



National Economic Justice Report: Beyond Workforce Development for Survivors of Trafficking



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

 Click to skip to the section that you would like to visit

- A NOTE TO SURVIVORS.....3**
- INTRODUCTION.....5**
- METHODS.....7**
- SAMPLE.....9**
- FINDINGS.....11**
 - CURRENT BARRIERS TO MAINTAINING EMPLOYMENT
 - THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND ITS IMPACT ON EMPLOYMENT FOR SURVIVORS
 - SELF-ADVOCACY IN THE WORKPLACE
 - PURPOSE AND BELONGING
 - ECONOMIC JUSTICE
- THE JOURNEY TO EMPLOYMENT.....26**
 - THE SEARCH
 - THE APPLICATION
 - THE INTERVIEW
 - BEGINNING A NEW JOB
 - MAINTAINING EMPLOYMENT
 - LESSONS LEARNED FOR A BETTER FUTURE
- WHAT EMPLOYERS CAN DO.....47**
 - BUILDING AN EQUIPPED WORKFORCE
 - POSITION OPENING ANNOUNCEMENTS
 - COMPANY-WIDE EDUCATION
 - SUPPORT FOR EMPLOYEES
 - SELF-DISCLOSURE AND TOKENISM
 - LANGUAGE JUSTICE
 - WORKPLACE CONDUCT-ATTIRE
- THE OPTION FOR ENTREPRENEURSHIP.....67**
- HIGHLIGHTING RESILIENCY & COMPASSION.....72**
- RECOMMENDATIONS.....75**
 - CENTERING LIVED EXPERIENCE VOICES
 - COMPENSATION AND BENEFITS PACKAGES
 - PEER NAVIGATION
 - WORKPLACE EDUCATION
 - HIRING PRACTICES
 - SAFETY AND CONFIDENTIALITY PRACTICES
- CONCLUSION.....84**



A NOTE TO SURVIVORS EMBARKING ON THE JOURNEY OF ECONOMIC STABILITY



Dear Survivors, This project was born out of not just seeing what the needs were of the survivors in The Avery Center's job training program, but what the needs were as a survivor myself working a full-time job and pursuing my own career goals. I needed answers for myself and I knew others likely had questions too! I am deeply grateful for all of the individuals who contributed to the development of this project. It is my desire to honor your journey in the following pages, to validate your experiences, and to let you know that you are not alone. For the survivors reading this, or who hear about it through economic empowerment initiatives in your community, it is my goal to see lived experience informing change in workplaces and in identifying ways allies can support us in our education, entrepreneurship, and career goals. Our voices have power. - Megan Lundstrom

To any survivors or folks with lived experience who may read this report, I hope this work is just the beginning of a long road towards fostering healthy workplaces for all- regardless of whether you disclose your trauma history in the workplace or not. You deserve a healthy work environment where you can be yourself without fear of discrimination or oppression due to your trauma history or your identities. Asking employers to be trauma-informed, inclusive, and affirming is not asking too much. To those who are on the journey towards economic stability, I hope you are reminded that you are not alone and that every step you take is an act of courage and resistance. Lastly, to the survivors who contributed to this study, whether as authors, contributors, or participants, thank you for sharing your expertise, knowledge, compassion, and vulnerability- we could not do this work without your leadership. Thanks to you, we will see the doors of re-exploitation closing as more and more doors of economic stability open. - Dr. Shobana Powell

A NOTE TO SURVIVORS EMBARKING ON THE JOURNEY OF ECONOMIC STABILITY

Through this project, I have gained a richer understanding of the barriers survivors face in finding employment through the generous participation of those who shared their experiences with us. Thank you to all of the survivors who contributed their stories and wisdom. To the readers of this report: What survivors are asking for in a workplace is what all employees want - a safe and nontoxic workplace, a place to meaningfully invest their time and expertise, supervisors who see them as whole people, colleagues who respect them, mental health support, fair and timely compensation, and opportunities to advance. Listening to their experiences shines a light on the ways that we can all do better to create more equitable and inclusive workplaces that allow every employee to thrive. - Jessica Pham

“Dear Readers, I hope you’re inspired to action upon reading the in-depth information and the insights that are reflected in these findings. The experiences of those who are impacted by human trafficking are the single most valuable resource of understanding new solutions for equitable dialog, workplace inclusion and how to achieve long-term economic stability. My deepest gratitude for everyone who contributed to this highly inclusive and thoughtful report. I look forward to ongoing discussions to further advance survivors economic equity and empowerment. The future is looking bright.” Cynthia Luvlee, Founder & Chief Visionary Officer at Shyne™



INTRODUCTION

Job training and workforce readiness programs are common across the US for equipping individuals in marginalized communities with the skills and social supports to enter the traditional workforce. While models and populations served vary widely, the common goal is to identify common barriers to meaningful employment and create new pathways into existing systems. Across many social justice areas, job programs are often one of the first significant program models that emerge when serving a newly-identified population or need, such as previously incarcerated individuals, single parents, or individuals with disabilities.

Within the anti-trafficking sector specifically, these job programs emerged in the early 2000's with organizations such as Thistle Farms, who is credited with developing a replicable model that they have shared with organizations across the country over the past two decades with other organizations. Since that time, at least two dozen well-known job training and entrepreneurial-minded programs have sprung up for survivors of human trafficking across the US. An unknown number of existing job programs serving individuals with intersecting identities (gender, race, socioeconomic status, prior criminalization, etc.) also have expanded positions to include survivors of human trafficking at these intersections. Providing immediate employment for survivors is a critical component to successfully exiting exploitation long-term. However in more recent years, service providers have shared a collective theme that while survivors were successfully graduating their employment programs, unless they were hired on internally with the organization, long-term economic stability rates remained extremely low. In fact, new findings from the National Survivor Study conducted by Polaris revealed that survivors experience economic instability long after exit (2021). This long-term instability is even more common for survivors who were criminalized as a result of their exploitation, thus further reducing their access to education and employment opportunities (Henderson and Lundstrom, 2018).

INTRODUCTION

While employment programs can provide immediate and relative economic stability and social support for survivors after exiting, they are just one component of long-term stability. Ultimately, marginalized individuals should not find themselves with limited options for meaningful employment as a result of or following their victimization: they should be able to enter supportive and empowering workplaces and move forward in both their healing and career goals. To accomplish this, legislators, employers, survivors, and direct service providers must all work together in identifying a continuum of care that provides all stakeholders with the education and support they need to deliver positive, long-term outcomes.

This intersection of economic empowerment and human trafficking matters because it is an essential, often overlooked, aspect of both holistic healing and long-term prevention of revictimization. Human trafficking is a form of exploitation that is most often perpetrated by a person in a position of power or authority over the victim, and relies heavily on emotionally, socially, and psychologically abusing their victim to maintain control. Because of this, it is imperative that survivors have spaces to engage in healthy relationships and feel a sense of authentic connection and purpose. Additionally, **because most survivors experienced exploitation under the guise of entrepreneurship or employment, the workplace has the potential to be a place for tremendous healing.**

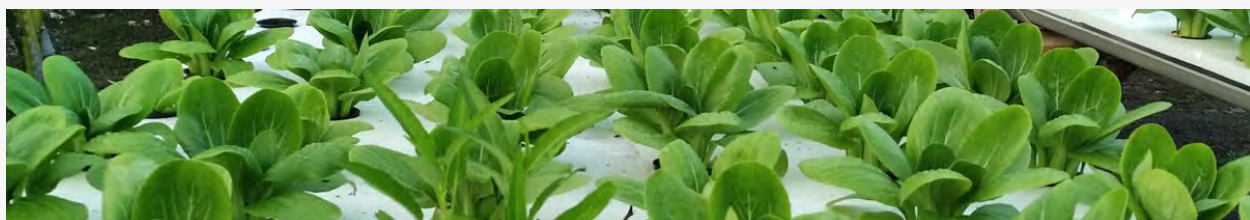
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METHODS

Beginning in the fall of 2021, The Avery Center embarked on a preliminary process to identify professionals who were engaged in economic empowerment initiatives for survivors of human trafficking across the US, and who were interested in developing content to distribute to employers and survivors with the end goal of increasing long-term employment and career path development for survivors. A working group came together composed of survivors and allies who lead economic empowerment efforts in their communities and nationally to launch a preliminary survey for survivors to share about their needs and experiences related to employment after exploitation. These organizations in this group included The Avery Center; You Are More Than, Inc.; Shobana Powell Consulting; and Shyne San Diego. Three publicly-identified survivors were a part of this working group, coming from some of the before-mentioned organizations, as well as self-represented individuals.

Phase 1

All members who were a part of this initial phase gave of their time either under their existing salary from their respective organization or volunteered their time to this initiative. The first survey was released online late December 2021 and left open into early 2022. Working group members shared the survey link with their individual networks with a request to continue sharing amongst anti-trafficking organizations and survivors. It provided no compensation for respondents, resulting in 33 responses after being open for over a month. It was immediately noted that there was a lack of diversity in demographics of respondents in this initial survey, with only 12% identifying as BIPOC and 21% identifying as LGBTQ+. The working group acknowledged the privilege associated with being able to take part in unpaid research opportunities, and also recognized the importance of including individuals from marginalized communities as high priority considering the existing systemic barriers BIPOC and LGBTQ+ individuals experience in employment and career development broadly. Not only do BIPOC and LGBTQ+ individuals experience such systemic barriers in the workplace, they are also disproportionately targeted and impacted by human trafficking. The working group recognized that in order to effectively support survivors, it is essential to acknowledge the intersectionality of systemic oppression, human trafficking, and employment.



BIPOC: Black, Indigenous and People of Color

LGBTQ+: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and More

METHODS

Phase 2

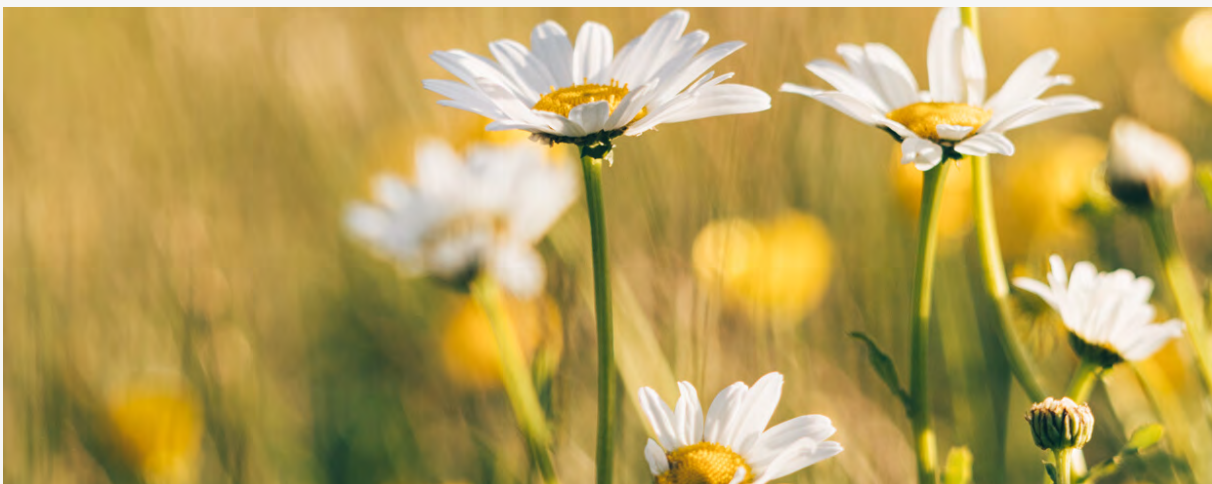
At this point, an additional organization, Nomi Network, was added to the working group, who was interested in conducting a similar study in order to help build pathways to employment in the private sector. Nomi Network was able to provide funding to compensate working group members for their time as well as survey and interview respondents. The initial survey questions were reviewed, revised, and relaunched a second time, accepting only individuals who self-identified as BIPOC and/or LGBTQ+. Invitations to participate in this survey were again shared digitally through the working group members' personal and professional networks. This survey garnered 35 responses in under 48 hours.

Phase 3

Following the second phase of the survey, the working group discussed language justice and agreed to contracting translators to make the survey available to individuals whose first language was French, Spanish, or Chinese. These respondents were compensated for their time as well, and resulted in 17, 14 and three responses, respectively. Again, the online survey link was shared with working group members' networks digitally. And again, this survey exceeded the goal of n=30 in less than a week.

Phase 4

As an added question in the second survey, respondents were asked if they would be interested in participating in a compensated one-on-one interview with a survivor researcher. Funding was made available to interview a total of eight survey respondents, which were conducted over the summer of 2022 while the third phase of the survey was conducted concurrently. These eight interviews lasted approximately 30 to 60 minutes each, were conducted over Zoom, and transcribed. The semi-structured interview guide was compiled by the working group to follow up on emerging trends and more in-depth information from the survey responses.



SAMPLE

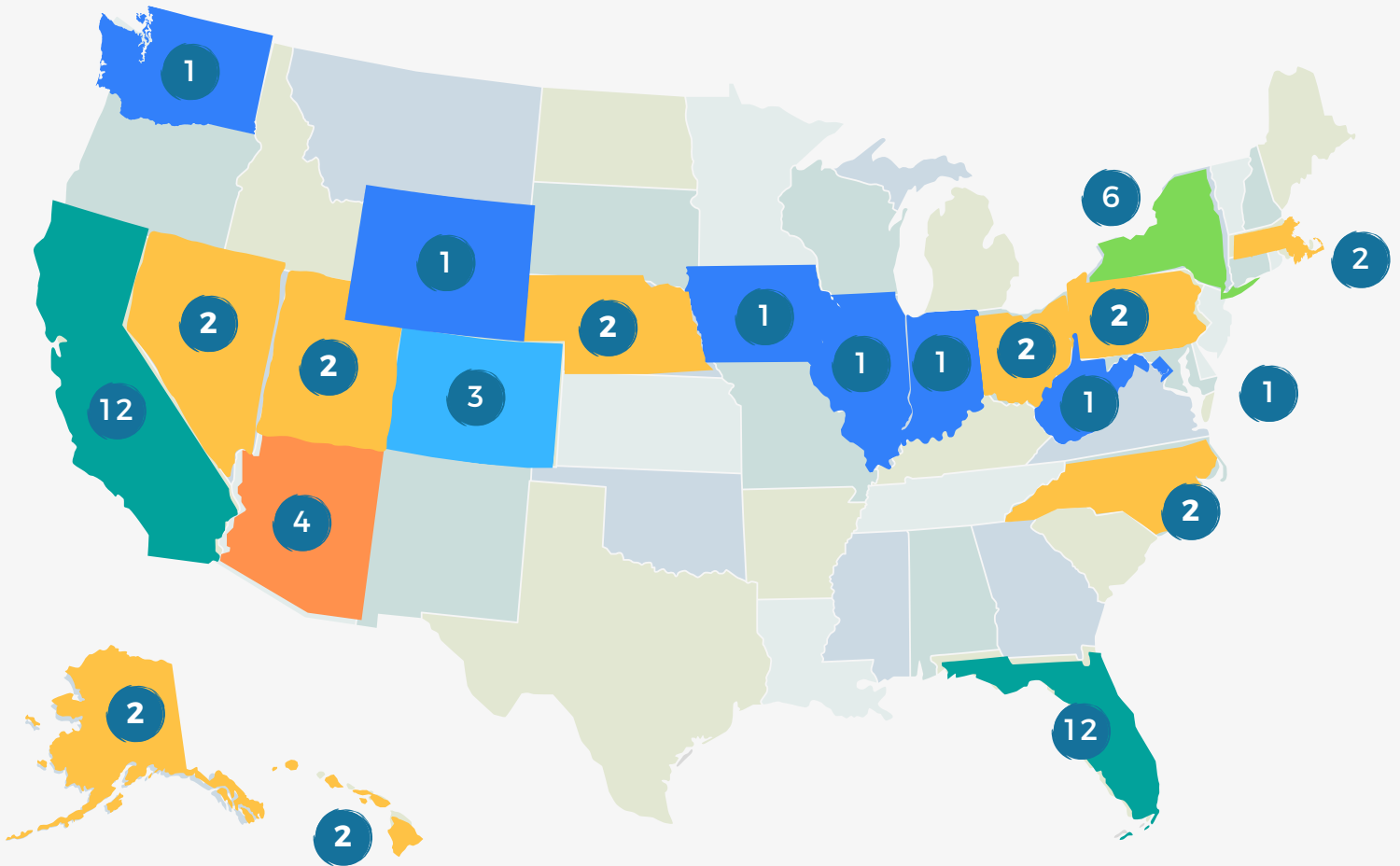
These surveys were combined for a total of 102 survey respondents who participated in the survey phase of this project, and eight of those individuals participated in one-on-one interviews. Twenty-three individuals shared their age at the time they completed the survey, ranging from 28 to 55 years old, with an average of 40 years old. A total of 64 individuals provided gender identity information. Eighty-four percent of respondents identified as female, six percent as male, eight percent as gender non-conforming, and 2 percent as transgender. Sixty-one individuals shared their race or ethnicity. Forty-six percent of respondents identified as white, fifteen percent identified as Black, two percent as Latinx, ten percent as Asian or Pacific Islander, five percent as Native or Indigenous, and twenty-two percent stated that they were multi-racial. Of the sixty-four individuals who responded to the question of whether they were Hispanic, nineteen percent confirmed they were.

Sixty-five individuals provided their highest level of education at the time they completed the survey. Six had less than a high school diploma, seventeen had a high school diploma or GED, six had completed some college, three had associate degrees, twenty-one had bachelor's degrees, eleven had Master's or graduate level degrees, and one had attained a PhD. Seven individuals were currently enrolled in an education program at the time they completed the survey.

Ninety-seven respondents provided their employment status at the time they completed the survey. Twenty-seven stated that they were currently unemployed and not seeking employment. Thirty-six were unemployed and actively seeking employment. Thirty-four respondents were currently employed.

Sixty-two respondents provided their current state of residence. Representation from across the US included AK (2), AZ (4), CA (12), CO (3), DC (1), FL (12), HI (2), IA (1), IL (1), IN (1), MA (2), NC (2), NE (2), NV (2), NY (6), OH (2), PA (2), UT (1), WA (1), WV (1), WY (1). One survivor respondent currently resided in Canada.





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FINDINGS

Current Barriers to Maintaining Employment


Survey respondents were provided with an open field to explain any issues they have had with maintaining long-term employment. While several themes emerged, the key issue stemmed from interpersonal issues with supervisors. One survivor shared their observation on power dynamics in a past work environment:

I think a lot of people really like to have a survivor on staff to utilize in improving their work and receive fundings, etc., but they don't like to be critiqued or they still internally perceive themselves as 'above' the survivor and to a survivor that can look and feel like re-exploitation.

Survivors have experienced negative interactions in the workplace previously including having their boundaries violated. This included time or project management and overtime, as well as sexual harassment. In all situations that survivors shared these experiences as contributing to their inability to maintain employment, they shared not feeling equipped to ask for help, or what their rights were in those moments. One survivor shared: "Not knowing what healthy boundaries are. Not using my voice to speak up because sometimes I still feel like I have to have permission." Most survivors who took part in the one-on-one interviews shared examples of feeling stuck or overwhelmed in the workplace when unresolved trauma came up. Eve, a contract consultant, provided an example that arose during a recent project she was contracted for:

I think it is important to say like money triggers my trauma right, like money makes me feel dirty, so like, how do we even deal with that? ... I hate when people reach out to me and say, like, 'I'd love to contract with you,' and ... I don't even want to talk about money. Like it's gross to me and also even more gross is not being paid. And then feeling so resentful. I have to build skills around it, but it's so freaking hard.



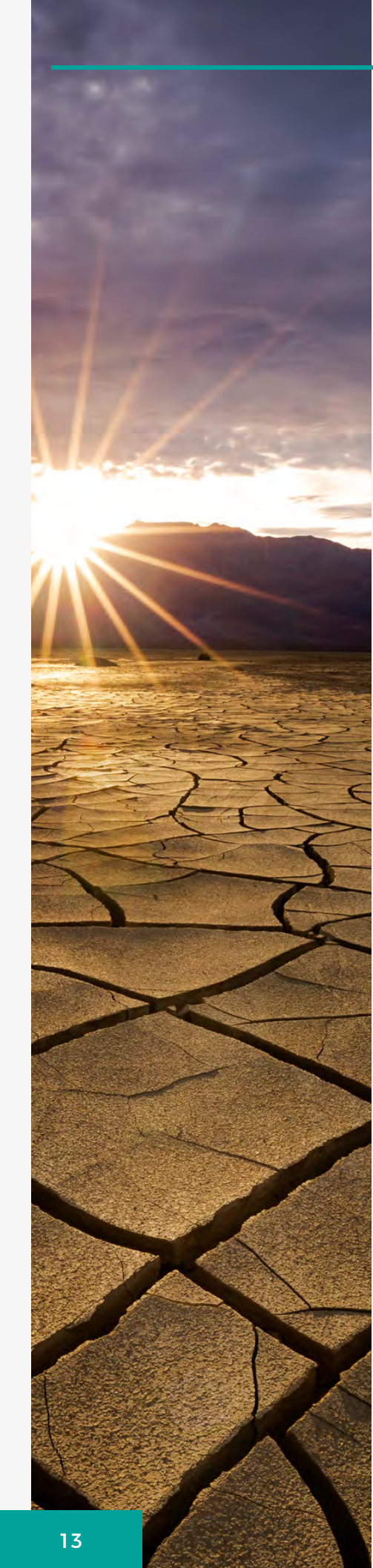


Overall, most survivors have found that having peer mentors to be the most effective method in learning coping and advocacy skills. Peer mentorship has been identified as meaningful for both the mentor and mentee in scenarios such as this. Kendra described this synergistic healing peer mentorship in the workplace has given her:

The grass is greener on the other side, I know it's hard ... But this is what is on the other side, and it doesn't come with the consequences. It's so much better to be over here, and being able to not only prove that to myself, but prove that for my [peers] and be a role model for them in some way, shape or form.

Throughout this report, actionable ideas are named by survivors that employers and the community can assume the responsibility to initiate. However, when employment situations have failed, survivors blame themselves for not being able to resolve the situation or move past it. This cycle of feeling inadequate in meeting demands in a workplace or for an authority figure can continue a cycle of traumatization and instability for survivors. One survivor explained: "Systems which retraumatize or continue to reinforce poor leadership [by] repeating unhealthy patterns." This demonstrates the lasting effects of emotional and psychological traumas, and how survivors can articulate the facts behind the cause of failure, however still wrestle with feelings of self-blame. Scarlet shared her optimism when survivors can access supportive employment:

I can really affect change in the world while still being a parent, I'm not less than or you know all the things that come with being a single parent. I've had some bad work experiences because they didn't see me as a human. I just hope that there's more support to consider families, and not just families but alternative families that don't look the same.



Scarlet's positive outlook on the future is attributed to past and current supportive employers who have created spaces for her to feel seen and validated. These experiences have helped Scarlet process past experiences from her exploitation and identify how they are different from her present career opportunities. Many survivors shared barriers to long-term employment that were ultimately due to many employers not recognizing their employees as whole people with life circumstances and needs beyond the skills they contributed to their role in the company. These circumstances included barriers with childcare, chronic health issues, and the need to pursue additional education for career advancement. Raina has worked many positions in the retail and customer service industries, and has struggled to find an employer where she feels seen as an individual. She described some commonalities she observed across employers:

I feel like they don't offer resources like not even for just survivors of commercial sexual exploitation. In general they don't offer any counseling or any sort of free therapy or even they don't have a specific designated HR number that you could sit down if you're feeling triggered by a certain situation, even though they said that they have an open door policy, me personally when I was working there the open door policy really isn't open to us. I feel like we're not allowed to have a personal life affect our work performance. The policy is the customer is always right so even if you're having a bad day you're not at your best, it's always the customer, the customer, and I'm always like you know what about me, what about my feelings.

Survivors often experience mounting pressure to sacrifice their own and their families' well-being to make ends meet presently, which ultimately leads to discouragement, burnout, and eventually turnover. It is up to companies to evaluate their foundational procedures and culture to identify these cycles and create brave spaces for trauma survivors to engage in relational healing.

FINDINGS

A Word on the COVID-19 Pandemic and Its Impact on Employment for Survivors

An open entry field was provided for survivors to share how the COVID-19 pandemic had impacted their employment. While some survivors experienced positive outcomes overall in how their employment opportunities shifted, most survivors were impacted negatively.

For the survivors who had experienced positive outcomes related to their employment over the past two years, the primary reason was that survivors had access to opportunities that provided more flexible schedules, time off, and remote work. One survivor shared: “The pandemic was the first time in my life that I had received accommodations (like work from home) and I’ve done significantly better because of that.” This need for survivors for a flexible schedule and remote work options are referenced at multiple times in this report and is a great way employers can support trauma survivors in accessing adequate employment opportunities.


Remote education options reduced barriers for survivors with young children during the pandemic as it made career development accessible in a way that might not have been previously. Tiana, a single mother of a young child in a major urban area has found affordable childcare to be her biggest barrier for employment, even before the pandemic. However during the pandemic, virtual education options became available and has increased her ability to pursue them. She describes how she successfully made the transition to remote education: “I used to like in-person, but during the pandemic it helped me to become more tech savvy and I actually like learning online, because then I’m able to do other things and I can be home with my child.” Not only have remote work options provided positive outcomes for survivors, but so have remote education opportunities.

The most common negative impact for survivors the pandemic has had on their employment has been accessing childcare or balancing the care of a child in the home while working during the same hours and in the same space. One survivor described their challenges: “I have been unable to find that perfect position that could balance out my mental health needs and my child.” Many shared the conflicting dynamics they tried to navigate during the pandemic with school- and childcare-aged children having facilities closed or being quarantined while the parent was still required to report for work on the job site. Missing too many days of work due to childcare closures often resulted in termination for the survivor.

Additionally, many survivors have chronic health conditions themselves, or have family members with chronic health issues, making exposure to the public very dangerous and limiting what in-person employment options are realistic. One survivor described their journey: “I got laid off by my job about 6 months into COVID and it was really hard to find another that didn’t put my safety at risk, especially as a high-risk individual with a chronically ill partner.” Other survivors shared that they had barriers to getting vaccinated, or having their children vaccinated, limiting what in-person jobs, schools, and childcare facilities they could utilize.

Other survivors, particularly those who came from multiple marginalized identities, shared how the politically-charged environment and social unrest over the past two years impacted their workplace safety. Tandi shared about her reason for voluntarily leaving the job she was at when the pandemic started:

I was there for a year, I did the same job everyday and it was during COVID and my boss was very dedicated [to his religious and personal beliefs], and I actually became very depressed and that definitely impacted that work. He would stand in my doorway every morning for like an hour, just talking and it became a job that I wasn’t looking forward to, and I started on depression meds at that job for a short period. So I finally decided to leave.



It is not uncommon for marginalized individuals to experience microaggressions and outright bigotry in the workplace, making the environment unsafe for them to advocate for themselves due to fear of retaliation, harassment, or termination. This was particularly true when the individual perpetrating these harms is the employer, and when companies are small and do not have an exclusive human resources employee or department where complaints can be filed anonymously. These power dynamics in the workplace are further heightened for marginalized survivors of trafficking, as it is a replication of the cycle of abuse and oppression by someone in a position of authority.

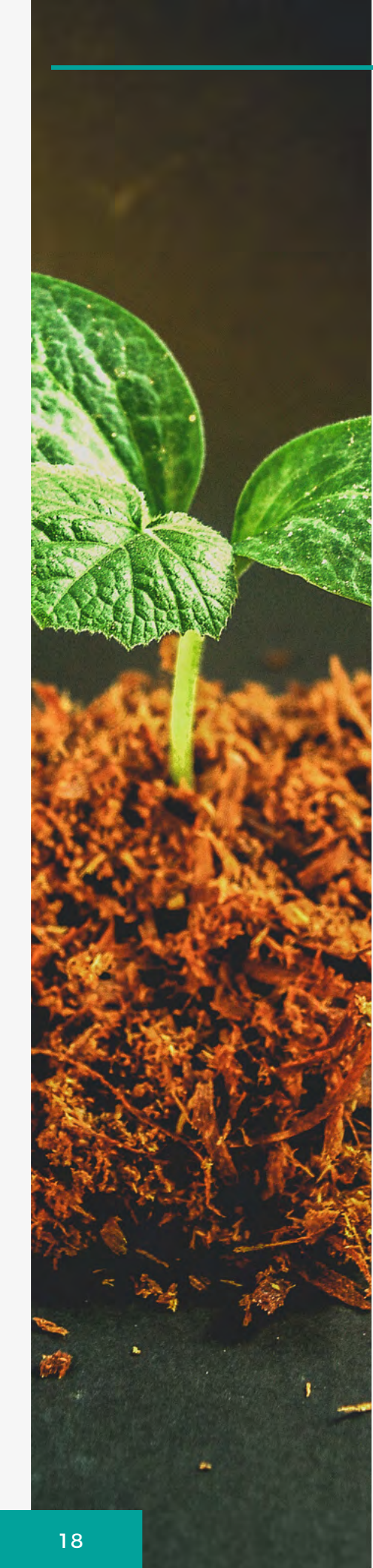
These pandemic-related barriers to employment mirror the global workforce barriers, however the impact is exacerbated for survivors, who disproportionately come from marginalized communities. The pandemic has served as an uncontrollable force that pushed survivors even further from empowering opportunities.

FINDINGS

Self Advocacy in the Workplace

Survey respondents were asked about their ability to advocate for themselves safely and confidently to their supervisors on a series of topics. Overall, most survivors did not feel they had adequate support in place for them to self-advocate regarding safety issues or on topics that could increase their financial stability. A total of sixty-five respondents provided responses based on their current employment situation. Only 31% of respondents felt confident in asking for time off, and only 26% felt they could ask for additional work hours. Only 20% of survivors said they felt confident asking for a raise, or that they would speak safely with their supervisor or employer without fear of judgment or termination, as well as that they had control over changing the work environment or their position if needed. Only 11% felt that they would have the potential to be promoted to a management position in the future at their current place of employment. Conversations with interview participants provided more context on these experiences in the workplace for survivors. Tandi, now currently thriving in her role in the financial sector, reflected on a past employment experience:

I was just like a functional, a very high functional human being in a lot of pain. I hadn't dealt with my trauma, but still the lack of trauma-informed workplaces. So this might be even a bigger discussion beyond human trafficking. People didn't know my past, and they didn't know why I would need time off, or I would need, like, to step out and cry or breathe or whatever right but like there was this expectation of professionalism that [wasn't] trauma-informed which ended up having a pretty negative impact on me personally.




Many survivors acknowledged this dual-issue: first, that individuals healing from trauma often lack the skills or emotional safety to advocate for their needs; and secondly that most workplaces lack the education and social support to identify an employees' needs in situations such as these. Another interview participant, Kendra, described the supportive synergy she has at her current place of employment:

We be up in people's faces so the fact that [my boss] is so patient with me and so kind to me when my spirit is dazed and I'm running through the office like not knowing what to do - she's very calm and she knows when I'm worked up. She'll lower her tone, she'll do things like talk to me kindly, she'll lower her body instead of standing over me. She'll sit and make eye contact with me.

Kendra's current employer has been a direct service provider in the anti-trafficking field, and has taken best practices for trauma-informed service provision and continued utilizing them as they hired survivors into employment positions as the organization grew. Other survivors shared specific examples of how employers, supervisors and colleagues have organically provided trauma-informed support in various aspects ranging from support navigating health insurance benefits to peer mentorship from other survivors employed at the same company.


Survey respondents were provided with an open field to answer the question: "How do you define success in your employment?" While minor themes of recognition, life balance, and career development all existed, the **two primary themes in responses were first and foremost purpose and belonging, followed by economic stability.**



During one-on-one interviews, survivors were asked what education and career goals they have for the future for themselves, what steps they needed to take to get there, and what barriers existed presently in achieving these goals. Survivors shared themes of wanting to reach financial stability while giving back to their communities of origin or identity, or combatting systemic injustices based on their personal journeys. Most saw higher education as an important step in reaching their goals, as well as the ability to become entrepreneurs. For both of these paths, survivors felt that they needed a significant, but short-term influx of financial resources to begin making the level of income they needed to be stable.

Kendra shared her dream of entrepreneurship and economic empowerment for women in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics):

I've always wanted to create solar powered motorcycles, that's something that I wanted to do since the eighth grade and thank goodness they haven't done that yet, so I think that is meant for me. If I was in my dream world and could wave a magic wand and things go as I plan them, I hope to be able to not only have my motorcycle company but put a vocational school to teach survivors how to become motorcycle technicians and how to be safe in the work environment, especially a male dominated one. But it has to come with housing too, if it doesn't come with housing, I don't want it. ... I want to pay off debt. I want to build my credit. I want to eventually buy a nice place. But at this time I'm making \$28 an hour, sounds like a lot of money, but you learn when you have to pay all your bills and stuff like that, it comes out to penny pinching at the end of the month.



Kendra is currently employed within a nonprofit organization and completing her master's degree in engineering. She feels that her dreams are within reach, but would be very realistic if she had more financial stability to provide for her family while she finishes school, as well as startup funds for her business idea. Eve also felt that there were substantial financial barriers for achieving her goal of entrepreneurship. She shared her dream:

I'm an interdisciplinary artist and if I could get paid to just ... do my music and art and my poetry and my spoken word work, I would be the happiest. I don't think it's a reasonable career path for me. You have to have some sort of like nest egg because it's so unpredictable and I just don't have that. ... I need to finish school, my Bachelors, it's been so hard but I'm working on it. And then I would love to record an album and I would love to finish my book, it's a book with illustrations of my art, and I would love to finish that.

For now, as Eve continues to work on achieving her education goals, she remains a contract consultant for anti-trafficking organizations. While this gives her variety in her work and a degree of flexibility she needs at this time, the administrative and accounting activities for being an independent contractor are difficult and Eve has found little support for time management and expense tracking. She shared: "I don't feel very well-versed at all about my rights as a contractor. I feel really confused about that all the time and not very empowered around it." While most education and policy development at companies is focused on employees, considerations should also be made for contractors who might just as likely be concurrently learning how to navigate traditional workspaces while healing from trauma as W4 employees, 1099 independent contractors, and other types of non-W2 employment.

FINDINGS

Purpose and Belonging

Survivors overwhelmingly described their sense of purpose as when they have opportunities to help others and contribute to the wellbeing and improvement of the community around them. One survivor described this as “being an asset to others.” Another survivor described their sense of purpose: “I define success as assisting with making someone’s life better.” And while helping professions such as human services are traditionally thought to be the place for individuals with this desire to improve their community, employers in other sectors have an opportunity to evaluate their contributions to their communities and provide a sense of purpose for their employees by highlighting the impact their companies make.

Across the industries and positions represented by the survivors who took part in the interviews, a clear theme emerged: the work environment is a place where survivors are seeking belonging. This theme appeared in each of the one-on-one interviews as well when survivors were asked about what a positive work environment looked like, and what gave them a sense of purpose in the workplace. Eve summarized her desire:

I think feeling connected, and feeling visible, honestly. So much about survivorship for me has been around feeling invisible, like that feels like such a [large piece] of my trauma. So feeling seen, feeling appreciated, feeling connected to the people in the work that I’m doing.

Even for the survivors who included statements about educating employers on trauma and trafficking, much of the reasoning behind this education was out of a desire to feel seen as a whole person and appreciated for being themselves.

Scarlet suggested:

I would definitely start with trauma-based training and workplace training so that people in administration have a better understanding of how to relate or work with or just kind of like what trauma looks like and how it manifests itself.

All of the survivors interviewed shared experiences of being able to see hurting and exploited individuals in situations where no one else was able to see what was going on, and this demonstrated the vigilant and empathetic affect being trafficked has for many survivors. Because survivors can connect quickly with others in these moments of intervention, they long for those around them to connect with them in similar ways. The workplace is not excluded as a place of opportunity for belonging.

FINDINGS

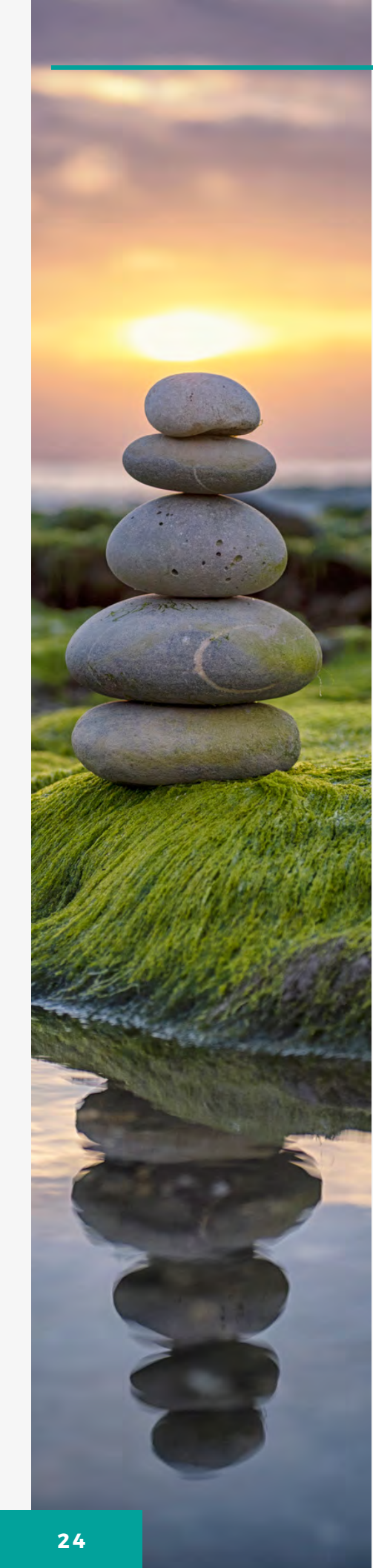
Economic Justice

As will be discussed throughout this report, economic justice is critical to reduce instances of trafficking as well as re-trafficking and further exploitation in the future. Survivors advocated for economic stability as their second highest priority after purpose and belonging. One survey respondent shared their struggle with financial stability: “[I want] sustainable wages in a job that isn’t soul sucking.” For most survivors, exorbitant wealth is not a goal, rather realistic consistency and stability. Many survivors shared their desire to just make enough money to pay all of their bills on time. One survivor shared: “I think it means having some stability and getting all my bills paid without burning myself out.” Survivors want access to better paying jobs in all fields with the end goal of becoming financially self-sufficient.

Economic justice is not limited to employment opportunities with living wages. Survivors painted a clear picture of what all employers can be providing their employees to ensure stability. Tandi had several ideas:

I really wish that there was some sort of coalition, or some sort of ... economic coalition or financial institution that would ... support survivors being able to get access to ... insurance. And survivors need to get compensated in a prompt manner so I wish there was an organization that would ... cut the checks on behalf of nonprofits in a timely manner, immediately so survivors were covered so the nonprofits could still, you know, the nonprofit industrial complex, like go through whatever they need to go through. Also, like a stipend for self-care, you know, trauma is so embedded in the body. I dream about a massage, I can’t afford a massage. But if I could get a massage every week or two weeks, or every month, that would help my body so much to process the trauma.

Tandi’s experience highlights an important point when it comes to employment options for survivors.



Many survivors work for nonprofit organizations, either in anti-trafficking or other social service or advocacy work, because the jobs are more accessible, they have a sense of meaning and purpose, and there is a higher likelihood of having a compassionate and supportive work environment. However, nonprofits themselves are under-resourced; many nonprofit organizations do not have the financial capacity to provide the compensation and benefits that survivors need to thrive. Nonprofit workplaces have high burnout rates and can often feel exploitative in their own ways. This is another reason why survivors need employment options in other sectors and why nonprofits should continue to work towards creating healthier, more sustainable work environments for the survivors who do want to work in that field.

Traditional employee benefits are not the answer for everyone, particularly trauma survivors and individuals from marginalized communities. Part of establishing a commitment to economic justice, employers should examine the successful usage of existing benefits packages offered to employees to identify unnecessary benefits and shift those resources to more relevant resources. Tiana shared additional and similar ideas that would help her be a more invested employee:

A paid hour of self-care, or self-care should be allocated somewhere. And if companies are able to take money out of your account for you to pay for a Metro card and make that easy for you, maybe something like that for childcare?

Again, many survivors shared struggles as women and as single parents trying to balance work, education and family commitments with limited resources and conflicting schedules. Trauma-informed workplaces acknowledge the gendered nature of parenting duties and the economic impact this has on families, and actively work to find solutions for inclusive workplaces and career development options.

Kendra, who was pregnant at the time of her interview, shared how her employer had listened to her self-advocacy:

My boss is really trauma informed so I get a lot of freedom that most people I know don't get, like I can bring my dog to work, I'm currently pregnant and I'm due in December and my boss knows that for the first year the baby will come to work with me because I'll be breastfeeding. ... She knows I work hard and this is what I'm bringing to the table. She sees the value which also makes me feel good that she sees that in me.

A positive outcome of economic justice for marginalized individuals and trauma survivors is that oftentimes, for the first time ever, people feel seen, and recognized as whole people with an identity and livelihood beyond their position duties.

THE JOURNEY TO EMPLOYMENT

Survey respondents were asked a series of questions about challenges starting with the job search and application processes, through interviewing, onboarding, and into long-term employment. These survey responses allowed survivors to provide written answers based on their own experiences. When a survivor begins the job search process, they are often met with barriers before they've even identified opportunities to pursue, which can discourage individuals from ever moving forward with the application process.

THE SEARCH



THE APPLICATION



BEGINNING A NEW JOB



THE INTERVIEW



MAINTAINING EMPLOYMENT

THE JOURNEY TO EMPLOYMENT

The Search

When survivors first begin the job search process, they initially review the education and experience requirements on a position announcement to determine if they meet the criteria. Due to systemic barriers, gaps in work history, and less formal education relative to their peers, respondents cited feeling underqualified for the position as the primary deterrent for applying for a position. One survivor shared the challenge of “finding jobs willing to accept having less experience due to life/work/school interruption due to trafficking experience.” During one-on-one interviews, survivors shared their difficulties with getting started in the traditional workforce initially after exiting exploitation. Kendra shared some of the barriers she was up against when she first started her job search:

I had no work history, from 15 to 24. I had absolutely no work history and so, even when I was applying to places, they weren't hiring me because I was so much older, had no experience, no nothing. And that brought up a lot of questions as to like why and so I had to end up disclosing my trauma, my homelessness status, all type of stuff.

Because individuals who come from marginalized backgrounds are disproportionately more likely to experience criminalization and traumatization, there are often inconsistencies in work history and formal education.

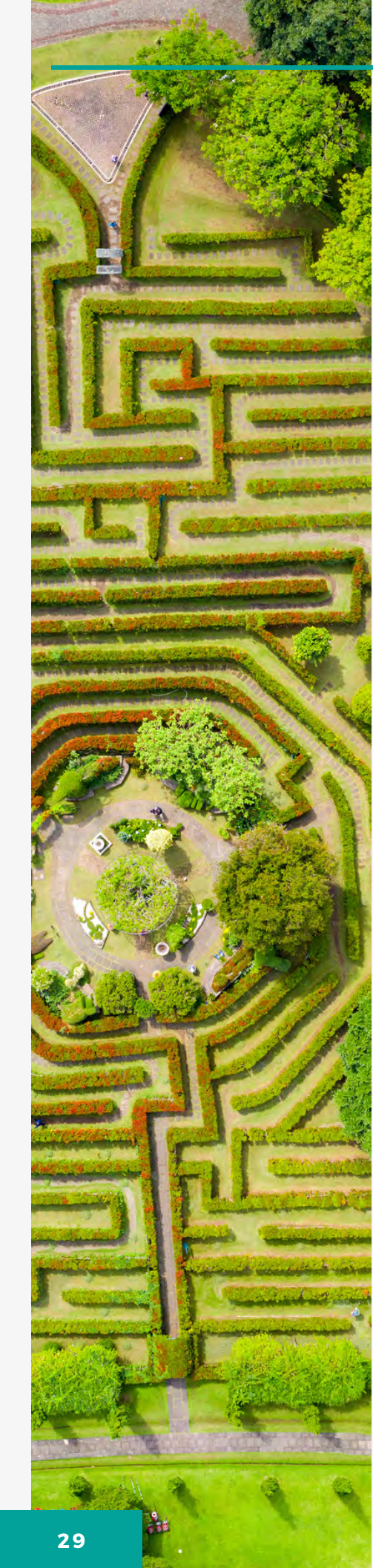
A close-up photograph of a wooden gavel and a metal scale resting on a dark wood surface. The gavel is positioned diagonally, with its head in the foreground and handle extending towards the top left. The metal scale is partially visible at the bottom left. The wood grain is clearly visible.

Kari, who was federally convicted while she was under the control of her trafficker, shared her experiences with finding and retaining employment with her record:

My [first] boss knew about my record and allowed me employment, and even if I didn't want to share, [I wasn't forced] to disclose in that state because public record is [considered] disclosure. [When I moved to a new state, my new employer] didn't do a background check when they initially hired me, they weren't looking and I don't think they honestly cared. ... My probation officer forced me to disclose, and I lost my job. [I feel like] it was a way to get me to be unemployed.

I was really tired of having to tell my story again and again in a situation that really wasn't on my terms, and it affected my mental health and it led me back to the lifestyle. And then I was labor trafficked, because there was an employer who decided to hire me [with my felony] and when I went to go cash my checks, most banks would not cash the check because this place had raised a lot of red flags and I didn't receive some of my checks after working, and I feel like that was because I couldn't find employment, then I was pretty much left with bottom of the barrel options because the government was pressing down on me to work or go back to prison.

Once a survivor has reviewed a position opening for education and work history requirements, they then check the compensation for the position. Survey respondents revealed that this was the second most common factor in deterring a survivor from applying for a position, particularly when looking at the intersection of poverty and criminalization. A survey respondent explained their barriers in the job search process: "Meeting qualifications whether that be job experience, or a lack of a criminal record."



Another respondent noted: “Finding good paying jobs with having a record. Even if it’s a misdemeanor.” In many communities, jobs that survivors might qualify for in terms of work and education criteria do not cover the cost of living in that same community. Another respondent shared: “The availability of jobs that actually pay a livable wage in my area.” Indeed, when working with survivors of human trafficking, recognizing the pre-existing systemic oppression that impacts a disproportionate majority is critical, and adequate compensation is just one means of remediation.

Survivors also cited barriers in the job search process to include language barriers, schedule and location flexibility, as well as general anxiety and fear around the employment process. One survivor explained their lasting health needs’ impact on employment: “As a survivor I have multiple complex trauma issues and it’s so frustrating that I cannot make my time the way I want it to and sometimes things come up and I can’t be where I need to be.” As we see changes in workplace flexibility across the workforce post-pandemic, these changes in how work is defined and completed have potential to provide greater accessibility for survivors of human trafficking.


THE JOURNEY TO EMPLOYMENT

The Application

For survivors who are actively applying for available jobs, many had similar experiences in this stage of the employment process. Overall, survivors feel overwhelmed at the repetitive and time-consuming task that is completing and submitting applications, especially while most survivors are struggling to survive and barely balancing working, therapy, court, childcare and family dynamics, transportation challenges, and other activities just to get through the day-to-day, much less moving forward with plans for an employment change. Kendra shared her worries, even after a period of time with a supportive employer:

Even to this day I don't feel like I'm 100% prepared or anything like that, and maybe that's just my perspective or how I look at life.

One survivor summarized this phase of the employment process succinctly: "Sometimes it can be so long and repetitive which can make it hard to focus and want to finish the application. It takes a lot of mental energy." Like most job seekers, survivors are not applying to just one job at a time, but numerous all at once, which can take its toll. The weight of the application process is made even heavier when most potential employers typically only reply to candidates, they would like to move forward within the hiring process. A survivor explained: "The lack of response from potential employers - you send out dozens of applications a day only to hear back from no one." This lack of communication is often felt as rejection without explanation.



When applying for jobs, survivors overwhelmingly shared their concerns about having to “check the box” on applications. Thirteen survey respondents specifically listed having to answer questions pertaining to a criminal record on applications as a deterrent for them in seeking employment from certain companies. Many other survivors shared feelings of insecurity and imposter syndrome where they decided not to apply for a job due to their previous work history. Eight survivors shared that they had significant gaps in their work history that they felt uncomfortable having to explain. Another five survivors felt intimidated in the application process because they lacked the general work history or field experience necessary. One of these survivors summarized both concerns: “Explaining resume gaps or why I may have less time and experience in settings due to being unable to pursue those things because of trauma experiences.” While survivors want to feel seen and heard in the workforce, they do not want to feel exposed or forced to self-disclose their trauma history as it relates to employment.

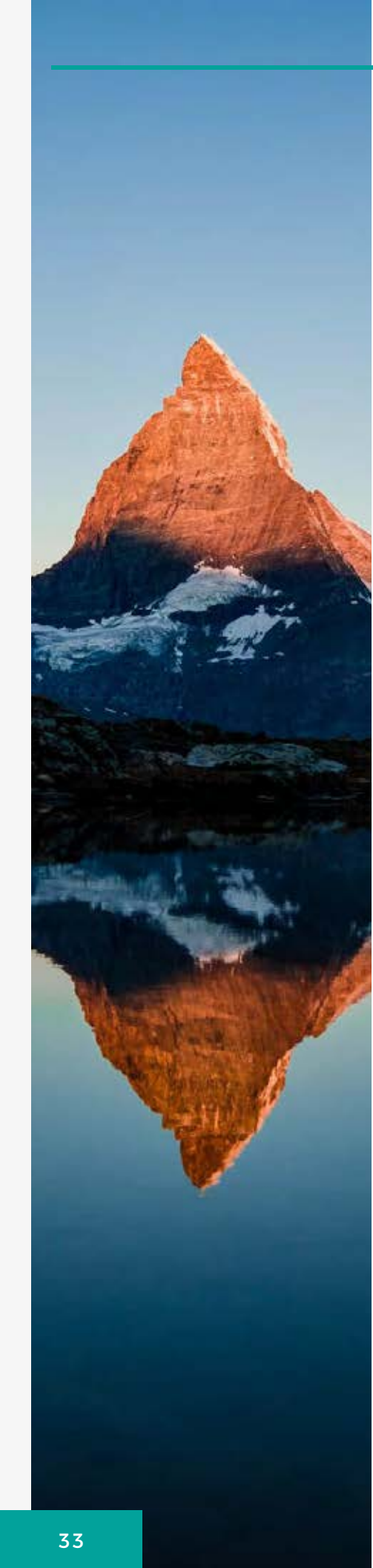
This need to clarify inconsistencies or advocate for needs was echoed in other parts of the application process for survivors as well. Especially when survivors apply for positions that require them to self-disclose or publicly identify as a survivor, respondents shared these struggles. One survivor explained their recent experience: “[I] applied for a mental health clinician job working with survivors and struggled with how to disclose and how also to add that experience to my resume as a reason I feel like I should be eligible for more pay when negotiating my salary.” This highlights the value of lived experience in a world that penalizes individuals for a lack of work history and formal education for that very lived experience. One interview participant, May, had significant previous experience in both the corporate and nonprofit sectors and still found herself being shut out of opportunities she was interested in.

She shared about her experience regarding industries requiring increasing formal education:

I don't think [degrees should be prerequisites for jobs]. I hate that because so many times I've applied for different positions within like different types of studies or what's these things for survivors like different positions that whatever, they don't have a degree. I had seven years' experience in case management and I did before it was even required that you had to have at least a Bachelors in human services or whatever. And I did it, and I got paid the same amount and then they brought them in here and said oh well you need to have a degree now.

This overreliance on higher education is an issue of economic justice that can be detrimental not only to finding employment or upward mobility, but also to the long-term financial impact on survivors. Human trafficking is often tied to poverty and the exploitation of the basic needs of a survivor, their family, and/or community. For many survivors, the financial burden of student loans in order to pursue higher education can create a cycle of debt from which they cannot escape. Many survivors have experienced debt bondage as part of their exploitation (United Nations, 2016, Debt Bondage Remains the most Prevalent Form of Forced Labour Worldwide); for some, the debt of student loans can feel like a parallel to their trafficking experience.

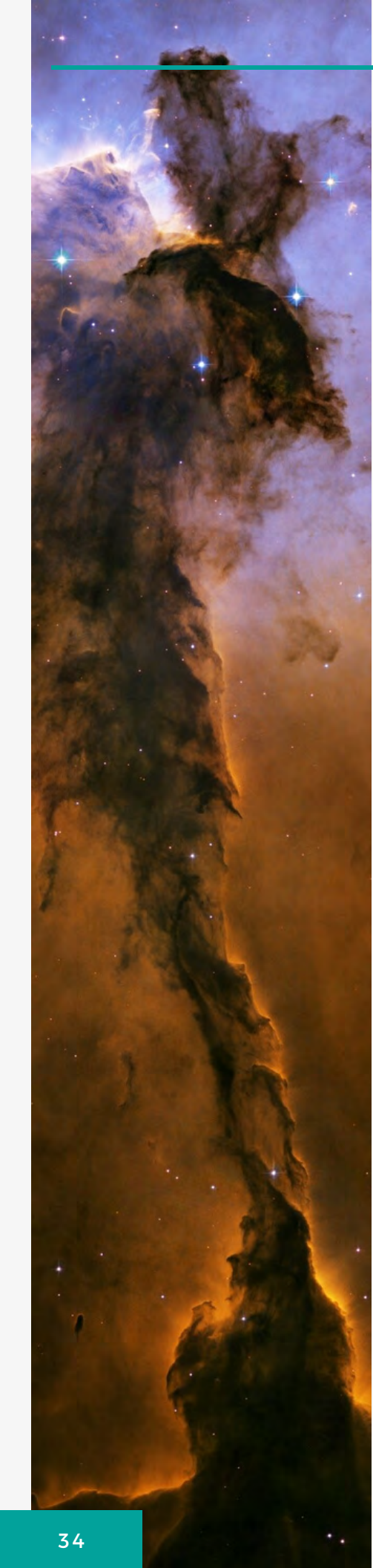
Additionally, other survivors wrestled with how receptive a company might be of them providing information in their cover letter such as their pronouns or their preferred name. Another survivor described this turmoil: "Knowing if I can put my preferred name on official documents like resumes and cover letters, or if they need my legal name." What survivors see as opportunities to be transparent are areas in which institutions have historically been unwelcoming and restrictive.



Survivors may not use their legal names for multiple reasons, including but not limited to their gender identity or safety concerns related to their trafficking situations. However, in an effort to present their authentic self and/or to prioritize safety, survivors are experiencing fear of discrimination in the workplace.

This also can create a trauma response when a survivor feels as though they must create a certain persona or become a person on paper other than their true self, as this is often the expectation in trafficking situations. Many survivors have also experienced dissociation, or a separation from one's self or from reality, in order to cope with the trauma they have endured. The expectation to separate from one's authentic self in the workplace can parallel or replicate feelings of dissociation. A survey respondent elaborated: "It's not real, I have to fit myself into a box, there's always a gender [or] race box. They're inhumane, there's no realness to it, it feels ingenuine and transactional. No one cares about what shaped me, how triggering it is to have to people please to get a job." While it can be viewed as an opportunity for dishonesty, when employers provide space for individuals to show up authentically, survivors feel empowered to show their true brilliance in the workplace and contribute passionately to the workplace objectives. Kari shared what she wished employers knew about her beyond what they might see on her application or background report:

I am more than what is on a piece of paper, whether it reflects me in a positive or negative light, a whole person and that doesn't come out just on a background check or resume that you're a whole person.



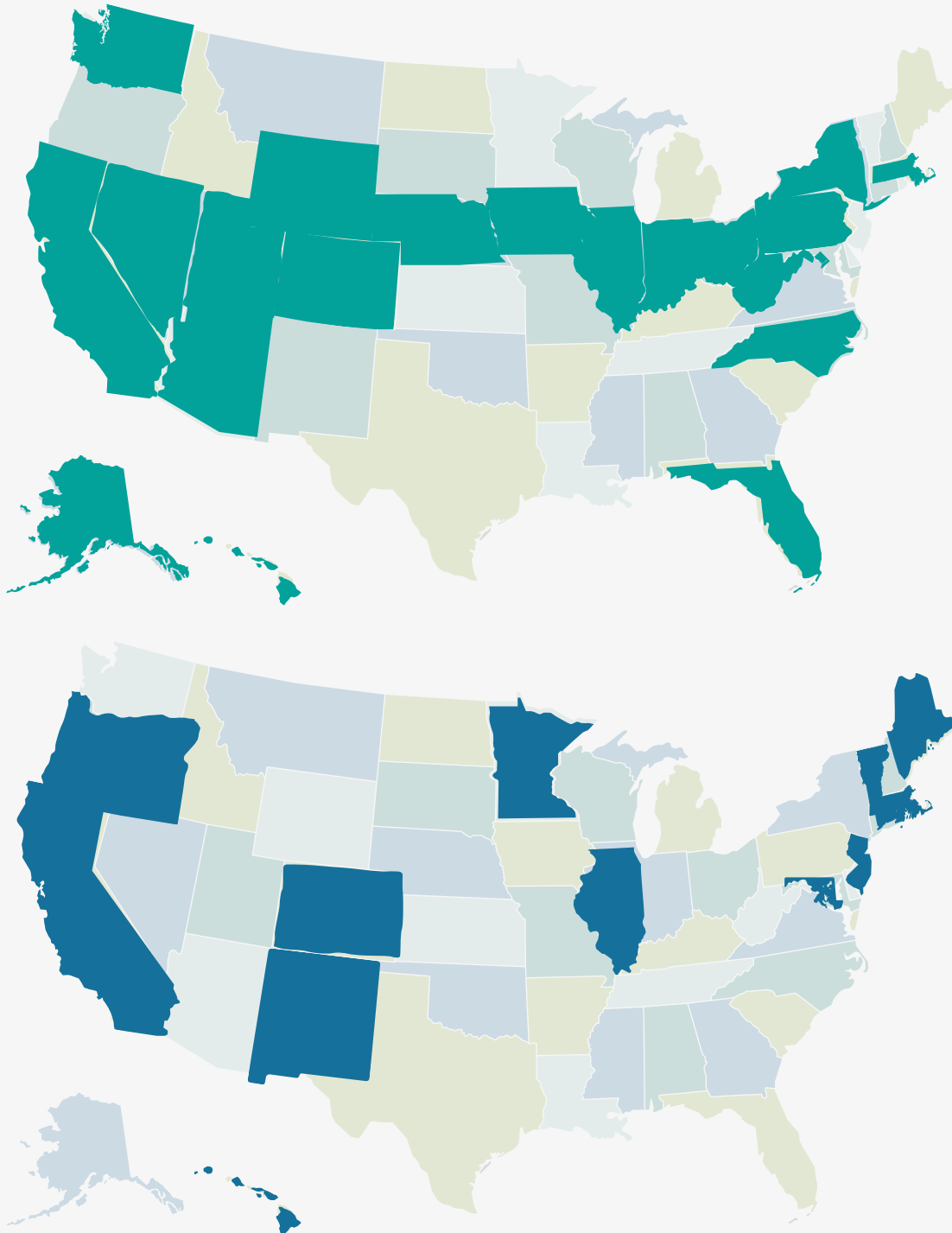
Again, survivors have a deep desire to be seen and understood as unique individuals. Survivors felt that when they had the ability to meet with a potential employer, or the freedom to share or withhold information during the application process, it increased the chances of the employer being able to see them for their skill set and work ethic. Many survivors felt that initiatives such as “ban the box” legislation could increase the chances of marginalized individuals getting face time with the employer where they might otherwise have been eliminated earlier in the hiring process had they disclosed their past criminalization. While Tiana had not experienced criminalization during her exploitation, working in the mental health and direct service fields for several years had increased her awareness of the impact of criminalization when it comes to education, employment, and housing barriers for many trafficking survivors and individuals coming from marginalized communities. She felt that mandatory disclosure of an applicant’s criminal background caused harm to people seeking employment:

I think that when you are asked without even knowing who was gonna read this paperwork - it's kind of demeaning to a person to have to explain something like that to a piece of paper. I feel like that should be explored with a person in an in-person conversation.

‘Cause you can read a story but hearing a person explain whatever I think it gives the employer the opportunity to say this person has a criminal record already and I don’t want to move forward - it gives them room for more discrimination as opposed to “this person’s resume is really good let’s get some more information about this person for sure,” before just making that judgement call.

THE JOURNEY TO EMPLOYMENT

Most of the survivors who were interviewed during the one-on-one process felt similarly about ban the box legislation. As of 2022, fifteen states have this legislation with an additional 22 cities and counties having these laws in place for private employers. While this shift in thinking about accessible employment has started, the US still has a ways to go towards reducing this barrier entirely for criminalized individuals.



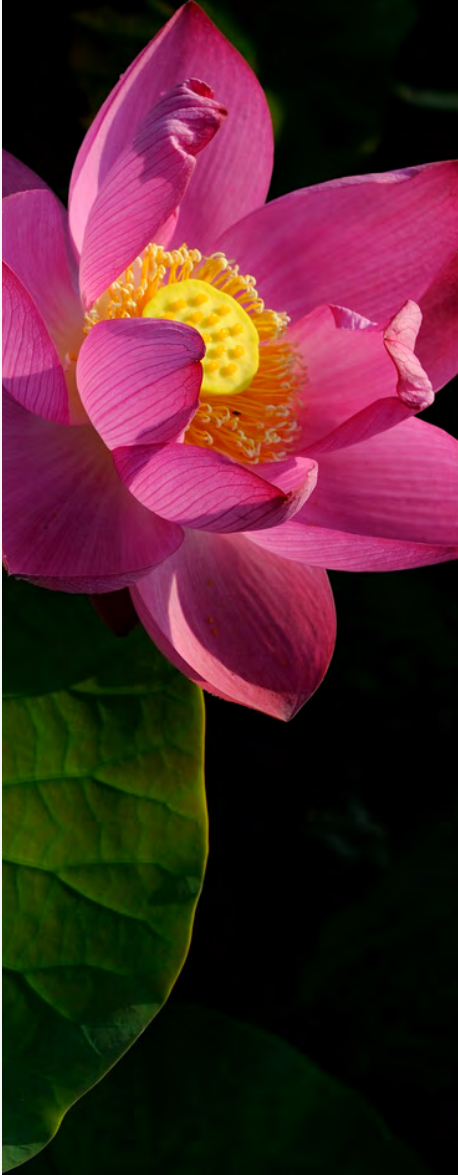
Survivors Interviewed (States)

Ban the Box States

Concerns about being considered to move forward from the application process also included survivors feeling concerned about the content in their resumes. Eighty-five respondents said that they currently had an updated resume, however over one-third (35%) stated that they did not feel confident with their current resume. Respondents were provided with an open response field to elaborate further on their needs regarding their resume.

Ultimately, survivors felt they would benefit greatly from having an expert review their resume. Some survivors explained that they wanted help with formatting and design. One survivor described their ideal resume: “[my] experiences, references, [and] condensing into one beautiful page.” Many other survivors said they wanted help on bringing forth their strengths where they would otherwise face judgment for weaknesses such as gaps in history or lack of experience. One survivor shared: “I feel like I don’t represent my power and talent well on paper.” Many survivors also shared feelings of shame around their lack of experience and education and a desire to feel qualified. One survivor explained: “I want more job experience in general, and job experience that I can be proud of rather than just trying to fill up space.” While many of the respondents’ needs regarding support with their resumes can be addressed with the assistance of qualified volunteers at direct service organizations, this also is evidence of survivors’ desire to work hard and be included in the workplace.

Most of the survivors who participated in the one-on-one interviews also acknowledged the time it takes to build work experience. Survivors are willing to spend the time learning and building relationships in one position, company or industry to achieve what they want to.



Raina has long-term goals to work in residential programming for youth. She currently works several nights each week for a nonprofit that has residential programming for young parents, in addition to her day job in retail. She shared the benefit of having access to this time each week:

I'm getting the experience and you know seeing how and like being a worker at a nonprofit and seeing how it's ran. It's given me kind of a list of do's and don't's of what I want.

Many survivors experience feelings of imposter syndrome, or carry shame of feeling perpetually behind in life when compared to their peers. While there are systemic issues that must be addressed, the need for peer support to normalize these feelings of isolation and shame is also necessary.



THE JOURNEY TO EMPLOYMENT

The Interview

Anxiety continues to mount as survivors move into the interview phase of the employment process. While several respondents noted tangible and economic barriers to attending interviews such as reliable transportation and not being able to afford professional attire for in-person interviews, or a quiet area and clean background for virtual interviews, most survivors shared feelings of total loss of control, inadequacy, and ultimately fear when it came to interviewing for a position they wanted.

These feelings manifested primarily in two different ways. First, survivors shared how worrisome it is not to feel prepared to answer questions. Sometimes this occurred repetitively across companies a survivor was interviewing with during a specific time frame. One survivor respondent described this as feeling “robotic”. Others described physical responses such as being uncomfortable with prolonged eye contact, having sweaty hands, and stumbling over words out of nervousness. Most often, survivors shared how interviews often elicit trauma responses. Trauma responses are more likely to happen when an individual experiences a loss of control, therefore being asked questions by someone they don’t know can be a space where survivors have these responses. Ensuring applicants feel prepared to answer questions and understand the individual(s) doing the interview and structure of the hiring process in advance can help reduce this stress. Scarlet mentioned the empowerment that is possible when a survivor feels prepared to explain their criminal history during an interview:

And it also opens up an opportunity to speak for themselves and kind of explain anything during the ... interview process if something did come up as opposed to an employer just seeing it [on the application] and automatically writing them off and not giving them a chance to even introduce themselves. Its discriminatory in a way where it's understandable the employer would be asking but I don't think just the words on paper really speak to like someone's true character or like where they are now.

When survivors have the space to be seen and heard in an interview as opposed to feeling judged for the part of themselves that is represented on paper, they have the opportunity to feel understood. One survivor explained: “[I want to] properly showcase my relevant skills and experience without having a trauma response.” Another shared their skill-building: “Learning when being too honest is too much. Some people love to talk and to hear your background but to some it seems that’s exactly what they didn’t want.” Survivors often experience skill-building in real time, which can parallel past experiences of survival, making interviews difficult.

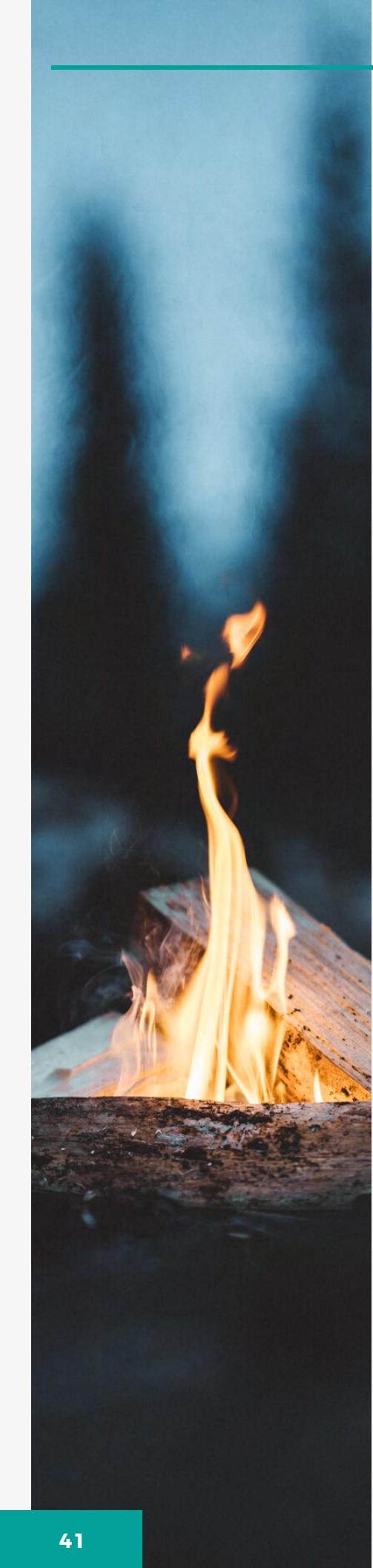
Secondly, interviews can also be more difficult because of the long-term impact of physical traumas. One survivor explained how they present in interviews as a challenge: “Having to think about and ask the interviewer to repeat questions because a brain injury makes me need to hear things multiple times before I can process them.” Similarly, another survivor explained how too much verbal communication at once can be overwhelming: “multi-tiered questions such as: If you were to get this position, what would be your first step as a leader? Do you have any problems rearranging those steps based on the agency’s priorities? What steps would you take to prioritize?” Trauma can impact verbal and auditory processing as well as memory recall. When survivors are placed in a situation where they feel they have no option but to succeed, they carry an immense amount of internal pressure to do so, which is then countered with overwhelming sensory inputs that are difficult to process in a heightened state.

THE JOURNEY TO EMPLOYMENT

Beginning a New Job

The onboarding and orientation processes for a new job can be overwhelming for anyone, but especially so for individuals who need additional time to process and adjust to changes in their routines and environments. One survivor provided a different perspective around self-identification: “I honestly think that trafficking survivors face discrimination due more to disabilities that they may possess as opposed to their status as a survivor specifically; ableism and approaches that do not hold safe space for requesting accommodations are the biggest barrier.” For both employers and survivors, understanding rights for individuals with invisible disabilities is critical in ensuring survivors have a positive onboarding process and access to ongoing support and accommodations to do their work successfully.

The first step at hire for many companies is for the new employee to submit various documents including background check, identification documents, and any related proof of education or licensing credentials. Many survivors mentioned the background check process once again as a significant challenge along the journey to employment. Another survivor shared a vicious loop that their trafficking experience had created that prevented them from finding adequate employment: “I needed to show proof of my original university transcript. There was a significant financial hold on it because I had to drop out due to trafficking. When I was finally free and able to work again, I owed thousands of dollars to my university but was left with no money and resources due to my trafficking experiences. I needed a job to get money but couldn’t afford to get a job because of the barriers in place with my transcript. And my employer was not willing to be flexible on that.” **It is unfortunately common for survivors to find themselves in a place where they cannot access employment due to lingering economic barriers as a direct result of their trafficking.**



Because employers often do not proactively make accommodations or educate employees on their rights under the American Disability Act, survivors may find themselves struggling to keep up with the pace of orientation procedures. One survivor shared: “getting overwhelmed with the amount of information needed to retain while also continuing to heal and maintain my mental health.” Not only can the effects of trauma directly impact learning speed, but previously mentioned barriers to accessing work and education opportunities create additional hurdles for survivors. Scarlet’s biggest barrier in maintaining employment long-term has centered on chronic health issues that are a result of her exploitation. She shared about the cycle she has been in over the years with several employers: “I left because of disability and just inability to keep working at the pace that I was working at.” When employers are able to identify accessibility needs of their employees, staff retention increases, which benefits both the employee and employer.

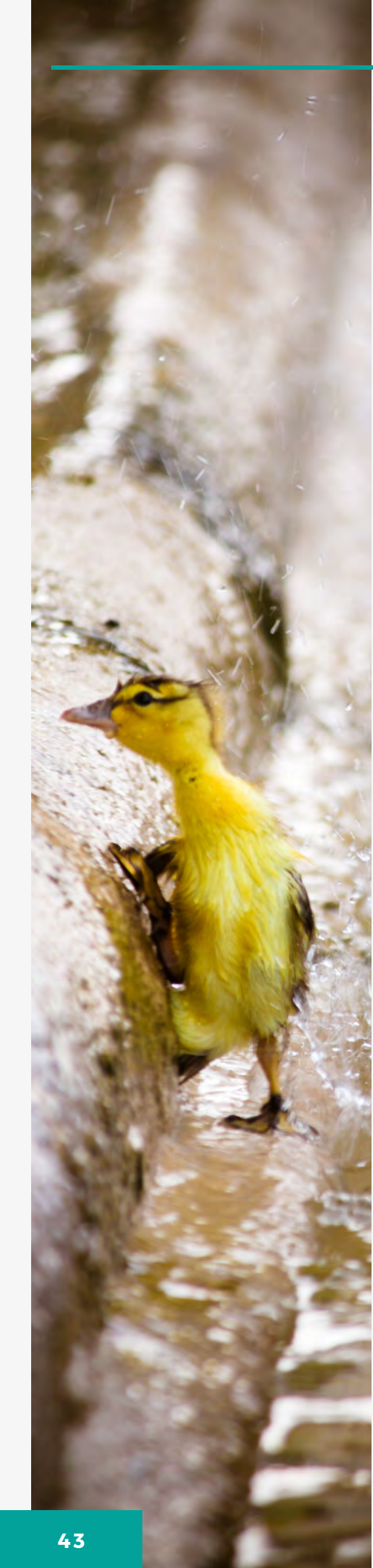
One survey respondent shared about the learning curve going into a traditional work environment: “learning new ‘language’ especially in the corporate world.” Another survivor shared about their barriers with technology: “Definitely the computer process. I’m realizing learning computers are [needed] in this process.” Despite all of these challenges with learning and change, survivors see the value in establishing community in their new workspace as a means to combat imposter syndrome and settling into a new routine. Kendra described her ideal work day: “just sitting in the office laughing with my [peers] and trying to figure it out together.” Survivors recognize that they do not have or need all the answers, nor do they need them entirely provided for them in advance, but rather the colleague and supervisory relationships to navigate challenges together.

THE JOURNEY TO EMPLOYMENT

Maintaining Employment

Survivors in this study were able to find and secure jobs at some point, however problems began to emerge over time. This generally aligns with what job program providers have found over the past two decades—that survivors thrived in a trauma-informed and supportive environment during their program, however they struggled with adjusting to a traditional workplace where there was often a total absence of those supports. Some had specific experiences that made it challenging to continue in the job; however, most survivor stories coalesced around two primary causes: institutions that were unable or unwilling to recognize the employee as a whole person, and the survivors’ feelings around interpersonal safety. Scarlet described the environment in past jobs that caused her to ultimately leave: “a negative environment is one that does not consider the whole human. You are just there to work whether you have a family, like that doesn’t matter. You [might] have personal things going on in your life that’s not factored in.” Overall, survivors felt blamed or diminished for circumstances out of their control, or experienced harm, retraumatization, or general lack of trust for their colleagues.

Most employers have not sought out anti-oppression or trauma-informed training education when developing internal systems and procedures. As a result, employees coming from marginalized communities experience barriers that were traditionally in place to exclude them and are now viewed as standard work practices. Examples of such work practices include but are not limited to: dress codes that are not inclusive nor affirming of culture or gender expression, sick days and healthcare benefits that do not acknowledge the impact of trauma and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) on health, and work schedules that do not take into account access to childcare for primary caregivers.

A vertical photograph on the left side of the page shows a small, fluffy yellow duckling standing on a rocky ledge. The duckling is facing left, and its body is partially obscured by water splashing around it. The background is a blurred, light-colored rock face.

One survivor described their observations with this: “Employers do not have an analysis to understand oppression, intersectionality, or trauma. When they receive thoughts regarding employee experiences, instead of taking responsibility, they dismiss people and/or impede solutions and healing.” Eve echoed this experience with recent contractor work where she felt the company she was consulting for was not receptive to additional considerations to increase inclusion. She shared: “[I felt] silenced, [I didn’t] have the freedom to give feedback or to bring new ideas.” Another survivor provided a specific pattern of experiences with past employers as it pertained to gendered barriers to full-time employment: “[My] employers and supervisors never understand the difficulties of childcare or involvement in my child’s education.” And while creating equity for mothers in the workplace has been an initiative for decades now that has made some progress, other marginalized identities continue to struggle with surviving in an outright harmful environment. One survivor described what they have endured in work settings: “Dealing with transphobic employers (intentionally or unintentionally with things ranging from open hostility to misgendering), ... dealing with getting triggered in the workplace and knowing how to handle it in a way that doesn’t upset my employer.” Even while actively experiencing harm, many survivors find ignoring their own needs as necessary to maintain employment and avoid further destabilization in their lives.

Survivors also highly value authentic connection with those in their social circles, but especially in the workplace. When these relationships are difficult to forge, survivors find themselves disengaging from that workplace entirely. Emotional and relational safety is a key to long-term employment for survivors of human trafficking, and likely most people in the workforce. Because survivors have experienced significant trauma under the guise of employment, and at the hands of perceived employers and colleagues, the workplace can bring up issues of trust and safety, and it can also be a place of immense healing.



One survivor shared about their desire to show up authentically with their colleagues: “Finding ways to stay comfortable enough to stay and getting used to people not recognizing the identities you hold.” Many survivors shared thoughts relating to ongoing imposter syndrome. One survivor was vulnerable enough to share: “the abuse I have endured can sometimes make me feel like I am not good enough to be in the room or contribute to the conversation.” Survivors often leave both their families of origin and all their existing social networks when they exit trafficking, meaning service providers and employers are often the starting point for their new social support. One survivor described this experience and feeling constantly behind others their age: “I came out of the life and left behind the old network. Where some [of my friends] had [connections] since high school, I had to build a new network and overcome anxiety to get out there and meet new people. It takes time especially when we do not have a stable friend group yet.” Employers can provide a relationally safe and empowering space for survivors to forge new relationships and establish trust with those around them once again.

It is also important to note that not only are there challenges with maintaining employment, but there is also a lack of hope for upward mobility. Survivors who are currently employed shared that they do not see potential for advancement within the company they work for, which might be attributed to knowledge of the culture and work environment, limited qualifications for other positions, or general lack of upward mobility within the companies they have already accessed employment within. Employers should be mindful of creating pathways for growth that are accessible to all employees, especially those from historically oppressed communities.

THE JOURNEY TO EMPLOYMENT

Lessons Learned for a Better Future

Survivor respondents provided countless ideas of ways employers and communities can close gaps in accessing long-term employment. Some of these ideas were focused on economic solutions for assistance with transportation, the waiting period before the first paycheck, and even ideas regarding dress codes and adequate work attire.

Other survivors shared how colleagues and leadership needed to increase education and awareness around trauma and life journeys. One survivor shared: “language in the workplace is difficult to hear. I’ve heard my colleagues call clients we serve drug dealers or eliminate youth from services for being in possession of drugs. As a survivor who transported drugs to stay alive, I know firsthand the choices that have to be made to stay safe, it can be really deflating to hear colleagues have so little understanding of that world.” Another survivor shared their experience overhearing workplace conversations: “A big thing I’d like employers to stop using is the word ‘victims’. I cringe [every time].” Individuals who have experienced trauma live and work in all areas of society, and all individuals should be mindful of their use of terms and stereotypes in day-to-day interactions as it is possible that someone with a similar history is sitting in the room. This is just one component of creating a trauma-informed work environment.

Another survivor summarized their needs around finding balance between honoring lived experience and valuing professional experience as well: “I need a long-term job where I am safe as a survivor and a professional.” This need for an empowering work environment that recognized the survivor as more than their story was echoed throughout responses.


Another survivor described their current experiences and provided alternatives for a better experience in the future: “[I’m] always treated like a survivor and rarely like a professional - ongoing critique with little support, encouragement, acknowledgement or praise.” While many survivors find employment in direct services, employers in the for-profit sector can ensure career opportunities are accessible to marginalized communities, and adequate support is in place for career path development.

WHAT EMPLOYERS CAN DO

Building an Equipped Workforce

Survey respondents were provided the opportunity to provide open-ended answers on the question What classes do employers need? Three themes emerged, including education on systemic inequalities, human trafficking awareness education, and how to create a trauma-responsive workplace.

Survivors felt that it was very important for employers to be educated on systemic inequalities. One survivor summarized this need: “I think the most important thing is moving away from performative allyship; equity and inclusion is an action not an ideology.” Another survivor elaborated: “[an] analysis of anti-oppression, intersectionality and the essentials of having tangible accountability mechanism for equity to truly exist for people directly affected, analysis focused on trauma and its effects, the importance of language justice, the importance of deconstructing what is considered professionalism [which can become a means that] people especially BIPOC/LGBTQ+ individuals are oppressed.” Indeed, incorporating anti-oppression initiatives into the workplace requires more than a one-time training or conversation with staff but rather a detailed inspection of the structure of the company and its operations. And while repairing systems and relationships are crucial, equity and inclusion require one step further. One survivor advocated: “[understand] the actual costs of housing, recovering from financial abuse, medical treatment, childcare, etc., because managers set wages for us and they need to know that it’s more expensive to be a survivor, and we need to get paid enough to live.” Economic justice is one truly impactful change employers can provide when transforming their work environment to be a trauma-informed one and can be the catalyst to breaking generational cycles of poverty and marginalization.

A photograph of a young tree trunk supported by wooden stakes in a grassy field. The tree trunk is light brown with some peeling bark. The stakes are made of rough-hewn wood. The background is a bright green field under a clear sky.

While human trafficking awareness training was a theme in the responses on the question about what education employers need, it contained the smallest number of responses compared with the other two themes. This suggests that while human trafficking education is important across all part of a community, most survivors feel that when it comes to creating supportive and empowering workplaces, education was better suited to anti-oppression and trauma responsive topics. This also highlights that these recommendations can not only be implemented to better support survivors of human trafficking specifically, but individuals who have experienced any form of trauma that might come into the workplace.

The survivors who contributed ideas about human trafficking awareness in the workplace centered their responses around providing education to employers about the nuances of trafficking experiences, as well as how those experiences might show up in the workplace. One survivor responded: “The intersectionality and complexity of human trafficking experiences. The different forms of survivorship and allowing space for individuality within survivorship.” Another survivor responded similarly: understanding lived experience on a spectrum. Making sure survivors are included in what the training should look like.” While survivors recognize the need for human trafficking education in the workplace, many ultimately want to see general and authentic diversity and inclusion practices beyond the tokenization of specifically hiring survivors of human trafficking.

As a part of the ongoing conversation around inclusive hiring practices, survivors also felt that a training on human trafficking should draw the connection between past exploitation and current employability. One survivor advocated: “[teach them] how critical having a job for survival is.” Another echoed this sentiment: “How [human trafficking] affects the individual and a community.” Survivors of human trafficking deeply understand the interconnectedness of these crimes and type of traumatic experience with other systemic and cultural issues.

Ultimately, survivors know that when individuals are working meaningful jobs and thriving wages, there is a positive impact in the community at large that reduces instances of human trafficking in the future.

Creating a trauma-responsive workplace takes time. Survey respondents overwhelmingly provided feedback that company-wide training on interpersonal dynamics was most important when it came to creating a trauma-responsive workplace. Other minor themes included creating supportive schedules and providing remote and hybrid opportunities where possible, ensuring employees had sufficient benefits packages that included insurance for mental health services, reviewing disability accessibility, and identifying community partnerships for employees to access as needed for holistic support.

Interpersonal and relational training for employees and employers were what survivor respondents felt would be most effective in creating a trauma-responsive work environment. One survivor shared: “I would teach them to be compassionate and understanding and to use a case-by-case approach when listening to each survivor. Each survivor has their own story and [you can] tailor [an employment] fit with the needs of each.” This theme and the corresponding responses were so explicit, a comprehensive list of responses have been condensed here to demonstrate the primary topics:

- Empathy training
- Active listening, conflict resolution, and effective (verbal and non-verbal) communication strategies
- Power dynamics, supervision approaches, and leadership styles
- Identifying indicators of triggers and trauma responses, and appropriate support plans

A variety of training on these topics already exists for professionals and business owners. It is now a matter of taking action to receive this education and implement formal policies around how companies support their employees.



WHAT EMPLOYERS CAN DO

Position Opening Announcements

A total of ninety-seven survey respondents shared how they primarily search for job opportunities. Participants were allowed to select multiple options. More than half (56%) of respondents utilize social media posts as the initial way to learn about positions opening at companies they follow or support in some way. Nearly half (49%) accessed traditional employment websites, and 23% found their personal and professional social networks to be helpful in the job search process. Only 18% of respondents used local job boards in public spaces, and 14% used local staffing agencies. Additionally, only 4% of respondents used the HR department of their existing employer for position announcements within the same company. These findings suggest that survivors find the job search process most accessible online, and that they are potentially open to either remote positions or relocating for the right employment. It also suggests that many survivors find locally-based employment options traditionally found on job boards and local staffing agencies to not align with their compensation needs and career goals.

WHAT EMPLOYERS CAN DO

Company-Wide Education

Survivors were asked to rank a series of eleven topics in order of importance to them that they felt were areas that they wished employers knew more about. A total of eighty-three respondents completed this question. In order of importance from most-desired to least-desired by survivors, the requested trainings for employers are ranked below:

1. Grievances
2. ACEs (Adverse Childhood Experiences)
3. Conflict Resolution
4. Nonverbal Communication
5. Health Benefits
6. Clear Expectations
7. Criminalization
8. Intersectionality
9. Lived Experience as Work History
10. Mental Health Support
11. Trauma-Informed Supervision

WHAT EMPLOYERS CAN DO

Support for Employees

Survivors were asked a series of questions about how employers might be able to provide additional support for their employees. Ninety-eight respondents answered these questions. Eighty-three percent of respondents felt that having a peer advocate in the human resources department would be extremely beneficial. Half of the survivors who participated in one-on-one interviews felt that human resource department professionals ultimately had the best interest of the company as their priority, which made advocating for their needs difficult. Scarlet suggested leveraging technology to increase safety:

Maybe like an app or something. I feel like there's so many people who have grievances and who experience things that should be streamlined but it's not always easy to find out what the best route to take is. There's really not enough information that's given to [employees] for complaints, you kind of have to search through it or go through HR and that can kind of be like stumbling through it and learning the process while you're trying to advocate for yourself. It almost feels like there's certain things that are hidden or covered and just not shared because they do have to do with employee rights.

When employees feel safe and heard, and can experience fast responses to workplace grievances, they are more likely to stay with the existing company as trust is built between the individual and the company's leadership. Seventy percent of these same respondents felt that company-wide trainings on both human trafficking as well as trauma-informed best practices in a work environment prior to a company intentionally focusing on hiring individuals with complex trauma histories.

Scarlet also advocated for how this education could look in the workplace:

I definitely would start with trauma-based training and workplace training so that people in administration have a better understanding of how to relate or work will adjust kind of like what trauma looks like and how it manifests itself. ... There should be sensitivity training because if there's issues that do arise and employees have to go to their managers and talk about things they don't want to talk about personal issues that are challenging, then response is critical because if they are demanding or abrupt or like make the issue worse or threatening, you know, it just makes it seem like the employee is at risk of losing their security and that can push things into a whole other category of fear.

Of these same survey respondents, fifty-seven percent felt that it would be helpful for supervisors to check in one-on-one with their direct reports on a weekly basis, while another thirty-one percent felt that monthly check-ins were adequate, and twelve percent felt quarterly check-ins were sufficient to feel supported in the workplace. Kendra shared what has been successful in her current place of employment:

I can hit my boss up and be like 'hey look I'm just overwhelmed or morning sickness is getting to me and I just need to take a self-care day' and so that accommodation is very, very helpful because like I don't have to be in the hospital, I don't have to be on my deathbed to get care for myself. ... She's turned into more than just the boss relationship, she's kind of like 'Auntie' now, like I know I could call her for advice even if it's outside of work. She has become just a support system in my life. Even if I decide to leave this company for whatever reason, she's not gonna just let me go like that, and I think that's huge for employers to be that support system for survivors because we don't get that much support.

Because survivors often lack social support systems, colleagues and supervisors have the opportunity to provide some of this support within and beyond the workplace. Survivors feel very connected to their places of work and those they work alongside, which in turn increases employee retention.


WHAT EMPLOYERS CAN DO

Self-Disclosure and Tokenism

Survey respondents were asked if they would be comfortable having their survivorship status common knowledge within their workspace or industry. Sixty-five survivors answered this question, with 42% stating that they would not at all be comfortable with this, while another 31% said that they would absolutely be comfortable with this. The remaining 27% of respondents fell somewhere between these two extremes and felt that it would depend on the work environment and circumstances surrounding that disclosure. For survivors working in human and victim services, many have found self-disclosure both healing for themselves and inspiring for their clients. Raina described this bi-directional healing:

I'm like living proof that you know the shelter system has success stories and I feel like I can directly impact these girls and their children with getting the support they need. It just makes us stronger individuals and we want to assist other people that went through similar situations and let them know that it is OK.

Similarly, Scarlet has felt the desire to give back through the organizations who have been instrumental in supporting her journey. She shared: "I feel like there's been so many people and organizations that have been allies, and you know it inspires me to give back." Additionally, Tiana felt self-disclosure in her role in the mental health field has increased feelings of safety and unconditional support with her clients: "I think because of my background and how I grew up and my experiences, I like to help people. You know, to help someone through any process that they're going through."



However, many survivors also recognized their need for privacy and strong boundaries with who and when they shared their lived experiences with coworkers. One survey respondent described the healing journey they are currently on and the internal work required:

I don't have the language to even understand/make sense of my own experiences. No one in my personal life even knows I was trafficked. I supposed I've been living in this façade for so long that breaking that news, even to an employer, would be extremely uncomfortable. I don't even know how to acknowledge that truth to myself or those closest to me.

It is important to recognize that each survivor is on their own journey and defines healing for themselves. While some individuals may find it empowering and helpful to process out loud with colleagues or to share pieces of their experiences as it relates to their current job, others need time and space to process their trauma privately.

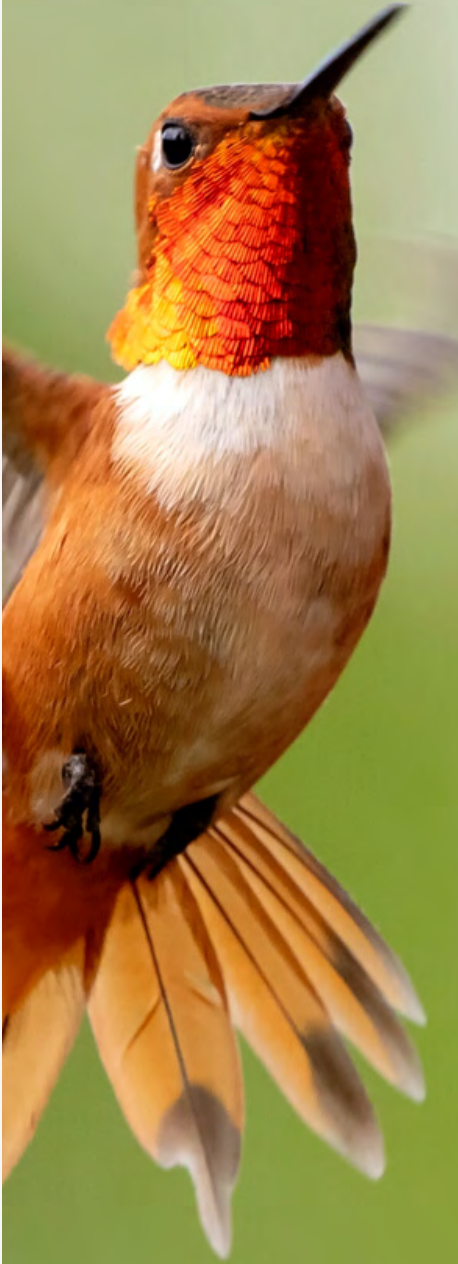
An additional field for open responses to elaborate on self-disclosure in the workplace revealed themes of safety, fear, healing, and peer support. Most survivors recognized that not only healthy boundaries are needed when disclosing personal information in the workplace, but many also shared concerns of being socially ostracized or even losing their job altogether if it was discovered they had been trafficked. One survivor explained their concerns around tokenism specifically: "I feel like I would be tokenized as a survivor, that they would exploit my experience to show how 'inclusive' they are. I also think they might discredit me more and act like I'm lesser than them because of that experience that they might pity me." Other survivors shared this fear of a shift in power dynamics as well. Kendra shared some of her past experiences of self-disclosure in the workplace and how it changed her coworkers' interactions with her:

People think working with people like us, it's such a sad thing and they got to be just rescuing us and oh boo-hoo sob story this and it's like no, we are some of the most funniest people to be around and just having a good time and just focusing on the goals to be better people.

Similarly, Tiana shared how self-disclosure has made people feel awkward going forward. She described past changes in relationships after disclosure:

When people have a sense of my background and then they kind of trip over their words. I feel like you should be able to say something without feeling like you said something totally wrong, cause now you feel like this person feels like they need to watch what they say around you ... [At the same time] I feel like people are kinda judgey about that too or like your educational background and how much experience you have as far as education is concerned [is not enough].

Often, survivors find that self-disclosure is a double-edged sword, where they ultimately face a constrained choice between disclosing for the sake of justifying their qualifications or accessing additional support, or not being considered for or even terminated from a position. One survivor shared their personal experience with self-disclosure thus far: "I got hired because I'm a survivor, but I am not respected at certain tables because of my lived experience. They discount that I am currently in school pursuing my [Master's] but I am still looked at for just my lived experience." Other survivors have found that self-disclosure is necessary because the truth about their past experiences is publicly accessible. One survivor shared: "If you Google my name, you find out anyway. Transparency is best practice." This demonstrates the constrained choice that many survivors have regarding self-disclosure, especially if they have been doxed as a part of their exploitation, have a criminal record, have been in the news, or if they did public speaking in the anti-trafficking field as a public survivor in the past.



The primary reason survivors felt comfortable with being known as a survivor in their workplace was seeing it as an opportunity to educate and mentor those around them on what harm can happen to marginalized and vulnerable individuals, as well as what is possible despite all odds. One survivor shared their desire for authentic connection in the workplace: “I am really comfortable sharing my story and I don’t want anyone to ever miss an opportunity to understand me better by knowing my history.” Another survivor explained their awareness of self-disclosure to others who might be struggling with abuse or exploitation themselves:

I feel empowered and [it] gives me validation to do the work I’m doing. But also, it shows ... strength, perseverance, dedication, my heart. I can also be a safe space for others, but also people might feel empowered to stand in their truth. It doesn’t have to define us, it can just be.

In the end, inclusive hiring practices should refrain from requiring self-disclosure of specific past traumas, but workplace culture should value the diversity of individual lived experiences it took to arrive at this same place in time. It is for this disclosure sensitivity that the authors of this report do not necessarily recommend survivor-specific job programs as a single solution for building employment opportunities for survivors.

Ultimately, the fostering of healthy work environments for survivors of trafficking ties to a broader conversation about the prevalence of trauma and the importance of creating a trauma-informed work environment for staff. Although many individuals do not self-disclose their trauma histories in the workplace, employers should be mindful that a significant number of their employees likely have experienced trauma.

In the United States, there is an estimated 1 out of 3 women and 1 out of 4 men experiencing physical and/or sexual violence in their lifetime, between 21-60% of survivors of intimate partner violence lose their jobs due to their abuse, and 78% of women who are killed in the workplace are murdered by an intimate partner (National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, 2022, Statistics). If employers create trauma-informed work environments for all staff, they can help support survivors, prevent further harm, and do so without placing the burden, responsibility, and safety risk of self-disclosure on the survivor.

WHAT EMPLOYERS CAN DO

Language Justice

Survey respondents were provided space for open responses regarding how employers could provide support for individuals whose first language was not English. Themes emerged around organization-wide policies, interpretation and translation services available on-site, and providing ongoing relational support for bilingual and multilingual individuals.

Language justice “is an evolving framework based on the notion of respecting every individual’s fundamental language rights—to be able to communicate, understand, and be understood in the language in which they prefer and feel most articulate and powerful. Rejecting the notion of the supremacy of one language, it recognizes that language can be a tool of oppression, and as well as an important part of exercising autonomy and of advancing racial and social justice” (American Bar Association, 2020, *Language Justice During COVID-19*). The language justice framework is particularly important in the context of human trafficking as English is not the primary language for many survivors. Of the reported survivors of trafficking whose immigration status was disclosed, 81% were foreign nationals, many of whom experience language barriers (Polaris, 2020, *Polaris Analysis of Data from the National Human Trafficking Hotline*; Department of Health of Human Services, 2022, *Human Trafficking Fact Sheet*).

Globally, nearly one in four individuals speaks English, making it the primary language for business worldwide (Harvard Business Review, 2021, *Global Business Speaks*). According to US Census data, about 80% of households in America speak exclusively English in the home. With this primary language foundation, most companies in the US are founded and run by English-speaking individuals, which often means that creating a language-inclusive work environment is not identified as a necessary or immediate priority for company growth.



For this reason, companies must first evaluate existing policies around diversity and inclusion to ensure that language equity is explicitly named as a part of anti-oppression efforts. One survivor shared how companies could begin: “[having a] clear plan on how language diversity is supported in the workplace.” Oftentimes this initially requires company executives to receive a formal training on language inclusive practices to better identify biases and system exclusions they were not previously aware of. Companies can evaluate existing employee positions for language accessibility and develop company-wide procedures tailored to meet their employees’ specific needs within those roles.

Eve, whose first language is Spanish, sees this inequity in human services and research work. She shared about a recent experience doing consulting work, as well as what she envisions for the future:

There is a lack of equity for me around language access for survivors ... I really, really, really would love to have funding to hold survivor support groups ... who are immigrants, Spanish speaking survivors hopefully, even immigrants of other nationalities or I mean other backgrounds. But because I am Latinx that’s what I would be comfortable holding because one thing I feel and see a lot is that survivors are immigrants and are undocumented and are Latinx like what would it look like to have ESL [be] trauma-informed, survivor-centered.

One opportunity survivors identified as a tangible means of supporting bilingual and multilingual employees is with English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. The means by which a company supported an employees’ engagement with ESL might vary, depending on the company’s capacity. One survivor suggested companies sponsor and provide ESL classes on-site at their office. Another survivor suggested: “[companies can] assist with paying for ESL classes and allow time to attend them.”

This idea highlights the importance of not just equality, but equity when it comes to reasonable time commitments for individuals overcoming systemic barriers. Ultimately both the company and the employee benefit when the employer is willing to invest in such tangible ways in their employees.


Survivors also highlighted the importance of ongoing peer support to decrease language barriers in the workplace. Many survivors suggested the importance of having other bilingual and multilingual colleagues that could support new employees in their position. Another survivor provided an opportunity for a community partnership: “partner with a nonprofit whose focus is on helping [non-native speakers] find jobs.” And while survivors felt this peer mentorship provided significant value for individuals entering a new workspace, they also brought to the forefront the potential to tokenize bilingual and multilingual employees, as well as to expect them to provide additional labor outside the scope of their job for no additional compensation. One survivor shared their experiences with such: “Understand that an English-only space is a space of privilege and that [me] speaking Spanish does not mean I automatically accept the title of being a translator/interpreter for everything. There needs to be language justice in workplaces.” Eight survey respondents specifically noted that hiring a bilingual or multilingual person specifically to support other employees in ESL needs would increase accessibility to that workspace for non-native speakers. A part of language inclusion in workplaces often includes recognizing that speaking more than one language is a marketable asset and skill some employees bring into the workplace, and that if the company wishes to include the use of this skill set to complete work-related tasks, compensation should be commensurate with these valuable contributions.

While certainly not a solution entirely, another theme that came up regarding interpretation and translation services was that survivors genuinely desired seeing companies begin to make efforts towards language equity.

Even if they could not afford a per diem contractor or full-time employee initially to provide these services to other employees, survivors provided intermediary solutions, and acknowledged the advancements in technology that reduce language barriers. One survivor explained: “if [an employer] is unable to provide a translator, there are free translation apps available that would help [with] interpreting.” For many individuals coming from marginalized communities, it is not the expectation of perfection they advocate for, but genuine demonstrations of effort that make all the difference.

Survivor respondents felt that having interpretation and translation services on-site for employees to utilize was an important way to reduce language barriers in employment. Because the terms “interpretation” and “translation” were used interchangeably by most respondents, the context of the open-ended responses was separated into two categories. First, references to verbal communication and secondly, references to written communication and static print materials. A vast majority of responses (82%) regarding interpretation and translation resources in the workplace advocated for the employer to take responsibility in making these available to increase accessibility to individuals otherwise marginalized by being non-native speakers.

Survivors suggested tangible ways to engage non-native speakers from the point of position announcement forward through long-term employment. One survivor summarized the various aspects employers should have in place: “by preparing for access for ongoing translation services if needed, and a variety of different communication mediums such as in-person meetings, emails, guidebooks, mood boards, etc.” Another survivor elaborated similarly: “drafting and reviewing curriculum, cover letter, LinkedIn profile ... job opportunities in the native language.” Another survivor explained incorporating language accessibility during the candidate search process: “conduct interviews and onboarding in their first language.”



These tangible steps again tie back to companies needing to spend dedicated time evaluating existing accessibility for non-native speakers, and ensuring the entire hiring, onboarding and practices feel supportive for employees.

For long-term employee support, survivors gave helpful ideas to create a more responsive environment for employees who speak more than one language. One survivor suggested ways for employers to support daily: “it is best that the employer constantly recap to ensure clarity and understanding.” Oppositely, another survivor also suggested ways for employers to hold space for employees to verbally process information: “the employee should also summarize in their own words so that the employer can confirm if their interpretation is correct. If not, the employer should again explain, perhaps in simpler language.” Language equity requires additional time for employers and employees to communicate, which requires adjustments throughout the workplace and momentum of work activities to accommodate. One survivor suggested: “give [the employee] some time after interpretation.” While evaluating and adjusting policies and procedures is where language equity begins, it ultimately requires modifications to the work environment to truly be accessible and empowering for non-native speakers.

WHAT EMPLOYERS CAN DO

Workplace Conduct - Attire

When it comes to dress codes for the workplace, survivor respondents ultimately felt that many company policies were either cost prohibitive for new employees and those battling poverty, or exclusionary towards marginalized identities. Starting a new job often requires having the disposable funds available to invest in new work approved clothing. When an individual has been unemployed and does not have pre-existing funds available, or they are underpaid for the positions they have access to, purchasing a new work wardrobe is not possible. Survivors provided ideas to help new hires access approved clothing quickly, centering on the role of the employer to assist employees in accessing garments that the company required them to wear. Many survivors did not have issues with dress codes in the workplace, rather the accessibility to approved clothing. One survivor explained: "I have no complaints about dress code, I like to dress up for the job. I just need more nice business clothes and can't quite afford it at the moment." Several survivors suggested a clothing stipend. One survivor suggested: "I think employers should provide a benefit of \$50 to \$100 basic needs allowance at hire; this will allow folks who may not have the right clothes ... to access until they receive their first check." It should be noted that a clothing allowance should not be in the form of a reimbursement as this still requires the new employee to have access to funds upfront, which they might not have. Another suggestion respondents provided was that employers give a deadline by which approved work attire be worn. One survivor advocated: "Allow time for uniforms to be obtained." This deadline should be reasonably after the employee's first paycheck to give them time to secure funds for clothing and to purchase them.

Most survivors felt that dress codes should allow for inclusive individuality, fit the job duties, and that professional dress expectations might vary by environment.

The most common feedback from respondents was about the gendered differences that many dress codes have. Survivors felt that if a company had a dress code, it should be applicable to all employees, regardless of gender. One survivor shared: “Many dress codes are gendered which puts me as a nonbinary person in a weird spot.” Another survivor described their preferences: “Having the same dress code for everyone – women can wear pants, men can wear skirts. Sleeves have to be the same length; men can wear shorts if women can wear skirts.”

Historically, dress codes come from a time with less inclusions. One survivor shared: “Part of anti-oppression and trauma work should be committed to a process of redefining what it means to be a professional and recognizing how the existing definitions we have support power dynamics dictated by white supremacy, patriarchy, and classism.” Another survivor echoed this at the personal level: “[Don’t] think prints or bright colors are unprofessional. My brain still holds the same information, regardless of the color I wear.” Ultimately, survivors want to feel comfortable which leads to increased participation in the workplace, and they want to feel welcomed as a whole person. Employers can increase feelings of safety and belonging in the workplace by ensuring their dress codes demonstrate body positivity, gender inclusion, and meet the needs of cultural, racial, and religious identities.

THE OPTION FOR ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Throughout the one-on-one interviews, survivors also shared the incredible skills and inspiration that have come out of adversity, and their desires to create their own solutions. Since 2016, The Avery Center has collected demographic information about the participants in its monthly care package outreach program. Survey data from 2021 recipients revealed that when compared to US averages, survivors were more likely to either currently own a small business or have the desire to. Often, survivors see business ownership as a solution to systemic barriers to traditional employment, a way to ensure freedom and independent thought, and a means to bring the changes to their communities that they know will be impactful.

All of the eight survivors who participated in one-on-one interviews expressed the desire to create nonprofit organizations with more inclusive practices. May, who has both worked within and received services from many different social service organizations over the years, described an organization in which individuals seeking support would not be retraumatized during the intake process:

I've always dreamed of being able to ... have my organization, or whatever, be able to provide help with ... no questions asked. Like some of the hardest things have been when I have asked for help, in order for me to get help from them, I have to tell them like my whole life story of things.

Oftentimes, individuals who are lacking a social safety net are the ones being targeted by traffickers. Survivors have experienced first hand the impact of systemic exclusions and service gaps in communities, and want to help address these issues to reduce the likelihood of future individuals experiencing the exploitation they have when all other supports have failed.

This valuable insight is only attained through direct lived experience, and with it comes other transferable skills as well that make survivors excellent candidates for entrepreneurship. Kari described her own experience and what she has seen with other sex trafficking survivors as well:

I think a lot of survivors are entrepreneurs in disguise. ... I feel we are already, through experience, obtaining the skills of the basic business ownership and entrepreneurship. ... I feel like programs that are geared towards [entrepreneurship], a lot of us have issues with authority after being exploited. There's nothing better than the freedom and empowerment in the world of business. ... [Right now] I am working on founding my own organization which specializes in survivor resources and prison re-entry. It will be under the umbrella of restorative community concepts, and this org will work towards recovering the lives of people who lost it on a bad path, so that would include people who have gone to jail, people who have survived exploitation. Some of us have ended up with both, and I think this is possible because I'm an expert by experience. ... I think that instead of just helping to find employment, we should be focused on education and providing survivors with a lifestyle, not just the living. ... If somebody may just need supplemental income, or may want to get their feet wet in entrepreneurship without the major commitment and investment, I think there should be different levels that meet people where they are. That could be somebody who started off like I did years ago, with a small cleaning business, all the way up to somebody who may want to go into a franchise or another endeavor. There should be like a scale. There's too much cookie cutter programming going on with survivors. We were exploited differently. We're different people and we want different things and we have different lifestyles.

Survivors have a wealth of knowledge, not just about their lived experiences and the systems they have interacted with.

They also possess wisdom on the power of holistic services and express a deep desire to help other companies and organizations improve positive outcomes for their employees and clients. While Eve has dreams of entrepreneurship in her future, she also brings her sense of self and justice into every project she currently consults on:

I work really hard and I will not give up until I get what my heart is telling me needs to happen. I have a strong sense of what's healing and what's not healing, like this [needs to] happen for the well-being of the company, or program or the community, like I'll go full mode and will get it.

Through her work in nonprofits and mental healthcare over the past several years, Tiana sees a gap connecting the emotional and physical healing for a holistic modality. She shared her vision for a healthier community:

I would like to start a Zumba or yoga [studio] ... I would like to connect mental health with that of like a group counseling kind of thing to take care of our bodies. Both online and in-person activities. I have my Zumba license, I was trying to get my yoga license and I have the counseling component, and I should be graduating with my Associate's degree in psychology this fall.

Individuals from marginalized communities know exactly where the disconnects are in existing systems, and the survivors who shared during interviews were passionate about making those systems better for everyone.

Scarlet's long term goal is to be able to do speaking and writing as a consultant full-time:



If I could do anything I would be paid to be a writer and motivational speaker. And I would devote a lot of my time after to working with nonprofit organizations to do media training and I would also do a project that is a narrative storytelling project and interview elders in communities of color and create a work that kind of showcases and preserves stories in history and culture. There's a huge need, especially for nonprofits agencies, to learn how to better tell their stories through media and use media as a resource and a tool instead of being intimidated by it or shying away from it so that they can communicate their messages.

While some interview participants were already working intensely on these goals of entrepreneurship, others saw significant obstacles in achieving them. Most agreed that having access to capital and consulting services to design and launch their endeavors would make their dreams a reality.

There are some innovative programs focused on supporting survivor entrepreneurs that are already in existence, such as You Are More Than Inc. and Shyne.

YOU ARE MORE THAN INC. IS A SURVIVOR-LED NONPROFIT THAT BEGAN OFFERING ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT PROGRAMMING FOR MARGINALIZED SURVIVORS NATIONALLY IN 2020. OVER THE LAST TWO YEARS, THEY HAVE SUPPORTED 32 SURVIVOR-LED SMALL BUSINESSES THROUGHOUT THE UNITED STATES WITH GRANT FUNDING FOR START-UP COSTS AND/OR ADMINISTRATIVE COSTS AND HAVE FOUND THAT 65% OF SMALL BUSINESSES ARE STILL RUNNING IN 2022.

SHYNE™ IS A NONPROFIT CONSULTING AGENCY WORKING ALONGSIDE SURVIVOR ENTREPRENEURS VIRTUALLY AND IN-PERSON TO BUILD A NETWORK OF SURVIVOR OWNED COMPANIES. TO HELP PREPARE SURVIVOR ENTREPRENEURS FOR BUSINESS GROWTH, SHYNE™ PROVIDES, AT NO COST TO SURVIVORS, A NINE-MONTH BUSINESS INCUBATOR, ONE-TO-ONE BUSINESS COACHING, PROFESSIONAL CONNECTIONS AND A PEER BUSINESS NETWORK. IN 2022, THE SURVIVOR BUSINESS NETWORK™ SUPPORTED 55 MEMBERS AT VARIOUS STAGES OF BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT IN EVERY BUSINESS SECTOR.



For those seeking immediate ways to support the economic advancement of survivor entrepreneurs, three opportunities exist: hire survivors, invest in survivors startups, and purchase survivor-owned products and services. Contracting Business to Business (B2B) is a widely accepted business practice that removes the need for high self-taxing agreements like independent contractors. Instead, partnering with a survivor-owned business through an MOU promotes more equitable practices, lowers costs to the survivor entrepreneur, and invests more capital into their community. Social equity takes into account systemic inequalities to ensure everyone in all communities has access to the same opportunities and outcomes. Business ownership ultimately gives survivors self-confidence and freedom to control their futures. It not only increases survivors' immediate access to income, but leads towards building generational wealth.

Kendra shared how her experiences being exploited gave her transferable skills that she is passionate about using in positive ways now:

Survivors are the hardest workers in the world like we get cut out just because of that piece of paper ... but they don't understand we're salespeople, we are entrepreneurs before entrepreneurship was entrepreneurial, and we are financial advisors. Like we check off our customer service, put that mask on dealing with these people out there like we know everything and I feel like honestly the game prepped me to be successful where I am at today because I didn't train for any of this but I use a lot of those skills that I just transformed from a negative situation. I'm still the same human being, the same loving person, the same integrity. I just had an opportunity to show it. We're also the most grateful for the position we're in and it'd be some of the most bottom of the barrel positions, get paid some of the lowest wages, but the survivor is going to go hard in that position and they're going to be the best that they can be in that position just because we're grateful for the opportunity that's handed to us.

Many survivors echoed similar thoughts about their dedication and willingness to work hard on a team. April reflected over her work history:

I've never been the bounce around kind of person, I've always been at a place of business for you know at least, I think even way back - I've been working since 14 - I've always stayed somewhere for at least 5, 6, 7 years. I never was the one who had, you know, this crazy job history where six months is something and it's actually really surprising to me, because in real life ... I get bored super easy so I'm surprised I ever stayed.

Interview participants were able to acknowledge these human complexities throughout those one-on-one conversations. Survivors recognized how their strengths can also become their weaknesses when they are overworked and underpaid. Eve described her spectrum of strengths and weaknesses:

Compassion ... [has its weakness] too. I can also engage in self-abandonment if my nervous system is in survivor mode. If I over think, if I am codependent. I tend to move in one direction or another, towards one extreme or the other, which is never healthy and that's usually what I have to work really hard on is staying in the place of healthy moderation with things.

Trauma survivors often struggle with self-regulation, and ultimately the solution is co-regulation. Being able to connect authentically with individuals around oneself is an effective means to remaining in a place of healthy moderation. Trauma-informed workplaces ensure that co-regulation is possible, which in turn supports individuals in building the skills for self-regulation as well.

Survivors also described their ability to handle lots of incoming information and manage multiple projects and deadlines at the same time as a result of their survival experiences. Kendra described her ability to multitask: "I multi-task, very, very well. I could sit on like four different meetings at the same time and am engaged in all four of them." Similarly, Scarlet shared how the ability to have flexibility and variety helped create feelings of safety for her:

Also, I'm very good at multitasking and again that whole rigidity [thing] for me can be triggering and make me feel really anxious so if I'm able to have a little bit of freedom in my work to move at my own pace, or maybe switch things up it can really help support me, even if it's working outside or from a coffee shop.


RECOMMENDATIONS: INSIGHTS ON ADVANCING ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

The authors of this report acknowledge that employers face different challenges in creating a more equitable and accessible workplace for survivors of human trafficking, depending on their sector, size, and other organizational constraints. It is therefore up to each employer to determine the best way to apply these learnings to their company or agency. With this in mind, we offer the following recommendations for consideration, and we encourage employers to partner with anti-trafficking organizations and lived experienced experts in making these strides towards more inclusive, affirming work places for survivors.

NOMI NETWORK'S MISSION IS TO CREATE PATHWAYS TO SAFE EMPLOYMENT FOR SURVIVORS AND INDIVIDUALS AT RISK OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING. NOMI NETWORK OFFERS TRAINING AND CONSULTING TO EMPLOYERS WHO ARE INTERESTED IN INCREASING EMPLOYMENT ACCESSIBILITY FOR SURVIVORS WITHIN THEIR COMPANIES. FOR MORE INFORMATION, VISIT WWW.NOMINETWORK.ORG OR CONTACT INFO@NOMINETWORK.ORG.

Centering Lived Experience Voices

This report in itself is a demonstration of what is possible when lived experience informs change, and that by providing or increasing compensation, marginalized communities were able to contribute at more significant rates. Throughout the three phases of survey data collection, it was demonstrated that providing compensation for individuals' time creates a more inclusive representation of experiences.



Across all surveys, a total of 56 survivors (55%) identified as BIPOC. Similarly, across all surveys, a total of 69 survivors (68%) identified as LGBTQ+. And finally, 29% of the total sample were individuals who were bilingual or multilingual. Employers can apply these same principles to workplaces in an effort to decrease barriers to employment for people from marginalized communities and/or with histories of trauma.

Operating from a space of relative privilege makes it difficult, if not impossible, to identify existing barriers. For example, while some employers may state in their employment handbooks that they have an “open door” policy, the statement may not be representative of the reality for some employees. There are organizations who many have Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion efforts, but those efforts may fail to consider the intersection with survivors of gender-based violence and other forms of “invisible” trauma and marginalization. As such, policy evaluations and individualized consulting with a third-party evaluator who specializes in working with marginalized communities and survivors of trauma and human trafficking is essential. Such outside consultation can support the process of centering the voices of individuals employed at the company to better understand their actual experiences, and how these compare with the desires of the executive team and founders. It is also recommended to follow existing models for working with survivors such as the Survivor Equity and Inclusion Framework, which provides organizational guidelines for preventing survivor re-exploitation, or the undercompensation, undervaluing, and tokenization of survivors in the workplace (Powell, 2021).

SHOBANA POWELL CONSULTING PROVIDES TRAINING AND TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE ON THE SURVIVOR EQUITY AND INCLUSION FRAMEWORK, VICARIOUS TRAUMA PREVENTION, AND OTHER TRAUMA-INFORMED DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION PRACTICES INTO YOUR AGENCY CULTURE, POLICIES, AND PROCEDURES. FOR MORE INFORMATION, VISIT WWW.SHOBANAPOWELLCONSULTING.COM OR CONTACT INFO@SHOBANAPOWELLCONSULTING.COM.

Following the best practices outlined in the Survivor Equity and Inclusion Framework, the development of policies for survivors should not only be reviewed by third-party evaluators, but they should also be co-created with survivors who specialize in anti-trafficking work, also known as lived experience experts. So as not to re-exploit, such experts should be compensated for their time as consultants advising on organizational change. Tiana mentioned the importance of lived experience informing economic empowerment initiatives:

I think projects such as these really help create an understanding of what people need because it's really hard to kind of justify what a person may be going through or what a person may need and so I hope that you know projects like this continue to happen and that they are interviewing the correct people as that makes a big difference as well.

It is also important for employers to respect individuals' privacy by not requiring self-disclosure in order to access employment. In the event that a position requires a level of public identification, employers can ensure the individual understands the role in full as well as the potential impact that disclosure might have. Ashante shared her observations as a Survivor Leader and Service Provider:

If a survivor is hired as a front-facing survivor-leader in an agency, have a clear understanding of how that role will play out in the long-term. Have a lived experience expert come in to teach managerial staff how to balance survivorship and professional duties. Don't hire a survivor leader as an external-facing survivor and then tell them they can never talk about their experiences with clients, isn't that what they were hired for? [Employers] should support staff in understanding trauma-informed disclosure practices if they do choose to disclose to clients.

RECOMMENDATIONS: INSIGHTS ON ADVANCING ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

Compensation and Benefits Packages

Accessible employment requires a thorough review of compensation and benefits available to employees. The following areas should be taken into consideration:

- Remote and hybrid work options
- Childcare accommodations and/or stipend
- Workplace attire stipend and/or inclusion policies
- Adequate health insurance coverage and affordable premiums
- Health insurance coverage that includes mental healthcare
- Eliminate probationary periods for benefits
- Provide complementary alternative medicine and other culturally inclusive approaches to healing not covered under traditional health insurance benefits
- Clear policies around waiting periods and termination for employees to understand when coverage begins/ends

RECOMMENDATIONS: INSIGHTS ON ADVANCING ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

Peer Navigation

The National Human Trafficking Training and Technical Assistance Center facilitates an annual cohort of the Human Trafficking Leadership Academy, which is a collaborative effort of allied and lived experience professionals that come together to create recommendations for addressing specific systemic issues survivors of trafficking experience after exiting exploitation. In 2019, Cohort 4 created recommendations for supporting survivors in reaching long term economic stability. Within the recommendations, the cohort suggested employing peer navigators to support individuals in communities, education facilities and places of employment (Administration for Children and Families: Office on Trafficking in Persons, 2019, Human Trafficking Leadership Academy Class 4 Recommendations). As these recommendations specifically intersect with the recommendations in this report, employers can implement a peer navigation framework in workplaces. These navigators can support employees in both onboarding and with maintaining long-term employment, and provide a cross-over between the employer and community support. Navigators can also be well-versed in the American Disability Act and ensure employees are receiving accommodations.

You Are More Than Inc. a national survivor-led nonprofit organization serving Black, Indigenous, survivors of colors, and LGBTQIA+ adult survivors of trafficking and/or those negatively impacted by the commercial sex trade, has found that survivor-leaders who engage in peer mentorship in the first six months of being hired are more likely to stay at the company longer than their colleagues who haven't had that support system.

Due to its supportive nature, peer mentorship offers survivors the opportunity to learn how to navigate workplace cultures and relationship building in companies that lack the foundation of traditionally supporting survivors.

YOU ARE MORE THAN INC. EMPLOYS PEER MENTORS IN SIX STATES AND NATIONALLY OFFERS THESE SERVICES TO SURVIVORS. IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO LEARN MORE ABOUT ENGAGING A PEER MENTOR FOR YOUR WORKPLACE, PLEASE VISIT THEIR WEBSITE AT WWW.YAMT.ORG/PEER-MENTORSHIP



RECOMMENDATIONS: INSIGHTS ON ADVANCING ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

Workplace Education

Ongoing education for all employees within a company is necessary for growth and inclusion. Following training, companies are better informed and therefore prepared to review and revise existing policies and procedures that might be creating barriers to accessibility. Some topics companies should begin with include but are not limited to:

- Anti-oppression framework
- Intersectionality
- Creating inclusive environments for LGBTQ+ individuals
- The source and long-term impact of trauma
- Human Trafficking
- Language justice

When employees understand inequality in the workplace, they are able to identify areas the company can work together to address. For example, in terms of language justice, once employees understand the barriers for individuals who speak a language other than English, they may provide suggestions similar to those recommended by survivor survey respondents. These tangible items included providing paid time and on-site ESL classes for employees, creating job postings in different languages, providing interviews in different languages, translating written materials for the position, and providing on-site interpretation services for employees.

RECOMMENDATIONS: INSIGHTS ON ADVANCING ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

Hiring Practices

Inclusive and trauma-informed employment practices begin before the date of hire. They start with a deep understanding of who might be looking for employment, and who might struggle to gain employment in the community. The following hiring practices can be reviewed by employers to increase accessibility:

- Encourage sharing pronouns and using names other than the individuals' legal name during the application and interview stages
- Understand that lived experience may result in gaps in work history, and identify ways to review employment history that do not require self-disclosure to explain such gaps
- Recognize lived experience as a valuable addition to professional and educational experiences
- Support Ban-the-Box initiatives, whether at the legislative level or in employment practices
- Provide interview questions in advance for candidates
- Include the pay range for the position on all open positions

RECOMMENDATIONS: INSIGHTS ON ADVANCING ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

Safety and Confidentiality Practices

Survivors of human trafficking, as well as other forms of gender-based and interpersonal violence, often need additional considerations for safety which might include a name change, confidential mailing address, and inconsistencies in their resume due to relocating frequently. Employers can consider developing a workplace policy that supports survivors of crime who need additional accommodations due to the threat of safety outside of work. This policy might include, for example, provisions for utilizing a PO box to receive employment-related mail, limiting or completely restricting employee information on websites and social media that would identify the individual, and additional support from human resources and/or the peer navigator to develop an appropriate safety plan for the individual employee.

CONCLUSION

Within the anti-trafficking sector, a focus on economic empowerment is a logical next step in considering “what’s next?” for survivors of human trafficking after exiting exploitative work. Without pathways to safe and sustainable income, survivors are economically vulnerable and at risk of re-exploitation. However, aside from economic necessity, work also provides an opportunity for continued healing for survivors of trafficking.

Within a safe workplace, survivors can build a healthy relationship to work after financial exploitation in a work-like setting. Economic empowerment can build or restore a survivor’s relationship with money and compensation. Financial independence can further strengthen a survivor’s confidence and agency.

For years, economic empowerment programs within the anti-trafficking sector have focused on skills building and job readiness for survivors. However, preparing survivors for the workplace does not address structural barriers to employment that are outside of the survivor’s control. Furthermore, the unique trauma that survivors of trafficking face in relation to work makes it especially challenging for survivors to thrive in work environments that are not trauma-informed.

Responsible anti-trafficking work requires not only a trauma-informed approach but also an anti-oppressive, intersectional, DEI lens. Traffickers target the most vulnerable and marginalized communities, as such BIPOC, LGBTQ+, immigrants, women, persons with disabilities are disproportionately trafficking. Economic empowerment programs focused on survivors of trafficking must also be mindful of the intersecting needs of historically oppressed communities, as they are not only dealing with survivorship, but also the barriers of racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, etc. Intersectionality calls for us to consider the myriad identities and experiences that survivors hold in the creation of any program or policy.



CONCLUSION

Ultimately, what survivors are asking for in a workplace is what all employees want – a safe and nontoxic workplace, a place to meaningfully invest their time and expertise, supervisors who see them as whole people, colleagues who respect them, mental health support, fair and timely compensation, and opportunities to advance. Listening to their experiences shines a light on the ways that we all can do better to create more equitable and inclusive workplaces that allow every employee to thrive.





“I am more than what is on a piece of paper, whether it reflects me in a positive or negative light, a whole person and that doesn’t come out just on a background check or a resume that you’re a whole person.”

-Kari

“I still feel for people, like, no matter how far I go up in the scale, because I know I’m going to go far. But no matter where I go, whether I decide to run for office or whether I decide to do anything, I’m always still connected to the streets, and I’m still connected to the people and I’m going to always feel for somebody who is going through any type of pain, whether that be abuse or homelessness ... I just don’t want to see people suffer.”

-Kendra



There is no such thing as absolute empathy in this world, but similar life experiences in a dislocated time and space allow us to stand together in a new way.

I can see your struggle, just like I saw myself. I can feel your longing, just like I was when I was knocked to the ground and fought back to rise. Your pain was also my pain, your growth was also my growth, we are our own separate selves, yet our souls meet because of pain. We also transformed this pain into love to guard each other and our community. The world kisses us with pain, and we will sing in return.

Achieving economic equality has a long journey ahead and requires the input and attention of many people and many parties. It is a necessary path for human civilization to progress. Let's fight for it.

Dear survivors, I love you, I love you so much for being so strong and brave despite your pain. To me, I not only want to protect people who get treated unequally, Be that hero that I wished could have shown up in my difficult time.

May there be peace in the world, more justice, less discrimination. Understanding more, love more.

-Love, Yuki