

## **Identifying a Victim of Sex Trafficking: Common Characteristics**

Many current victims or survivors of sex trafficking will not self-identify as a person who has been trafficked. Service providers who familiarize themselves with the below list of common characteristics of individuals who have been trafficked for sex work can help service providers with identification.

### **Common Characteristics in Work and Living Conditions<sup>1</sup>:**

#### **Note if the client:**

- Is not free to leave or come and go as he/she wishes and/or has to check in with someone regularly regarding his/her whereabouts
- Is under 18 years of age and is engaging in commercial sex acts
- Is in the commercial sex industry and has a pimp/manager
  - **Important Note: A trafficked individual may refer to her pimp/trafficker as her boyfriend, husband, or daddy**
- Is unpaid, paid very little, or paid only through tips, or has to hand over what she earns
- Works excessively long and/or unusual hours
- Is not allowed breaks or suffers under unusual restrictions at work
- Owes a large and/or increasing debt and is unable to pay it off
- Was recruited for work through false promises concerning the nature and conditions of his/her work, or via a romantic partner
- Demonstrates an inability to attend school on a regular basis
- Is living or working in a location with high security measures (e.g. opaque or boarded-up windows, bars on windows, barbed wire, security cameras, etc.).

### **Poor Mental Health or Abnormal Behavior:**

#### **Note if the client:**

- Exhibits unusually fearful, anxious, depressed, submissive, tense, or nervous/paranoid behavior
- Reacts with unusually fearful or anxious behavior at any reference to “law enforcement”
- Avoids eye contact
- Exhibits a flat affect

### **Lack of Control:**

#### **Note if the client:**

- Has few or no personal possessions
- Lacks control over or his/her schedule or identification documents

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<sup>1</sup> Polaris Project. (2014). *Potential trafficking indicators*. Retrieved from <http://www.polarisproject.org/resources/resources-by-topic/human-trafficking>

- Is not allowed or able to speak for him/herself (e.g., a third party may insist on being present and/or interpreting)
- Has an attorney that he/she doesn't seem to know or to have agreed to receive representation services from

**Other Common Characteristic to Note<sup>2</sup>:**

- Has been “branded” by a trafficker (e.g. a tattoo of the trafficker’s name)
  - These tattoos are often placed across the individual’s chest and a victim may say that the tattoo is the name of her boyfriend
- Claims to be “just visiting” and is unable to clarify where he/she is staying or to provide an address
- Exhibits a lack of knowledge of his/her whereabouts and/or does not know what city he/she is in currently
- Exhibits a loss of a sense of time
- Has numerous inconsistencies in his/her story
- Chronically runs away from home
- Makes references to frequent travel to other cities
- Is inappropriately dressed based on weather conditions or surroundings
- Makes references to terminology of the commercial sex industry that are beyond age specific norms
- Many victims develop loyalties and positive feelings towards the trafficker as a coping mechanism. There may be a strong emotional bond with the perpetrator even though this is a bond forged in trauma. Victims may also fear for the safety of their family and friends, including their children.

There are social services and legal resources for individuals who have been trafficked in the DC Metro Area. **The Amara Legal Center exists to provide free legal services to survivors of sex trafficking and any other individual who has been harmed through involvement in the commercial sex trade.** To refer a client in need of legal services to Amara, please either call 202-662-9800 or email [info@amaralegal.org](mailto:info@amaralegal.org)<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Polaris Project. (2007). *Tools for service providers and law enforcement*. Retrieved from <http://www.polarisproject.org/resources/tools-for-service-providers-and-law-enforcement>

<sup>3</sup> This document has been prepared by Amara Legal Center Forensic Psychology interns Kayla Faulkner, Ashley Pearson, and Jazmyne Ferguson, spring 2014.