploited. Victims may appear to have free will but are often controlled by their trafficker through fear and other forms of mental manipulation. They may not even identify themselves as a victim.
Traffickers are older men who prey on young girls.	The person who lures a youth into a trafficking situation is often one of their peers, a member of their family, or someone they think they trust. <b>Traffickers can be any race, gender, or age.</b>
Only girls are sex trafficked.	<b>Youth of all genders are vulnerable to experiencing sex trafficking.</b> This includes boys, transgender youth, non-binary, and non-conforming youth.
Youth experiencing human trafficking do not go to school.	<b>Youth who attend school and are involved in community activities are still at-risk for being trafficked.</b> Even during a trafficking experience, a victim may still attend school regularly and participate in their usual programs.
Traffickers target victims they do not know.	In many cases, <b>traffickers target vulnerable people who they already know.</b> Traffickers may target friends, family, or any mutual connections to victims in order to establish contact.
Only undocumented individuals are forced labor victims.	<b>Anyone can be a victim of forced labor.</b> Youth of every race, gender, and immigration status are vulnerable to being forced to work for little or no pay.
Forced labor doesn't occur in legal or legitimate business settings.	<b>Forced labor takes place in all kinds of businesses and settings,</b> both legal and illegal. A variety of industries, for example illicit massage businesses, domestic work, agriculture, factory work, door-to-door sales crews, bars and restaurants, construction, hospitality, and commercial cleaning services, have uncovered forced labor.





# INDICATORS OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Understanding the indicators of human trafficking can help alert adults working with or caring for youth to a potential human trafficking situation. *While no single indicator is necessarily proof of human trafficking, recognizing the signs is the first step in identifying potential victims.*

## Physical or Behavioral:

Does the youth...



- » Have unexplained absences from school or display a sudden drop in school performance?
- » Chronically run away from home?
- » Show sudden or dramatic changes in behavior? For example, if a typically mild-mannered youth begins acting out or a typically outgoing youth becomes reclusive and disconnected from peers.



- » Act fearful, anxious, depressed, submissive, tense, or nervous/paranoid?
- » Suddenly have more (and/or more expensive) material possessions, like purses, clothing, and/or cell phones?



- » Exhibit behaviors that would get them suspended (fighting, class disruptions)?
- » Defer to another person to speak for him or her, especially during interactions with authority figures?
- » Appear to be deprived of food, water, sleep, medical care, or other necessities?
- » Talk about or use language related to performing sex acts for money?
- » Have tattoos or scars that may indicate branding from a trafficker?

## Social

Does the youth...



- » Have a "boyfriend," "girlfriend," or romantic partner who is noticeably older?
- » Engage in sexual behavior that puts them at risk of harm or indicate they may be experiencing abuse from their partner?



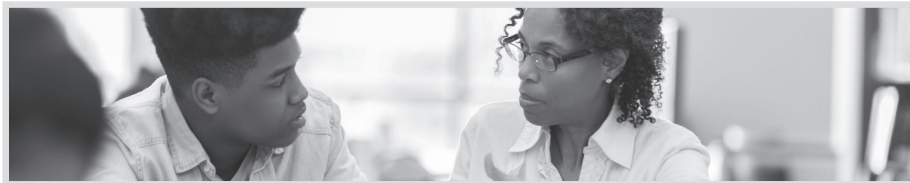
- » Stop attending the youth activities they normally attend?
- » Reference traveling to other cities or towns frequently?
- » Seem restricted from contacting family, friends, or his or her legal guardian?



- » Seem to work excessively long hours or during school hours?
- » Talk about getting paid very little or not at all for the work they do?
- » Appear to not have the freedom to quit their job?







# YOUTH VULNERABILITIES

## Risk Factors

Understanding youth risk factors can help put youth caretakers and individuals working with youth in a better position to prevent the youth they interact with from being exploited or even trafficked. Youth often experience individual and environmental risk factors that make them more vulnerable to human trafficking situations. Keeping the following risk factors in mind will help to provide you with a better understanding of human trafficking victimization. As a trusted adult, youth may talk to you about their experiences with these risk factors, but it is important not to highlight those experiences as something that could make them vulnerable to exploitation or human trafficking in your conversations.

- » Poverty
- » Homelessness
- » Interaction with foster care or juvenile justice systems
- » Lack of support networks, like strong relationships with friends, family, or other trusted adults
- » Gang involvement, especially among youth who identify as female
- » History of running away
- » Low self-esteem
- » Being bullied
- » Experience discrimination due to their race, gender identity, sexuality, disability, or other personal characteristic
- » Family history of sexual abuse or violence
- » Community or familial history of trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation
- » Substance abuse or addictions
- » Cognitive and physical disabilities
- » Experiencing or witnessing a traumatic event
- » Cultural historical trauma (particularly among minority communities)
- » Being the sole or primary provider for their family

## Protective Factors

To counteract risk factors, identifying and building protective factors can help to prevent youth from exploitative and trafficking situations. As a youth caretaker or individual working with youth, you may already be helping to build protective factors by engaging youth with their peers and community and by serving as a trusted adult in their lives. Some additional ways to increase protective factors among youth include:

- » Talking about being taken advantage of and what that can look like (See page 8).
- » Building self-esteem by helping youth recognize their capability, potential, and interests.
- » Fostering a sense of community and encourage youth to build strong relationships with friends, family, peers, neighbors, and/or other community members.
- » Fostering an environment of acceptance and support for youth who identify as LGBTQIA+.
- » Encouraging youth to seek help from a trusted adult or community resource if they are experiencing exploitation or any other form of hardship.
- » Emphasizing to youth that there are people like you who will advocate for them if they find themselves in an exploitive situation and need help. They may feel shame or guilt about what they've been forced to do, often due to the manipulation of their trafficker, and may fear how their family or law enforcement may view them.
- » Building pride for their community and awareness of the cultural contributions made by their ancestors.
- » Talking about characteristics of healthy relationships and red flags for abuse (See page 9).
- » Talking about safe internet use (See page 10).





## EXAMPLES OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING

*The following examples are fictional but based on actual tactics that traffickers use to exploit victims and indicators that someone is a potential victim of human trafficking.*

### Fitting In



Stacy has spent the last three years in foster care. She was removed from her home due to repeated physical and sexual abuse she experienced by her mother's boyfriends. Stacy is about to be adopted by her foster parents. She is excited to have a permanent home, but also feels self-conscious about the school she has been going to. Her foster parents do not have a lot of money and she worries that she sticks out compared to the other students.

All her clothes are from discount stores, and she has been teased for her off-brand outfits. Stacy starts to make some new friends with a group of kids in the grade above her. They invite her to parties and she really feels like she is starting to fit in and become more confident in herself. Her new friends also give her brand name clothes and new make-up. Stacy's case worker notices that Stacy has started wearing new expensive clothing and has not been showing up to their check-ins. She asks Stacy where she is getting money for the clothing from, but Stacy claims that she found an after school job assisting at a hair salon.

At one of the parties, Stacy is told to go to the back bedroom with some of her other female friends. If they do whatever the men entering the room ask them to do, they will all get \$150 at the end of the night. Stacy is hesitant at first but her other friends seem to be okay with it and she really could use the money. Her friends have become like her family and now they are helping her make money, which she desperately wants and needs. Stacy is enticed by the possibility that she can make money for herself even if that means having sexual contact with men. After making nearly one thousand dollars, Stacy decides she does not want to do this anymore.

When she refuses at one party, her friends say that some of the men have videos of them and will send them to their families if they do not keep doing what they say. Stacy is really scared that if her new adoptive parents find out what she has been doing they will put her back in foster care. She decides to tell her case worker, a trusted adult in her life, about what's been going on. Her case worker tells Stacy she did the right thing by coming to her and works with the local authorities to report the men threatening to release videos of her.

### Controlling "Boyfriend"



Henry is a teacher who oversees a classroom of 15 middle schoolers. He really gets to know the kids during the school year and enjoys watching them become friends with each other. He often overhears the kids talking about crushes, boyfriends, and girlfriends. Most of the time these conversations are innocent, but he overhears a group of the girls chatting about hanging out over the weekend.

One of the girls, Carmen, says she needs to ask her boyfriend for permission first to hang out with them. One of her friends asks, "Wouldn't you need to ask your grandma, not your boyfriend?" Carmen responds, "I know my grandma will say yes, but my boyfriend gets mad when I don't spend enough time with him. I really don't want to make him mad." Henry knows immediately that this does not seem like an appropriate relationship dynamic for a middle schooler. He has also seen Carmen being dropped off at school by an older man who he assumed was a relative, but now he is second guessing. Henry decides to talk to his supervisor about his concerns that Carmen may be in an exploitative situation.





## Too Much Freedom



Josh is an openly gay high school freshman. His teachers recognize him as being extremely smart but has a hard time applying himself. He goes to an after school recreational program with his friends at a nearby community center and has gotten in trouble a few times for disruptive behavior and once for drinking on the community center's property. The staff that oversees the afterschool program knows Josh's mom has struggled with drugs and often has a hard time making ends meet. The staff watch out for all the kids at the community center but keep a closer eye on kids like Josh who are experiencing hardships at home.

One day the staff overhears Josh bragging about staying out late, partying, using drugs and alcohol, and showing off wads of cash to other kids. He also mentions hanging out with a new group of men and how much fun he has being "arm candy" to them. One of the staff members calls Josh's mom to check in and expresses concern. Josh's mom says, "I let him do what he wants because he is a good kid." She is very defensive of his behavior, although it is out of character for someone of his age. The staff member decides to speak with their supervisor to share concerns.

## Working During School



Vance is a youth counselor at a local community center where he runs the after-school program. He is familiar with most of the kids in his community because so many of them come by the center to get help with school work or play pick-up sports games. Lately he has noticed a group of kids of various ages that he has never seen before. They hang out outside the corner store across the street selling candy bars and sometimes he sees them going door-to-door in the neighborhood trying to make sales. He's used to seeing some of the local kids selling candy for school fundraisers but there's something different about this group. They are very quiet and submissive and they don't appear to go to school because he sees them out selling at all hours of the day. When one of the kids approaches him to sell him some candy one day, Vance asks him what neighborhood he lives in, but the child doesn't seem to know the answer. He notices that the kid is probably not getting enough to eat and his clothes are in poor condition.

One particular day, Vance sees two men in a van drive up to the kids at the corner store. They get out to talk to the kids and Vance overhears the men asking them how much money they have made so far. When the two men don't seem to be happy with the answer, they demand all the kids get in the van and they drive off to another location. Vance decides to write down the make, model, and license plate of the van and submit it to the local authorities with what he saw.







## TALKING TO YOUTH

The term “human trafficking” often invokes imagery of glorified Hollywood scenes of young people being kidnapped by a stranger. Because this type of trafficking situation is not typical, young people are often unaware of what the more common warning signs of trafficking or and exploitative situation can look like and how to guard against them.

To help youth identify warning signs and better understand human trafficking, and more broadly, exploitation that can lead to trafficking, below are recommendations for how to talk about the crime in terms that may be more relatable to the youth you interact with. These recommendations can be incorporated into existing activities, lessons, or used in casual conversations.

DO	DON'T
<b>Talk about exploitation.</b> Focus conversations on what it means to be taken advantage of, what that may look like, feel like, and even examples of exploitation – such as job offers that seem too good to be true or online romantic relationships that move too fast.	<b>Use crime-specific language.</b> The term “human trafficking” may not resonate with youth and they may even “tune out” from conversations using too much crime-specific language.
<b>Talk about protective factors.</b> Conversations should focus on how youth can protect themselves and look out for their friends and peers. Encourage youth to recognize what they are good at, their future goals, and the value they bring to their friends and family.	<b>Talk about risk factors.</b> Many times, youth may not have any control over the risk factors they are affected by. Focusing discussions on risk factors may make youth feel singled out, vulnerable, and unable to protect themselves.
<b>Use empowering language.</b> Use language that focuses on highlighting the strengths of the youth you work with and emphasizes they are in control of their own decisions, especially when presented with opportunities that may seem too good to be true.	<b>Use victimizing language.</b> Using language that invokes fear and highlights weaknesses may discourage youth from taking any protective action.
<b>Use language that resonates with youth.</b> By interacting with youth regularly, you likely are familiar with the types of language they use in their everyday conversations. Use casual language that you’re comfortable with and that youth will connect with to keep them engaged.	<b>Use “textbook” language.</b> Using formal or “textbook” language that youth do not relate to may make it harder for your message to catch their attention.
<b>Express that you care and are concerned about their safety.</b> If youth shares information with you about an exploitative situation they may be experiencing, start by listening to them and letting them know you care about what they are going through.	<b>Focus on questioning their situation.</b> Let professionals who are trained in trauma response ask specific questions about their situation. Asking too many questions initially may also inadvertently place some blame on them and make them less receptive to help.





## LIFESTYLE FACTORS

Youth caretakers and individuals working with youth may also want to address certain lifestyle factors that may help to prevent youth from being exploited. Below is some information about important lifestyle factors affecting youth that can be incorporated into programing or casual conversations.

### Healthy Relationships

Youth who do not have examples of healthy relationships in their lives may be more vulnerable to human trafficking. Their understanding of what a relationship should look like may be distorted by the relationships they see among their peers, from their parents and guardians, or in the media.

Below are some misconceptions youth may hold as to what a relationship looks like:

- » Being obsessed with one another is part of being in love.
- » Having a controlling partner means that they care about you.
- » It is normal to ask your partner for permission to go somewhere or buy something.
- » Violence is an acceptable part of a relationship.
- » Sex is an obligation in a relationship.

While interacting with youth, it is important to challenge these ideas and emphasize what a healthy relationship can look like. Conversations can center around respect and how that should play out in the relationships they have with their family, peers, or romantic partners.

These are some characteristics of healthy relationships that can be emphasized with youth:

#### OPEN COMMUNICATION

You should never be scared to talk to your partner about something.

#### RESPECT FOR PRIVACY

You do not need to be with your partner 24/7 and they should not have access to your personal belongings like your phone or money.

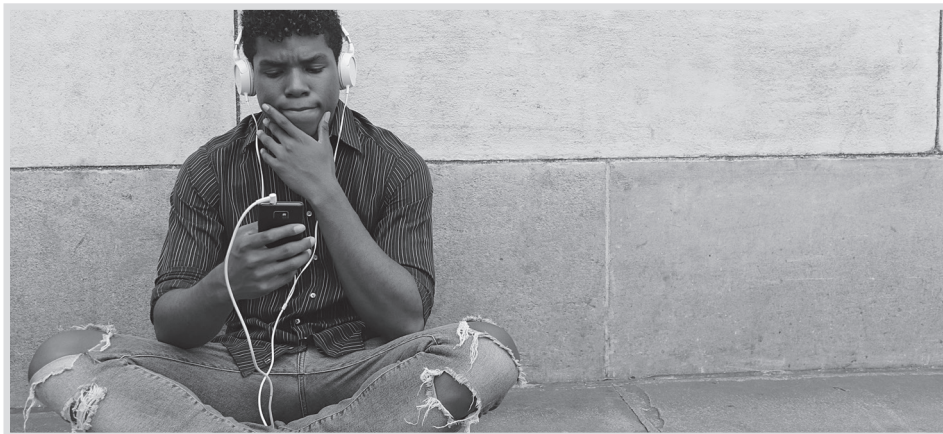
#### VIOLENCE IS NEVER OKAY

Your partner should never put their hands on you with the intent to physically harm you and you should not feel unsafe when being around them.

#### CONSENT

It is only okay to engage in any type of sexual behavior if both of you have agreed, are comfortable, and desire to do so. It is also okay to change your mind about wanting to have sex and a safe partner should respect that.





## Online Safety

Predators and human traffickers can gain access to youth online because they are not always aware of how dangerous online environments can be or how to keep themselves safe. Predators oftentimes actively stalk online meeting places, such as chat rooms and social media sites, to identify and lure their victims.

Many vulnerable youth may use the internet as a place of self-discovery, and to find a supportive network of people experiencing similar hardships as they are. While they may be building online friendship and getting much needed support from peers, it is still important that they practice safety online. Below are several safety tips you can discuss with the youth you interact with to protect themselves while they are online and using social media:

- » Keep your personal information private (where you live, work, go to school, or details about your personal life).
- » Set your profile to private so only your friends in real life can get access.
- » Never accept a friend request from someone you do not know in real life.
- » If you share a personal photo and someone uses it to threaten or blackmail you, you have options. Talk to a trusted adult about how to protect yourself or get help.
- » If you plan to meet someone in person that you met online, it should be in a public setting, like a restaurant or coffee shop, and let a trusted friend know who, where, and when you are meeting.
- » Do your research on a job offer that seems too good to be true by reading reviews on company rating websites or reaching out to current and/or past employees to validate information about the job.
- » If someone is not who they seem to be, or you think you are being lured into a potentially exploitative situation, tell a trusted adult. Reporting the person could help stop them from potentially exploiting others.
- » Trust your instincts! If something feels wrong about a conversation you are having with someone online, stop the conversation and block the profile.

## Job Promises

If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is. Youth should be wary of offers for jobs in fields that are typically hard to break into - such as modeling and acting, or offers in remote locations, faraway states, and foreign cities. Traffickers may try to lure victims into isolation away from their friends and family.

Indicators of a false job promise could include:

- » The payment and the job description do not seem to match (for example, a high hourly salary for a typically low-paying job).
- » The employer does not request any information about your previous work experience.
- » The employer asks for a photo of you as part of the application process.
- » The employer asks a lot of personal questions about you that are not relevant to the potential job.
- » The employer requests a substantial fee to cover the costs of uniforms or other expenses.
- » The employer tells you not to tell anyone about the job or asks you to lie about your age.





## HOW TO REPORT

**Call 911 or local law enforcement** if you or someone else is in immediate danger.

**Follow your organization's reporting protocols.** If you suspect a youth you work with is experiencing a human trafficking situation, follow your organization's protocols for reporting a child in danger.

**>> Do not at any time attempt to confront a suspected trafficker directly or alert the youth to your suspicions.** Your safety and that of the youth is important. Instead, please contact local child services or local law enforcement directly or call the tip lines indicated on this page.

**Call 1-866-347-2423** to report suspicious criminal activity to the **Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) Tip Line** 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, every day of the year. Highly trained specialists take reports from both the public and law enforcement agencies on more than 400 laws enforced by HSI, including those related to human trafficking. HSI agents responding to reports are specifically trained on a victim-centered approach to stabilize victims and connect them with support services, including providing immigration relief<sup>4</sup> for qualifying victims. You can also **submit an anonymous tip online via the HSI Tip Form** at: [ice.gov/webform/hsi-tip-form](https://ice.gov/webform/hsi-tip-form).

**Call 1-888-373-7888 or text HELP or INFO to BeFree (233733).** The **National Human Trafficking Hotline** takes calls from victims and survivors of human trafficking and those who may know them. It can help connect victims with service providers in the area and assist in reporting their situation to trusted law enforcement contacts. The Trafficking Hotline is a national, toll-free hotline available to answer calls from anywhere in the country, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, in English, Spanish, and more than 200 other languages. The Trafficking Hotline is not a law enforcement or immigration authority and is operated by a nongovernmental organization.

**Call 1-800-THE-LOST (1-800-843-5678) or go to CyperTipline.org** to report suspected child sex trafficking, sextortion, online enticement, and sexual abuse material to the **National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC)**. NCMEC is a non-profit organization, available 24/7 to work with families, victims, private industry, law enforcement, and the public to support the identification, location, and recovery of child sex trafficking and child sexual exploitation victims.

## ABOUT BLUE CAMPAIGN

Blue Campaign is a national public awareness campaign, designed to educate the public, law enforcement and other community partners to recognize the indicators of human trafficking, and how to appropriately respond to possible cases. Blue Campaign works closely with U.S. Department of Homeland Security components to create general awareness training and materials for law enforcement and others to increase detection of human trafficking, and to identify victims.

For additional resources such as pamphlets, information sheets, and wallet cards, please visit Blue Campaign's resource webpage: [dhs.gov/blue-campaign/share-resources](https://dhs.gov/blue-campaign/share-resources).

### Contact Blue Campaign

BlueCampaign@hq.dhs.gov

[dhs.gov/bluecampaign](https://dhs.gov/bluecampaign)



@dhsbluecampaign



<sup>4</sup> Learn more about immigration assistance at: [dhs.gov/blue-campaign/immigration-assistance](https://dhs.gov/blue-campaign/immigration-assistance)