VILLANOVA UNIVERSITY
CHARLES WIDGER SCHOOL OF LAW

THE INSTITUTE TO ADDRESS
COMMERCIAL SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

Human Trafficking and Substance Use Disorder (SUD): A Guide for SUD Treatment Providers

Commercial sexual exploitation frequently intersects with substance use and dependency, which can be exploited and weaponized as both a tool of coercion and means of control.

SUBSTANCES AS A TOOL OF COERCION

Substance use and dependency increases vulnerability to being trafficked. Related vulnerabilities include housing instability, poverty, past abuse, and trauma. Traffickers often target individuals with these intersecting vulnerabilities by exploiting survival behaviors and promising to provide substances or money. Traffickers have even been shown to recruit victims directly from substance use disorder treatment facilities.

SUBSTANCES AS A MEANS OF CONTROL

Substance use and dependency often serve as a means for traffickers to control victims. Many trafficking victims use substances as a mechanism for coping with trauma, pain, and violence of commercial sexual exploitation. Traffickers can introduce victims to substances to increase their dependency on the trafficker, use substances to reward productivity, and/or leverage substances and withdrawal to coerce victims into engaging in commercial sex.

Trauma-informed, victim-centered care is crucial for providing assistance to trafficking victims, who have experienced complex trauma. Demonstrating that a victim's **basic needs are a priority** is critical in building rapport and trust. It is the **victim's choice** whether to engage with other services, and victims have the **right to immediate support** regardless of their decision.

RED FLAGS AND TRAFFICKING INDICATORS

- Physical injuries in various stages of healing
- Malnourishment or poor hygiene
- Multiple pregnancies or abortions
- Sexually-transmitted infections
- Leaving against medical advice or refusal of care
- Inappropriate clothing for the age or season
- Hesitance to answer questions about injury or illness
- Inability to focus or concentrate
- Scripted, confusing or inconsistent stories
- Overly fearful or nervous behavior, lacks eye contact
- Excessive control or monitoring by a companion
- Lack of control over identification documents
- Financial dependence and little-to-no possessions

RESOURCES FOR SUD TREATMENT PROVIDERS

Specific Statewide Referrals
If a victim expresses a specific need, providers can search the PA Human Trafficking Resource & Coordination Project website organizations hub.

www.pa.gov/agencies/pccd/programs-and-services/human-trafficking-in-pa/search-for-organizations

**Filters for region, county, and organization type*

General Statewide Referrals
If a victim expresses a general desire to engage with anti-trafficking services, referrals can be directed to the Salvation Army's anti-trafficking programs.

- **Western PA:** Salvation Army's LIGHT Project (Leading Individuals Gracefully out of Human Trafficking) 24/7 Hotline - **(412) 999-1197**
- **Eastern PA:** Salvation Army's New Day to Stop Trafficking 24/7 Hotline - **(267) 838-5866**

IF YOU BELIEVE THE SITUATION IS AN EMERGENCY OR THAT SOMEONE IS IN IMMEDIATE DANGER, CALL 911.