Human Trafficking Policy & Research Analyses Project

Demonstration Grants to Strengthen the Response to Victims of Human Trafficking in Native Communities (VHT-NC) Program: Final Report of the Formative Evaluation

Elizabeth Tibaduiza
Christina Melander
Rebecca Pfeffer
Liat Weinstein

RTI International

Ada Pecos Melton
Rita Martinez

American Indian Development Associates

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ADMINISTRATION FOR CHILDREN & FAMILIES
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Demonstration Grants to Strengthen the Response to Victims of Human Trafficking in Native Communities (VHT-NC) Program: Final Report of the Formative Evaluation

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Elizabeth Tibaduiza, Christina Melander, Rebecca Pfeffer, Liat Weinstein (RTI International);
Ada Pecos Melton, Rita Martinez (American Indian Development Associates)

Submitted to:
Mary Mueggenborg, Project Officer
Kelly Jedd McKenzie, Project Officer
Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation
Administration for Children and Families
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Contract Number: HHSP233201500039L

Project Director: Rebecca Pfeffer
RTI International
3040 East Cornwallis Road
P.O. Box 12194
Research Triangle Park, NC 27709

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RTI International is located on the ancestral and current homelands of the Lumbee, Saponi, Occaneechi, Cheraw, and Catawba peoples. Evaluators work remotely from locations across Turtle Island (North America), based on the ancestral and current homelands of the Dakota Wahpekute, Wá·šiw (Washoe), Pawtucket, Pueblo of Laguna, and Pueblo of Jemez.

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Introduction

To address the critical need for support for Native American (i.e., American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander) people who have experienced human trafficking, the Administration for Children and Families' (ACF's) Office on Trafficking in Persons (OTIP) established the Demonstration Grants to Strengthen the Response to Victims of Human Trafficking in Native Communities (VHT-NC) Program. The program aims to build, expand, and sustain organizational and community capacity to deliver services to Native American people who have experienced human trafficking. In September 2020, six VHT-NC projects received 3-year awards to enhance the response to human trafficking in their communities by providing culturally responsive and trauma-informed participant outreach and identification, comprehensive case management and service provision, and community training.

The Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE), in collaboration with OTIP, oversaw a formative evaluation of these VHT-NC projects. RTI International and American Indian Development Associates conducted the formative evaluation to understand their design and implementation, including challenges, strengths, and lessons learned.

Primary Research Questions

- What is important to know about the projects' community contexts?
- What are the characteristics of the VHT-NC award recipients, primary partners, and project participants?
- How do VHT-NC projects develop and maintain partnerships and intergovernmental relationships?
- What are the outreach approaches that VHT-NC projects use to identify Native people who have experienced human trafficking?
- How do VHT-NC projects provide comprehensive case management services and other supportive services to participants?
- How is community training provided?

Purpose

This final report summarizes the implementation of the six VHT-NC projects, including their challenges and strengths. The report describes the VHT-NC projects' (1) community context, (2) structure and approaches, (3) partnerships, (4) outreach and identification, (5) case management and supportive services, and (6) community training.

Key Findings and Highlights

- Projects focused on supporting Native people who have experienced human trafficking in culturally responsive and trauma-informed ways are crucial and fill a gap that has existed for too long.
- Trust is essential to addressing human trafficking in Native communities. Time is needed to build this trust and establish partner and participant relationships.
- Holistic, empathetic, and relational approaches strengthen participant engagement and partnerships. Good partnership requires reciprocity, cultural humility, continual learning, and transparency.
- Flexibility is required to respond to the unique needs of participants, provider organizations, and communities.

Key Project Strengths and Successes

- Inclusion of Native staff
- Increased trust with communities
- Strengthened partnerships
- Development of culturally responsive and trauma-informed processes
- Service provision that largely met participants' needs
- Improved understanding of human trafficking

Methods

The findings in this report are informed by primary data sources (virtual and in-person interviews with project leaders, advocates, partners, and project participants) and secondary data sources (project applications and award recipients' performance progress reports).

Executive Summary

VHT-NC Program and Formative Evaluation Overview

In 2020, the Administration for Children and Families' (ACF's) Office on Trafficking in Persons (OTIP) established the Demonstration Grants to Strengthen the Response to Victims of Human Trafficking in Native Communities (VHT-NC) Program to address the significant need for supports to respond to human trafficking in Native communities. In September 2020, 3-year awards were issued to six VHT-NC projects to build, expand, and sustain organizational and community capacity to deliver services to Native American (i.e., American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander) people who have experienced or are experiencing human trafficking through the provision of direct services, assistance, and referrals.

Under the VHT-NC Program, the following activities and components are required or encouraged:

- **Required:** Outreach to identify Native American people who have experienced or are experiencing human trafficking, comprehensive case management and supportive service provision, and training to community partners
- **Encouraged:** Trauma-informed and person-centered service models, culturally appropriate and traditional healing practices, project design and implementation that engages Native American people who have experienced human trafficking, qualified professionals who reflect the communities being served, and focus on community issues (e.g., the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Peoples [MMIP] crisis)

ACF's Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE), in collaboration with OTIP, oversaw a formative evaluation of the VHT-NC Program, conducted by RTI International and American Indian Development Associates. Using a participatory and culturally responsive approach, the overarching evaluation goals were to understand the context in which the six VHT-NC projects were implemented, the projects' goals, and the paths taken to achieve their goals.

Final Report Overview

The purpose of this report is to summarize VHT-NC project implementation, including challenges and strengths, across the six sites. The report describes (1) the VHT-NC communities' context, (2) project structure and approaches, (3) project partnerships, (4) outreach and identification, (5) case management and supportive services, and (6) community training.

The findings in this report are informed by primary data sources (virtual interviews with project directors, advocates, and partners, and in-person interviews with project leaders, advocates, partners, and project participants) and secondary data sources (project applications and award recipients' performance progress reports).

VHT-NC Communities' Context. Respondents described factors (e.g., domestic violence, sexual assault, housing and economic insecurity) in their communities that contribute to vulnerability for human trafficking, particularly emphasizing unaddressed historical trauma. They also highlighted strengths, such as cultural supports, that act as protective factors. The VHT-NC projects were located in diverse service areas, and respondents described how their geographic, structural, commercial, and

economic features contributed to unique types and occurrences of human trafficking. Respondents were predominately aware of and providing services to address sex trafficking, although with increased awareness of labor trafficking indicators and cases. The VHT-NC projects were involved in a variety of coordinated community efforts (e.g., taskforces) to address human trafficking and MMIP, recognizing the connection between the two issues.

Project Structure and Approaches. The projects experienced staffing challenges related to turnover and hiring, which often resulted in limited staffing capacity and hampered their ability to meet the award objectives. A primary strength of the projects was that all prioritized hiring Native staff, resulting in deeper understanding of many of the issues that affected project participants. Respondents highlighted other staff strengths, including exceptional soft skills (e.g., compassion, rapport building) and meaningful understanding and application of culturally responsive and trauma-informed approaches. These approaches were infused into and strengthened the primary components of the VHT-NC projects.

Project Partnerships. VHT-NC projects partnered with a wide variety of organizations and agencies (e.g., shelters, housing providers, behavioral health providers, traditional healers) within their communities to increase their service capacity. Respondents highlighted several partnership facilitators, including reciprocity, consistency, transparency, and flexibility. There were several lessons learned, including the need for (1) time to develop meaningful and trusting partnerships and (2) concerted efforts to connect with the broader community in addition to partners. A primary challenge that the projects faced was the existing service capacity in their communities, which were all limited in the number of providers who were equipped to provide culturally appropriate and trauma-informed care specific to human trafficking. Fragmented and siloed systems were also a barrier, and project and partner staff alike recognized the need for increased collaboration and coordination among service providers and systems. Primary partnership strengths included expanded networks, strengthened relationships, enhanced collaboration, resilience in response to challenges, and positive outlooks on the future of their relationships.

Participant Outreach and Identification. VHT-NC project staff described a range of outreach strategies that clustered around five general approaches: (1) having a presence at community events; (2) partnering with other organizations within the community; (3) conducting direct street-based outreach to people who may be experiencing human trafficking; (4) pairing human trafficking education with events addressing intersectional issues in the community, such as domestic violence or MMIP; and (5) highlighting the culturally specific knowledge and connections among project staff and partners.

Across the outreach and identification challenges identified by projects, the importance of building trust within communities emerged as a dominant theme, including the need for increased human trafficking awareness but also the reluctance to discuss it. The latter was a major barrier to confirmation of trafficking experiences, which was a requirement for project enrollment. Other barriers to outreach and identification included limited staff capacity, difficulty connecting with other community organizations, and lack of referrals.

Primary successes included increased community awareness about human trafficking and the VHT-NC project, improved trust within the community, improved human trafficking identification, strengthened referral mechanisms, and established screening and intake processes.

Case Management and Supportive Services. Flexible and individualized practices were fundamental elements of the case management provided by the VHT-NC project advocates. They used varying approaches tailored to participants and interwoven with culturally responsive and trauma-informed practices. Common components of initial engagement included introducing the project and staff, assessing needs, setting initial goals, safety planning, and providing basic needs assistance. Participants' goals and service receipt were based on their self-identified needs. Advocates identified barriers to conducting assessments, setting goals, and maintaining engagement with participants actively experiencing behavioral health challenges. Patience, mindful listening, attentiveness to participants' behavior and actions, transparency, consistency, and meeting participants where they are were helpful to work through these challenges. Again, trust building was emphasized to facilitate participant engagement. Participants spoke positively about the VHT-NC project staff and voiced appreciation for the assistance and emotional support they provided.

Generally, participants received the services and supports they needed. Some services were more difficult to provide, including cultural services and traditional healing, behavioral health services, and housing. This may be because the services are limited or nonexistent, difficult to access, or do not provide an appropriate level of care. The supports that were identified as most helpful included basic needs assistance and the overall support provided by the VHT-NC project staff. Respondents, including participants, highlighted the staff's commitment to providing any assistance that would support participants' recovery and healing as a significant strength of the projects.

Community Training. Training remained an essential component of the VHT-NC projects. They continued to prioritize training as a way to educate the general community, to establish and refine referral and collaboration efforts with community partners, and to sharpen internal staff capacity and understanding of the issue of human trafficking and its unique manifestations within their communities.

Summary. The VHT-NC projects made significant progress in building up programs that are responsive to the needs of Native people who have experienced human trafficking and their communities. The projects are well-positioned to continue building on the momentum they established through formalized project protocols, critical partnerships, and increased community awareness and understanding of human trafficking.

The primary themes that emerged from the formative evaluation include the following:

- Projects focused on supporting Native people who have experienced human trafficking in culturally responsive and trauma-informed ways are crucial and fill a gap that has existed for too long.
- Trust is essential to addressing human trafficking in Native communities.
- Time is needed to build this trust and establish partner and participant relationships.
- Holistic, empathetic, and relational approaches strengthen participant engagement and partnerships.
- Good partnership requires reciprocity, cultural humility, continual learning, and transparency.
- More can be accomplished by working together instead of individually.
- Flexibility is required to respond to the unique needs of participants, provider organizations, and communities.

Introduction

Human Trafficking within Native Communities

Human trafficking is a pressing global human rights abuse with disproportionate impacts on some communities, including Native American, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander people. Human trafficking is not a new issue affecting these communities, and much light has been shed on the intersections of human trafficking, sexual exploitation, and colonialism among Native[a] communities. Trafficking for sexual exploitation has occurred from the inception of settler colonialism.[1] Patterns of rampant sexual violence perpetrated by white settlers on Native peoples and the recruitment of Native women and girls into the sex trade is a background for present-day trafficking trends.[2] Labor exploitation has historical roots as well, with accounts of forced labor and slavery of Indigenous communities gaining more recognition.[3]

Present-day trends and risk factors related to human trafficking of Native communities are a result of the legacies of the reservation system, forced relocation, attempted cultural genocide, and physical and sexual abuse through boarding schools, including federal and missionary day schools in Tribal communities.[4] These legacies of oppression are often referred to as intergenerational or historical trauma and are major factors in current disparities related to behavioral and physical health, education, income, and housing.[5] Traffickers prey upon individual vulnerabilities such as housing instability, underemployment, poverty, mental illness, substance use challenges, disability, and prior experiences of trauma or victimization.[6]

People who have experienced human trafficking may need support accessing short- and long-term housing, identification documentation, health care, substance use treatment, therapy or counseling, family reunification or relocation, employment assistance, and more.[6] Supportive services provided after experiencing human trafficking can play an important role in helping provide stabilization and recovery. Case managers or advocates typically support people who have experienced human trafficking in identifying their needs and accompany them through accessing needed resources.

The Demonstration Grants to Strengthen the Response to Victims of Human Trafficking in Native Communities (VHT-NC) Program utilizes the U.S. federal definition for human trafficking for its program eligibility:[b]

- Sex trafficking is the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, obtaining, patronizing, or soliciting of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age (22 U.S.C. § 7102(11)(A)).
- Forced labor is the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services, through the use of force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery (22 U.S.C. § 7102(11)(B)).

[a] In this report, we use the term "Native" to refer to people who are Native American, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander.

[b] See https://www.justice.gov/humantrafficking.

Although most federal laws apply to all Tribes, many Tribal governments are exercising their own judicial authority through the creation and implementation of human trafficking statutes in their Tribal codes. The reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act of 2022 recognizes the inherent sovereignty of Tribes to hold non-Native perpetrators accountable by expanding the types of crimes included in Tribal jurisdiction, which includes sex trafficking.[c] Despite this enormous victory affirming Tribal sovereignty, Native communities continue to face legal challenges to prosecuting and responding to human trafficking due to the complex web of jurisdictional authority, bias, and a lack of education about Tribal cultural norms, human trafficking, and related Tribal, state, and federal law.[7]

Native communities respond to these challenges by developing strengths-based and community-led solutions for human trafficking. Cultural competence has been recognized as an important component of supportive services for Indigenous people.[8] Culturally specific and culturally responsive services incorporate Indigenous values systems and resources into their programs. For example, in a recent study of Indigenous gender-based violence service providers, "walking with relatives" (or how providers support survivors) was recognized as more valuable than the specific service provided.[9] Connection to culture is both a resource and service element that is imperative to healing and recovery from victimization.[9,10]

This report summarizes the findings of a formative evaluation of the VHT-NC Program, which is intended to support the development and implementation of projects responding to human trafficking in Native communities.

VHT-NC Program Overview

In 2020, the Administration for Children and Families' (ACF's) Office on Trafficking in Persons (OTIP) established the VHT-NC Program to address the significant need for supports to respond to human trafficking in Native communities. In September 2020, 3-year awards were issued to six VHT-NC projects to build, expand, and sustain organizational and community capacity to deliver services to Native American (i.e., American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander) people who have experienced or are experiencing human trafficking through the provision of direct services, assistance, and referrals.

The VHT-NC Program broadly focuses on three components:

- **Outreach** efforts to increase identification of Native American people who have experienced or are experiencing human trafficking
- Provision of comprehensive, culturally responsive, and linguistically appropriate **case management and supportive services** to Native American people who have experienced or are experiencing human trafficking
- Provision of **training** to service providers and community partners on effective identification, referral, assessment, and trauma-informed service delivery strategies

[c] See https://www.justice.gov/ovw/tribal-jurisdiction-program.

In addition to the required activities of outreach, comprehensive case management and supportive service provision, and training of community partners (see **sidebar**), the VHT-NC projects were expected or encouraged to do the following:

- Use service models that are trauma-informed and person-centered.
- Incorporate culturally appropriate and traditional healing practices.
- Practice a whole family approach.
- Include meaningful engagement of Native Americans who have experienced human trafficking in project design and implementation.
- Hire qualified professionals who reflect the communities being served.
- Focus on issues relevant to their community, including the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Peoples (MMIP) crisis.

VHT-NC Formative Evaluation Overview

ACF's Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE), in collaboration with OTIP, oversaw a formative evaluation of the VHT-NC Program, conducted by RTI International and American Indian Development Associates (AIDA). Using a participatory and culturally responsive approach, the overarching evaluation goals were to understand the contexts in which the six VHT-NC projects were implemented, the projects' goals, and the paths taken to achieve their goals. The formative evaluation was guided by the questions listed in **Exhibit 1**. Through data collection and engagement of Native community members with expertise in human trafficking, we learned from the VHT-NC projects and communities and help to tell their stories.

Exhibit 1. Questions Guiding the VHT-NC Formative Evaluation

VHT-NC Formative Evaluation Questions
What is important to know about the projects' community contexts (e.g., geographical, historical, cultural, governance, legal)? How does this affect the planning and development of VHT-NC projects?
What are the projects' VHT-NC goals? How do projects define successful achievement of their goals?
What are the characteristics of the VHT-NC award recipients, primary partners, and project participants?
How do VHT-NC projects develop and maintain partnerships and intergovernmental relationships?
What are the outreach approaches that VHT-NC projects use to identify Native people who have experienced human trafficking?
How do VHT-NC projects provide comprehensive case management services and other supportive services to participants?
How do VHT-NC projects involve Native people who have experienced human trafficking in project design and implementation?
How is community training provided?

Participatory and Culturally Responsive Approach

We aimed to conduct a participatory and culturally responsive formative evaluation that was informed by and incorporated the knowledge, values, and traditions of the VHT-NC projects and communities. We developed strategies to integrate meaningful engagement of the VHT-NC project staff and local Native communities into the evaluation's design and activities, including obtaining Tribal study approval for applicable award recipients.

> The evaluation brief, *Conducting Culturally Responsive Evaluation Engagement with Tribal and Native Communities*, provides more information about the formative evaluation's participatory and culturally responsive approach.

Our Tribal approval and engagement strategies demonstrated respect for Tribes by following each VHT-NC award recipient's Tribal authority structure (as applicable) and Tribal research laws or policies regarding approval procedures, publication, data protection, information sharing, and other provisions. Formal Tribal approval protocols applied only to the two Tribal-led VHT-NC projects. For the remaining four projects, we held informational meetings with project leaders to determine if alternative approvals (e.g., at the organization level) were necessary.

In addition to Tribal approval for the study, we developed a two-pronged participatory approach to engage with local Native communities impacted by human trafficking. First, we established bimonthly project check-in calls with VHT-NC project staff. VHT-NC project staff are knowledgeable about human trafficking in their local Native communities, their community's context, and their project implementation. Many VHT-NC project staff are also Native-identifying. Ongoing engagement with VHT-NC project staff throughout the life cycle of the evaluation ensured their perspectives and learning goals were incorporated. Regular communication helped the evaluation team understand and respond to the award recipients' needs (e.g., capacity building support to document the use of culture as a resource).

Second, we convened a Community Expert Group (CEG), which was a core component of the evaluation's participatory approach. The CEG included Native-identifying representatives who are knowledgeable about human trafficking from each of the VHT-NC service areas. CEG members were identified through recommendations or referrals from the VHT-NC project site, as well as the evaluation team's professional networks. These Tribal and cultural experts provided guidance and feedback on the evaluation design, implementation strategies, community context, analysis, and interpretation through regular meetings with the evaluation team. CEG members were compensated at a consulting rate of $81.25/hour. CEG members' expertise on human trafficking and cultural knowledge brought invaluable contributions to this evaluation.

Data Collection

The results presented in this report are based on data collection conducted by the evaluation team between May 2021 and August 2023, which centered on project document abstraction and virtual and in-person interviews with a variety of key respondents involved in the VHT-NC projects. **Exhibit 2** provides an overview of the data collection types, respondents, modes, frequency, and timeline.

Exhibit 2. Overview of Data Sources

Data Type	Source or Respondents	Mode	Frequency	Timeline
Project documents	Project application	Document review and abstraction	Once	May 2021
	Performance progress reports – Narratives	Document review and abstraction	Quarterly (n=12)	October 2020–September 2023
	Performance progress reports – Performance measures	Secondary data analysis	Quarterly (n=8)	October 2020–September 2022
Virtual interviews	Project director (n=6)	Semi-structured virtual interview	Twice	March–June 2022 September–December 2022
	Advocate (n=6)	Semi-structured virtual interview	Once	October 2022–March 2023
	Key partner (n=6)	Semi-structured virtual interview	Once	November 2022–March 2023
Site visits	◆ Project leadership (n=10) ◆ Direct services staff (n=10) ◆ Partners (n=25) ◆ Participants (n=3)	Semi-structured in-person interview	Once	June–August 2023

Project documents. Early in the evaluation (May 2021), we reviewed and abstracted information from the award recipients' project applications. The award recipients submitted performance progress reports (PPRs) to ACF quarterly (for a total of 12). The PPRs included two components:

- a narrative description of completed activities and encountered challenges during the quarter and planned activities for the following quarter, and
- quantitative performance measures across a variety of domains (e.g., participant characteristics, project enrollment, service needs and receipt).

We received all of the projects' PPR narrative descriptions,[d] which were reviewed and de-identified by an evaluation team member. We received the projects' PPR performance measures through September 2022 (i.e., 8 quarters). However, in Year 3, ACF implemented a new data platform (the Anti-Trafficking Information Management System [ATIMS]) for projects to enter their PPR performance measures. Due to delays related to ATIMS contractual issues, we did not receive any of the projects' Year 3 PPR performance measures. The project's Year 1 and 2 PPR performance measures related to participant characteristics, enrollment, and service needs and receipt are summarized in the formative evaluation's Interim Report and the VHT-NC Program: An Overview of Participant & Service Characteristics (FY2021-FY2022) brief. It is important to note that one project did not officially enroll participants by the end of the award period due to outreach and identification challenges described in this final report.

[d] Except for one project's PPR for the final quarter, which the project did not submit to ACF.

Virtual interviews. Between March 2022 to 2023, we conducted one virtual interview with each of the following respondents from all the VHT-NC projects: (1) project directors, (2) advocates,[e] and (3) key partners (as identified by the project director). These interviews focused on the VHT-NC projects' community context, initial project design, and early implementation. All interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed and de-identified by an evaluation team member.

Site visits. Between June and August 2023, we visited each VHT-NC project site to conduct in-person interviews with (1) project leadership (e.g., project director, project coordinator), (2) direct services staff (e.g., advocates), (3) project partners, and (4) project participants (i.e., people who were enrolled into and received services from a VHT-NC project). Interview topics included community context, project implementation progress, organizational and staff characteristics, partnerships, outreach and identification approaches, case management and service provision, survivor engagement, and community training. Site visits were conducted by two evaluation team members, one from RTI and one from AIDA. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by an evaluation team member or a professional transcription company. All interview transcripts were de-identified by the evaluation team.

Analysis

De-identified interview transcripts and PPR narratives were imported into Dedoose, a web-based data analysis application, and then analyzed using the flexible, in-depth coding method.[11] First, we linked attribute codes (e.g., site ID, respondent type) to each transcript or PPR document. Then, we read through each document and applied index codes, which comprise broad content areas (e.g., outreach, case management) that were developed based on the evaluation questions and interview topics. Then, we reviewed the excerpts coded within the index codes and applied subcodes by analytic themes.

Final Evaluation Report

This report begins with a description of the VHT-NC award recipients and their communities and projects. We then describe the projects' key partnerships; outreach, identification, and enrollment approaches; comprehensive case management and service delivery; and community training activities. To embrace the Indigenous tradition of storytelling and amplify the voices of the people most knowledgeable about the day-to-day implementation of the VHT-NC projects, de-identified quotes from interviews and PPRs are presented throughout the report.

The VHT-NC Formative Evaluation Interim Report provides a detailed summary of the VHT-NC projects' first 2 years of implementation.

[e] In this report, we use the term "advocate" to refer to VHT-NC project staff who provided direct services (e.g., case management, supportive services) to participants. The projects used a variety of terms, including advocate, case manager, life coach, and youth support specialist.

VHT-NC Award Recipients and Communities

VHT-NC Award Recipients

Six VHT-NC projects were awarded to a diverse group of recipients across the United States. These included two federally recognized Tribes, one Native justice advocacy organization, two social services non-profit organizations, and one state government agency. **Exhibit 3** highlights the award recipients' services offered that informed the design and implementation of their VHT-NC projects. Prior to the VHT-NC project, all award recipients offered wraparound services, and had extensive experience providing case management or victim advocacy. Five offered domestic violence and/or sexual assault services. One site (3) specialized in youth and homelessness outreach programs. Although all organizations had experience working with Native community members and with people who had experienced human trafficking, some of these service experiences were not formalized through culturally specific or trafficking-specific services. For example, sites 4, 5, and 6 served people seeking domestic violence/sexual assault services who had also experienced human trafficking. Similarly, sites 2 and 3 served Native community members in their programs but did not offer Native-specific services prior to the VHT-NC award.

A demonstration program, such as VHT-NC, is a valuable opportunity for award recipients to build capacity and grow into new service areas. By the end of the award period, the five projects that enrolled participants had experience formally providing Native-specific, human trafficking services (i.e., the services were intentionally developed and implemented for Native people who had experienced human trafficking). Even the project that did not officially enroll participants had developed their capacity to provide the same services by hiring and training advocates, developing project protocols, and forming partnerships to support referrals into the project for enrollment and out for services.

Exhibit 3. Prior Service Experience of the VHT-NC Projects' Parent Organization

	Site 1	Site 2	Site 3	Site 4	Site 5	Site 6
Native-specific	◆			◆	◆	◆
Shelter/housing					◆	
Youth services			◆			
Homeless outreach			◆			
Domestic violence/sexual assault services	◆	◆		◆	◆	◆
Human trafficking services (predating VHT-NC)	◆	◆	◆			
Wraparound services	◆	◆	◆	◆	◆	◆

Human Trafficking within the VHT-NC Communities

Project staff and partners described a confluence of present-day and historical factors that contribute to human trafficking in their communities. Within their Native communities, they described high rates of domestic violence, sexual assault, housing and financial insecurity, adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), and unaddressed trauma as contributing to risk factors or vulnerabilities for human trafficking. Other vulnerabilities include having a physical or cognitive disability, mental health care needs, and substance use care needs. Traffickers target and exploit these vulnerabilities. Geographic, structural, commercial, and economic features of an area contribute to the unique types and occurrences of human trafficking. Respondents were predominately aware of and providing services to address sex trafficking, although with increased awareness of labor trafficking indicators and cases.

Present-Day Human Trafficking Trends

Nearly all VHT-NC projects described human trafficking (mostly sex trafficking) trends within their unhoused population. Several VHT-NC projects described homeless encampments predominately composed of their local Native population. In one project area, these encampments are semi-permanent structures, while in another project area, the encampments experience routine evictions and show up in new locations. The encampments can be a protective factor for those staying there, as they can access and share resources more easily, and, hypothetically, be protected in larger numbers. Respondents said that people living within the homeless encampments often had co-occurring issues with substance use, mental health, and experiences of survival sex.[f] Traffickers target people within the encampments because of their high vulnerabilities and survival needs. As one project director described it, "Obviously the longer they experience that homelessness, if they aren't already being exploited or trafficked…that likelihood that they will be increases significantly."

Respondents emphasized the connection between homelessness, substance use, sex work, domestic violence, MMIP, and human trafficking. They shared numerous anecdotes of project participants, community members, coworkers, and family members who went missing, were trafficked, or died while facing these interlocking challenges. In addition, they said that these situations can overlap with forced criminality, in which people who are experiencing human trafficking are coerced into other criminal activity, such as auto theft or drug sales or transportation, on behalf of their trafficker.

Traffickers target and exploit unmet needs and vulnerabilities of the people they recruit. Respondents said that people who experience human trafficking often have a close relationship with the person trafficking them, an observation that is mostly pertinent to sex trafficking. This includes intimate partners, spouses, dating partners, family members, among others. Youth are often specifically targeted or groomed by traffickers. A respondent from one site shared that people have manipulated youth to exploit the per capita payments they receive from Tribal business earnings that the Tribe distributes to enrolled citizens. VHT-NC projects in remote or rural areas said that familial-based trafficking[g] is a major concern and is especially difficult for people to identify and disclose.

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[f] **Survival sex** is the exchange of sex to meet immediate or basic needs such as shelter, food, clothing, etc. For children under the age of 18, engaging in sex acts for something of value is sex trafficking.

[g] **Familial-based trafficking** occurs when the trafficker(s) are family members (e.g., parent, aunt, cousin) or legal guardians to the person experiencing human trafficking. The individual exploiting their family member may also be experiencing victimization.

Although most respondents described awareness of what constitutes labor trafficking, only a few respondents shared tangible examples of cases identified in their local community. Areas with significant agricultural, farming, fishing, and extractive industries were cited as having confirmed or likely labor trafficking incidences, although it was not always clear the extent to which Native people have been involved in these cases. Anecdotes or individual cases add to the growing knowledge of labor trafficking within Native communities. For example, one project director shared direct experience supporting two people who experienced labor trafficking through magazine sales and a case of overlapping labor and sex trafficking within a family-run restaurant. Another project director believed that labor exploitation within the family system could be considered labor trafficking, such as unpaid childcare provided by relatives within coercive family systems.

SHARING KNOWLEDGE: TRENDS AND IMPACTS OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN NATIVE COMMUNITIES

"To add a layer of context to what we are seeing…in the experience of trafficking is a lot more experiences of ***survival sex****, which…obviously goes hand in hand with the experience of* ***homelessness or high mobility****. And we are also… intentionally seeing it easier for those who want to take advantage of others to target the Native community, specifically the Native community right now that is unhoused and unsheltered. We, in doing outreach at camps, are understanding that there are certain exploiters or traffickers that have maybe several victims in one camp. And so, there's also this clear intersection between MMIR [Missing and Murdered Indigenous Relatives] because this population is looked at as easily accessible, easily disposable, and easily replaceable. When your supply is literally right there in front of you and all you need to convince someone, maybe that day, is a little bit of drugs or food or a house."—Project director*

"A lot of what we've come across, especially with a lot of the younger folks that we've worked with… a lot of ***situations that kind of appear more of a domestic violence situation****, especially at the beginning. But it's people coming into somebody's life and saying, 'I love you. I want to take care of you,' and kind of doing that grooming. Or this honeymoon phase and providing their basic things they need, and they're getting them somewhere to stay and food and a phone and all these things. And so, it feels so great. And then it's kind of the situation, well, I need you to do this for us to be able to have somewhere to stay, and kind of this trickling effect of a lot of situations. And I think that's a lot of the confusion,* ***especially with the younger folks that we've worked with, is that they're like, I'm not being trafficked****. My partner asked me to do this because we needed somewhere to stay, and we needed drugs, or we needed alcohol."—Project director*

"My dad is [Native], but I also look very white. And so, my trafficker preyed on that, and I was marketed as a white girl. And everything about me ***culturally was erased****. And I've heard that from other people who walk that too—your Native ancestry…is erased in this industry, and you are remade into a different person. And so, for me it's about how do you heal that and come back to your culture and who you are when you've been convinced that you don't belong there?" —Partner*

Historical Connections to Human Trafficking

Respondents reflected that human trafficking has been occurring in their communities since colonialism. They described situations in their communities that are more recently being understood as human trafficking and exploitation. For example, one respondent said that their Tribal members experienced forced labor up through the 1980s due to legal loopholes. Another respondent shared numerous examples within their Tribe of situations adjacent to or resembling human trafficking: historical recruitment of Native widows and young women into nearby brothels; grooming by non-Native men of young Native women for sex acts; and marrying Native women to gain their land, although these marriages often became situations of domestic servitude and cases of Native women going missing or being murdered. As awareness grows of what human trafficking is, there is new language to describe old oppressions. However, one respondent shared concerns of these stories being lost as elders pass on.

SHARING KNOWLEDGE: HISTORICAL VIOLENCE AGAINST AND EXPLOITATION OF NATIVE COMMUNITIES

*"**This land was so fertile that the farmers and settlers wanted it, and so there was a big push to marry Native women and take the land and divorce them.** Or marry Native women, and then they get lost in the woods and die or get killed in a hunting accident. We're canoe-bearing people, you know, ocean-going, river-going people, and all of a sudden…they're drowning on a river they grew up in. So, some of these **fishy things where people are being taken and killed, or married to do domestic servitude**, to take care of the farm and the kids, and that's it. Be seen and not heard, or just for the allotment… So that historically, we know has happened here, but **there's very few elders who have carried on or at least are public with those stories** that we know of."—Project coordinator*

Present-day risk factors and disparities pertaining to human trafficking are a result of historical and intergenerational trauma within Native communities and legacies of colonialism. Respondents said that family systems, cultural values, and community mechanisms to keep people safe were stripped away from Native communities through federal and state policies and colonizing practices. These include termination, relocation or forced removals, loss of language, and abuses within boarding schools and onsite missionary and federal day schools. In particular, respondents said that physical and sexual abuse and the attempt of cultural genocide within these schools had profound and lasting impacts on identity, self-worth, parenting, and healthy attachment patterns that are only now coming to the surface. The unaddressed traumas and cultural devastation of the boarding and day schools also impacted community members' ability to talk about and heal from past and current traumatic experiences.

SHARING KNOWLEDGE: HISTORICAL AND INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA

"Historical trauma—just based off of what we've learned from clients coming in, especially through domestic violence victims or sexual assault victims prior to receiving this trafficking grant, just learning the generational trauma that they've experienced in their own family and then how it also affects other families in the Tribe, ***it's not spoken of****. A lot of the times* ***the boarding schools have also played a role in it****. So, the abuse that the children went through in the boarding schools, because it was very prominent in our area as well. The lack of affection shown from parent to child. There's a disconnect of a child having that comfort from their parents. So, I've heard interviews from elders. I've heard interviews from elders' children explaining the lack of intimacy that they've had from their parents, hugging [or] cuddling a child or comforting them when they get hurt. So, then they're not taught that at a young age. So, when they're growing older...they're just acting out what they learned as a child."—Project director*

"There's proof that [trauma] was ***handed down from our generations before us*** *into our systems that, yes, we know there was removals. There was the relocation. There was the terminations. Like, we were terminated. All of a sudden one day, we weren't Indian... There was also sterilization of women so there couldn't be any more Indian babies... Boarding schools.* ***All that stuff takes a toll on you, knowing what could we look like if that didn't happen. How strong could we be?*** *So, there is a lot of trauma there. We lost a lot of our language. Luckily, there was some that we could still get that, learn our language from some elders that were still around 20 years ago. But now, I think we only have—I can count them on my hands how many are alive right now that were first speakers. So, that's a big loss."—Partner*

"It ***radiates from our people****... I do feel that, you know, our communities, first of all, they don't understand or sometimes they don't really get historical trauma until you really explain it and say, 'These are the* ***vulnerabilities in our communities****... These are where the vulnerabilities come from and* ***this is why you may see some of the things that you see or feel some of the ways that you feel****, even though you don't know why you feel that way. Because it came from your parents, it came from their grandparents, it came from their parents, and that's how it's been passed down.'" —Project director*

Cultural and Community Strengths to Address Human Trafficking

Within the VHT-NC project communities, there are numerous cultural and community strengths that support responses to human trafficking. Respondents describe a renaissance of language and cultural revitalization within their communities, especially for younger generations. Native communities are increasingly organizing and building out the infrastructure for language immersion, learning about traditional food systems, cultural activities, and healing traditions. Reconnection to culture and language is also a protective factor that can prevent vulnerabilities to human trafficking.

Several respondents shared efforts within their Tribal governments that promote healing and cultural connection. For example, one project director said that their Tribal programs are focused on holistic well-being and include services for mental health, suicide prevention, a wellness center, and Indigenous healing pathways. This same Tribe hosts quarterly community engagement meetings open to various agency staff and community members to discuss and connect around needs in the community, which often catalyzes grassroots mobilization around social issues.

CELEBRATING STRENGTHS: CULTURAL STRENGTHS TO HEAL INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA AND RESPOND TO HUMAN TRAFFICKING

"This is not who we are as a people. ***This is not what our ancestors intended for us.*** *This is just how things have happened because of what's happened to us…* ***What are the steps that we can take as a community to heal those traumas and right some of those wrongs*** *and help so that the next seven generations don't have to endure the same pains and the same struggles that we are enduring."—Advocate*

"I feel like our community has used the language immersion, language resurfacing, to try to ***instill some of those traditional ways to our families and our community****… But we also have cultural ways, like our Indigenous foods initiatives and our immersion schools, so that children and families are* ***totally immersed and wrapped in language and Indigenous foods, ways, and just living****."—Project director*

"I think because there's that renaissance in language, a lot of the Native communities have come together and brought—especially the [Native Council], or the elders, come together to ***regenerate their cultural aspect*** *and share that with the next generation. And the next generation are also the ones that were very excited that they know the language, they know the practices. They're very involved."—Project director*

Intersectional Efforts to Addressing MMIP

Respondents discussed how they see the issue of MMIP occurring in their community, their experience addressing it, and ongoing needs for future efforts. First, respondents acknowledged that the issue of MMIP is often co-occurring with other forms of victimization and social issues, such as human trafficking, domestic violence, sexual assault, substance use, mental illness, and homelessness. They emphasized that addressing MMIP must happen simultaneously with addressing these intersecting issues.

Respondents' own experiences related to MMIP highlighted the intersections with human trafficking. Several respondents had firsthand exposure to MMIP through experiences of family members, community members, or project participants. One person shared that they were inspired to raise awareness of and work with other families impacted by MMIP after their mother went missing, and another person mentioned working with a participant who disappeared shortly after receiving services.

Many projects described their MMIP outreach and education activities as being in the early stages. Some project staff and partners are involved in taskforces that are MMIP-specific or include it within the scope of focus (e.g., human trafficking taskforces that discuss MMIP). Respondents also discussed various successes in their efforts to spread MMIP awareness, including updating technologies and systems to track missing persons cases more efficiently, raising awareness of MMIP through community outreach, updating outreach activities to be more inclusive of various identities, and gaining support for the issue from Tribal government.

Respondents acknowledged that there is much work to be done. Historical erasure, neglect, and discrimination against Native peoples have resulted in present-day disparities related to investigation of missing persons and murder cases. Accurate data on MMIP occurrence is sparse, and missing persons are not always reported. There continues to be a lack of education and awareness of effective protocols for tracking cases and collecting data, as well as

persistent challenges in understanding the causes and urgency around MMIP from mainstream systems professionals. Although human trafficking and MMIP are interconnected, they are not synonymous and yet occasionally conflated. Partnerships, awareness, and systems-level efforts with law enforcement are increasing in the VHT-NC communities, although improvements are still needed.

LEARNING THROUGH REFLECTION: SITES CONSIDER INTERSECTIONS OF MMIP AND HUMAN TRAFFICKING

*"It was 73% of the families that I had worked with, **their missing person had either a disclosure or risk factors or their family suspected [human trafficking]**. And that was really, really eye opening. I wish that we could [have] more simple data like that. Like, my little data doesn't mean a whole lot—but it does."—Project coordinator*

*"I started because…my mom is missing. And so, that was kinda how I started looking at trafficking is I was always advocating and reaching out to other families of missing. And they were telling me, like, I think her boyfriend's pimping her out, or she was being trafficked…you know, telling these stories. And **so many of the families that I was talking to thought or knew that their missing person was being exploited**."—Project coordinator*

*"I don't know all the relationships. I don't know the terminology. But I do know that since I've been running this program, that my program has been impacted by two Native women who went missing in the last couple of years. And it's heartbreaking. And how do we handle those? You know, **I wish we were heard more from the outside community**… It's just another Indian, right? Or it's their problem because [Native people] wanna be independent… I feel there's a lack of action that is taken when we have our women, the ones that I've experienced, come up missing."—Partner*

VHT-NC Projects' Community Context

Service Area Context

Each VHT-NC project took a unique approach to serving their Native communities based on their service area's geographic factors, cultural values and activities, existing resources, and service needs. Some projects served communities in large, urban areas, while others focused on smaller, more rural regions. Both types of service areas experienced challenges and successes due to their physical geography and unique cultural characteristics and traditions. Additionally, sites provided their services to various Native communities. Although some sites mainly focused on a single Tribal or Native community, others served dozens, or even hundreds, of Native communities across their state or within their city. **Exhibit 4** displays the VHT-NC projects' geographic type, Native communities served, and service area size. These categorizations reflect the projects' characteristics at the end of the award period, which may have changed from the initial project design.

Exhibit 4. VHT-NC Projects' Service Area Characteristics

	Geographic Type (Urban/Rural)	Native Communities Served and/or Focus	Service Area Size
Site 1	Urban and rural	Served all Tribes in the state	Statewide; one regional partner
Site 2	Urban and rural	Focused on one Native community	Several towns in one region
Site 3	Predominately urban	Served many Tribes	Three counties within a metropolitan area
Site 4	Predominantly rural	Focused on four Tribes	Five counties
Site 5	Urban and rural	Focused on one Tribe	Tribal reservation and three adjacent counties
Site 6	Predominantly rural	Focused on one Tribe	Tribal reservation

Geographic, structural, commercial, and economic factors contribute to the industries in which trafficking takes place and are unique for each VHT-NC service area. Features that contribute to sex trafficking economies include the presence of a tourist economy, bars and clubs, casinos, and the proximity to highways and airports. Urban areas were cited as a resource for people experiencing homelessness or other vulnerabilities and thus a draw for vulnerable populations and the people looking to exploit them.

Sites based in urban areas often had access to a wider array of services (e.g., medical care, housing or shelter resources, behavioral health services) but they also faced challenges associated with being in more densely populated areas. Specifically, respondents noted that urban areas can increase trafficking risk due to high commercial activity in the region, systemic poverty, and the prevalence of homelessness (particularly street homelessness or encampments). Respondents also said human trafficking can be more difficult to identify in urban areas because the population is more transient, with people from other areas traveling in and out frequently. One project director, whose project served communities across their state, said the transient nature of their state's central urban area increased the risk of human trafficking, because people "come here for shopping. They come here to visit family. But there's times that there's not a lot of conversations around what safety looks like coming to [City], versus a town where you know everybody." Another project director whose site is in an urban center said the combination of a major interstate, numerous casinos near the freeway, and various train and bus stations within their service area increased the risk of human trafficking due to the high number of people traveling in and out daily.

SHARING KNOWLEDGE: HOW HOUSING INSECURITY AFFECTS HUMAN TRAFFICKING SERVICE DELIVERY AND OUTREACH

*"[In] urban parts of our [regional] community where we are seeing **high concentrations of homelessness**, we do still have a lot of encampments that pop up and get shut down repeatedly. We have had quite a few [participants] in…our exploitation and trafficking services, who are experiencing that homelessness and are often in those areas. So, we also see a lot of **opportunity and vulnerability for traffickers** and exploiters there for those [participants], especially those who also have **substance challenges** and are meeting that need as well as their basic needs through exploitation and trafficking."—Project director*

Respondents from projects serving Native communities in predominantly rural areas said they considered the strengths and challenges experienced by rural communities when designing and implementing their VHT-NC projects. Respondents said despite having access to fewer resources and service organizations, the small, close-knit nature of many rural communities can be an asset when conducting outreach or offering case management services. One advocate noted that "there are benefits because at least when you're in a rural environment, you still know where to go." However, one project director said that serving a variety of distinct communities across their state, many of them rural, also makes it difficult to design and implement projects because "every community is so different here that it can be really confusing. Some people have law enforcement. A lot of communities don't have regular law enforcement, health services, behavioral health services. It really differs so dramatically from community to community." In addition, some rural Native communities depend heavily upon their subsistence[h] activities during summer months, making those difficult times for project engagement. VHT-NC projects planned their activities to take seasons into account, which also signaled cultural respect for those Native communities. As one partner described, "We don't do health services during summertime, because that's subsistence time. So, if [staff] do go out there, we go out there with the expectation that the people might be out there doing subsistence activities."

CELEBRATING STRENGTHS: LEARNING ABOUT COMMUNITY RESOURCES TO TAILOR SUPPORTIVE SERVICES

*"I think in the rural communities, **trying to kind of gear [services] towards that actual community is really beneficial**. And like I said, sometimes that could be social services, and **sometimes that's an elder, and that's just a safe person**."—Project director*

Two projects serving rural areas also described how people in their communities face unique challenges with self-identification of human trafficking. They noted that people in rural communities may be more hesitant to identify as having experienced trafficking due to social stigma and difficultly maintaining privacy, since people often know or have close relationships with one another. One advocate explained how these dynamics affect self-identification, noting that "it gets a little tricky because it is such a tight-knit community. If we do have a participant, and folks see us out in the community, they're going to be like, 'Oh, that person is obviously identifying as a victim of human trafficking.'" One project site even expanded its service area after initially focusing on a small, rural community because they struggled to identify and enroll participants in such a small geographic area. Although respondents emphasized self-identification as a challenge in rural areas, this ultimately arose as a challenge for all sites, regardless of physical geography or demographic characteristics.

[h] **Subsistence** is a cultural practice for many Native communities in which local natural resources (e.g., animals, plants) are gathered (e.g., through hunting, fishing) and prepared for use by community members. Subsistence is a way of life and a long-practiced tradition that helps to teach and preserve culture.

Systems and Community Response to Human Trafficking

Each VHT-NC project and its broader community has unique trends, needs, challenges, and strengths related to human trafficking response. As discussed in the Interim Report, all VHT-NC projects participate in regional or statewide anti-trafficking taskforces, working groups, or multidisciplinary response teams. These efforts often include collaboration between victim service providers, law enforcement, and coalitions. Some VHT-NC projects are leading these efforts based on their history and experience working with this population, while other VHT-NC projects are recent additions to community-level efforts to addressing human trafficking, working with Native populations, or both.

Notably, one VHT-NC project belongs to a Tribal government that passed its own Tribal code for human trafficking offenses, demonstrating Tribal leadership's buy-in on the issue of human trafficking. This Tribal code included mandated human trafficking training for Tribal program staff and delineated a multidisciplinary response with the Tribe's victim services program and law enforcement.

VHT-NC staff from Tribal government projects described strengths and challenges with their governmental and systems response to human trafficking. Several respondents said that they had champions within Tribal government and key systems (e.g., law enforcement, child welfare, victim services), as well as active engagement from casinos. This level of engagement facilitated trainings, awareness events, protocol development, and coordinated referrals. Respondents also shared challenges with Tribal approval processes, which can be lengthy and overly bureaucratic and sometimes resulted in missed opportunities to participate in events or conferences.

Jurisdictional challenges for responding to and prosecuting human trafficking cases are likely experienced in all VHT-NC project site areas, given the complex legal web among the United States federal government, states, and Tribal nations. Jurisdictional issues are impacted by factors such as the location of the crime (on or off reservation), the Tribal status of the victim and perpetrator (Native or not), and whether Public Law 280[i] applies to the Tribe. State-recognized Tribes lack equal sovereignty with the United States federal government and are often under-resourced. In addition, some Tribes and Alaska Native villages do not have their own law enforcement department to respond to or investigate crimes.

SHARING KNOWLEDGE: JURISDICTIONAL COMPLEXITY AND CHALLENGES

"Our own [Tribal] law enforcement can only respond to Tribal members and federally recognized Tribal members who call for assistance. And they can only respond on the reservation. If, let's say, I call and I don't identify myself as Native American, they'll send [city law enforcement]. ***But if they find out anybody is a Tribal member, they're going to drop the ball and they'll say, 'Call Tribal.'*** *Tribal cannot arrest a non-Tribal member without city or county's approval."—Project director*

[i] Public Law 83-280, known as PL280, is legislation passed in 1953 that grants some states criminal jurisdiction over American Indians and Alaska Natives on reservations. PL280, which has long been opposed by many American Indians and Alaska Natives who believe that the legislation undermines Tribal self-governance, also allows civil litigation under Tribal or federal courts to go under the jurisdiction of state courts. Ten additional states are referred to as "optional" PL280 states because they chose to assume jurisdiction over crimes committed on Tribal land. A 1968 amendment to PL280 changed the process for assuming state jurisdiction by requiring Tribal consent; no Tribes have given their consent since the amendment passed. See Administration for Native Americans, "American Indians and Alaska Natives - Public Law 280 Tribes, Fact Sheet," https://www.acf.hhs.gov/ana/fact-sheet/american-indians-and-alaska-natives-public-law-280-tribes.

National Institute of Justice, "Public Law 280 and Law Enforcement in Indian Country -- Research Priorities," December 2005, Public Law 280 and Law Enforcement in Indian Country—Research Priorities (ojp.gov).

Some of the VHT-NC projects shared challenges with incorporating their project into existing structures for human trafficking systems response. Respondents described intra-agency and interpersonal politics, such as competition for funding, pre-existing referral partnerships, and territorial attitudes around the work that impeded effective collaboration and partnership development. The projects needed to mindfully navigate this landscape while still working on implementing the award objectives.

SHARING KNOWLEDGE: ESTABLISHING VHT-NC PROJECT ACTIVITIES WITHIN PRE-EXISTING SYSTEMS

"[Enrollment is] the hard part for me… I've reached out to the hospitals, but that's hard because ***[organization] is already there. They're already a presence****. So, if there's a victim at the hospital, they're going to pick up the phone and contact [that organization]."—Advocate*

Overwhelmingly, respondents said that their primary challenges to systems response were a lack of understanding and awareness of what constitutes human trafficking and, in some cases, resistance to activities dealing with the topic. People who experience human trafficking are often unaware that what they are experiencing is human trafficking, in part due to stigma around the term 'trafficking,' and in part because of trusting or close relationships with the persons who are abusing them.[j] Their experiences of exploitation may be viewed as survival or normalized. Further, distrust of service providers, government, and law enforcement inhibit disclosures and help-seeking. Several respondents said that disclosures can be subtle, nuanced, and easily missed for those who have less experience working with Native communities or with people impacted by human trafficking. Respondents emphasized that distrust is common in Native communities as a result of historical trauma and oppression. Trust and relationship building are heightened needs and challenges for non-Native award recipient organizations.

Systems-level responses to identifying and addressing labor trafficking are still emerging in many of the VHT-NC project service areas. Respondents said that the VHT-NC trainings, which are inclusive of labor trafficking, have helped local systems responders be more aware of the indicators of labor trafficking.

[j] CEG members emphasized that physical and cognitive disabilities add another complex layer of understanding and being able to identify human trafficking. These disabilities may be a risk factor for or consequence of human trafficking (e.g., traumatic brain injury resulting from a trafficker's physical abuse). People with these disabilities may be more vulnerable to exploitation, may not be able to seek help, and may not be able to identify their experience as human trafficking. CEG members strongly recommended that projects consider the specific needs of people with disabilities when developing outreach, screening, service delivery, and training approaches.

LEARNING THROUGH REFLECTION: DISCLOSURES AND DISTRUST

"[In talking about human trafficking,] it's been, can you tell us what are you seeing? What are you observing? Have you ever seen this and this, and talking through, like, some scenarios that are trafficking situations, or—I don't do red flags. I do a lot of situational type things and talk about, are you observing these types of things? Or have you heard anybody saying things like this? But the other piece of it is also not always ***recognizing the nuances of language.*** *One of the most recent ones that I learned about was the word 'bother.' A lot of [people from our Native community] will use the word bother, and it can mean anything from this person is just annoying me, to this person is molesting me, to this person is trafficking me. And it's just, you don't know until you ask further questions, and you can't ask those questions without having a relationship."—Partner*

"When you have a particular subsector of a culture that has been taken advantage of for a long time, there's a distrust. And sometimes it's not just a distrust. Sometimes it's almost an ***inability to trust****. And trying to work through that, especially when an individual or a person has been victimized by some of the people…that should have been the most trusted, whether it be family members, clergy… As law enforcement, we understand that we already have an uphill battle to get people to trust law enforcement." —Partner*

The VHT-NC Projects

Years 1 and 2 of project implementation focused on startup and building solid foundations to support outreach, case management, and service provision (as described in the Interim Report). This included developing protocols and data collection systems, hiring and training staff, developing partnerships, and piloting various outreach strategies. In Year 3, VHT-NC projects continued to establish partnerships and focused on completing award objectives.

The VHT-NC projects' goals included:

- Provision of individualized case management to Native people who have experienced human trafficking
- Direct outreach to populations at-risk for experiencing human trafficking
- Provision of trainings on human trafficking
- Partnership development to improve systems' response to human trafficking

Reflection on Project Design, Goals, and Progress

Near the end of the award, VHT-NC project staff had diverse views about the success of their project and reflected on lessons learned. Overall, they felt excited about what the VHT-NC Program could offer their community, and hopeful for ongoing investment to address human trafficking in Native communities. Project directors identified potential changes for future efforts and aspects of their projects that were most successful.

Service Area

One VHT-NC project initially focused on a small regional service area with a high concentration of Native people experiencing risk factors for human trafficking. However, due to the transient and mobile aspect of human trafficking, they felt restricted by the narrow focus. This project later officially expanded their project service area, which allowed them greater flexibility in outreach and identification. By the end of the award, they surmised that serving an even larger area would have facilitated their ability to meet their goals.

Another VHT-NC project's service area encompassed the entire state, with four regional partnerships. This project faced challenges maintaining its partners due to low technological capacity and internet access, which impeded their ability to work together. In hindsight, they expressed a desire for a smaller service area and more intentionality in partnerships to ensure effective service delivery.

Another VHT-NC project expressed satisfaction with their service area given its proximity and centrality to the Native population and other resources.

Staffing Structures

Several VHT-NC projects believed that their staffing structures placed too many tasks or responsibilities on their direct service staff. For many sites, the VHT-NC advocates were responsible for case management, outreach, training, and partnership development. In retrospect, they wished they would have delegated some of these roles into separate positions. They believed that stratifying these tasks across several people would allow each person to dedicate their time more fully to their respective tasks. For example, one site briefly piloted a senior youth support specialist position to focus on outreach, training, and partnership development, with no direct work with participants.

Project Deliverable Goals

Some respondents reflected that their proposed project deliverable goals were too ambitious and did not take into account the length of time needed around intentionally building relationships, partnerships, and raising awareness in the community about the presence of VHT-NC project services.

Inclusion of Cultural Activities and Programming

Some of the VHT-NC projects faced challenges with their planned structures to incorporate cultural programming and activities. One project had a subcontract with a grassroots Native-led organization to provide cultural activities. However, this partnership was negatively impacted by mutual staffing challenges. As a Tribal-based program, this project reflected that in the future it would be more effective to hire internally for cultural activities. Another project did not have established partnerships for cultural activities. Instead, the VHT-NC advocates offered cultural activities (e.g., beading, regalia) themselves with assistance from a cultural expert. However, organizing and providing these activities took a substantial amount of time for advocates who had full caseloads, and these activities fell through with staffing changes. Although the project developed partnerships by the end of the award to access cultural activities, they wished in hindsight that these partnerships had been established from the beginning.

LEARNING THROUGH REFLECTION: INTENTIONALITY REQUIRED FOR CULTURAL ACTIVITIES AND PROJECT OBJECTIVES

"[A change I would make to the goals or design is] a lot more intentionality with the proposal. And I think just ***being more realistic with, capacity-wise, about what we could actually achieve****. You know, this was our first time doing culturally specific services within [our department], within [our] program and…there wasn't enough intentionality on what it actually—and this has been an ongoing conversation we've always had—about* ***what does it mean to provide culturally specific services****… And that it wasn't just a copy/paste of what our program model already is."—Project director*

Defining Participant Success

Many projects defined participant success in fluid and varied ways, recognizing that participants are unique and that success will look different depending on each person. These varying definitions informed projects' evaluations, allowing them to evaluate the notion of success (and the extent to which participants eventually achieved it) in terms appropriate and individualized for participants. For instance, one project noted that they do not formally measure success as a means of evaluating the strength of their program—instead, they treat all forms of assistance offered to participants as successes. Other projects said that participants define success for themselves, which encourages them to set their own goals and avoids constraining them to specific perceptions of success. Others highlighted that it is difficult to capture longstanding cultural traditions into language or measures that fit the requirements of the award (e.g., Indigenous practices of taking care of the community). Overall, some projects found it challenging to formally report participant successes because of these varied definitions or concepts of what constitutes successful outcomes for those experiencing human trafficking.

CELEBRATING STRENGTHS: PARTICIPANT-LED DEFINITIONS OF SUCCESS

*"When one of my [participants] **got into school**, I clapped so hard just for getting there. And I think that's successful, because if you're not in school for a while, going back is a hard thing to do. And so, **I let them define their goals, and I support them along the way**, and when we're able to check something off the list I will acknowledge that. And it feels good for me too, because I know I helped them along the way."—Advocate*

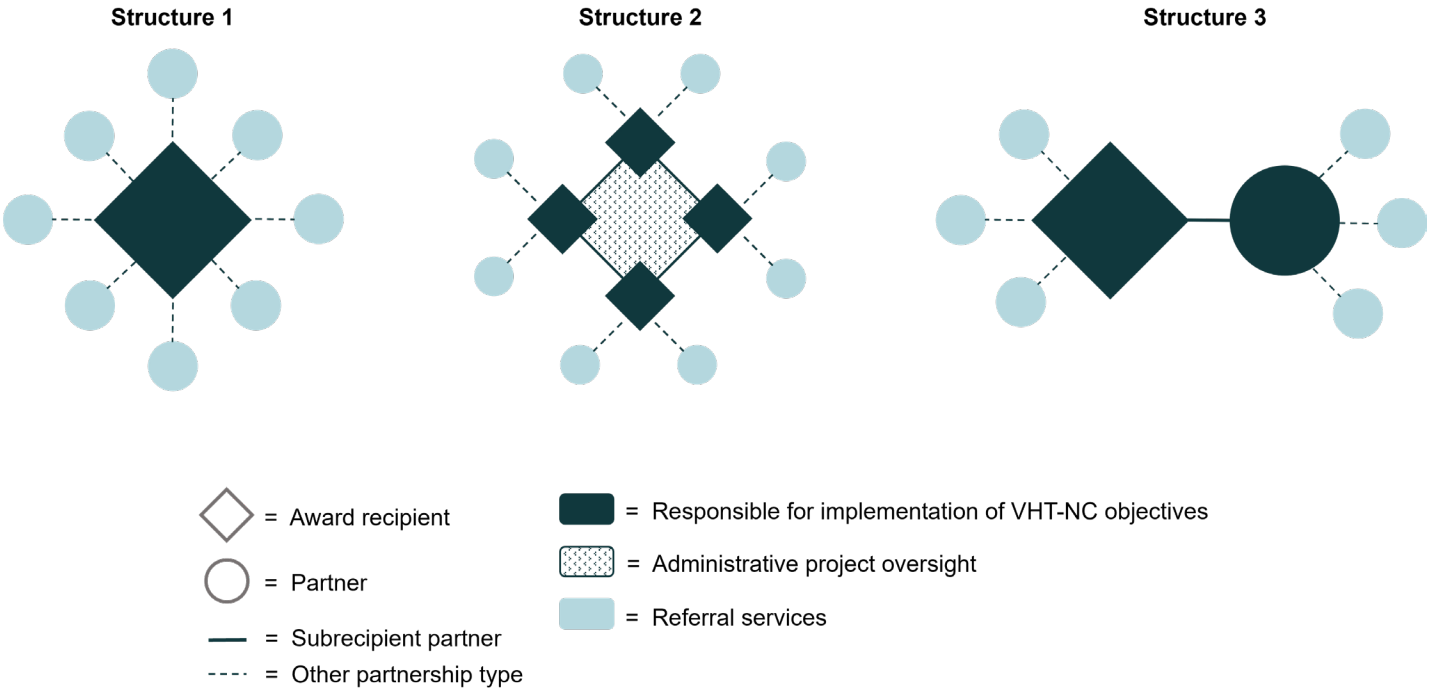
*"I think it's always interesting to see someone that is experiencing crisis that's manifesting in their body, right, and seeing how supportive services really has the ability to change that physiological reaction. So, that's something I've seen happen that's really rewarding. Just having **better coping skills** and support to help with that anxiety and how that person's experiencing their trauma. Success also is just having the client be able to have **self-agency and self-determination**. I mean, trafficking control has been so much a part of their experience that for them to even realize that they can make their own decisions. Also, seeing them grow with being able to have **good boundaries** with other relationships in their lives… For some people it may be **going to work or school**. I don't think that's going to be with everybody. I think that can be a measure of success, but **I think that's going to be different for every client**, but that's certainly been something that I've seen clients take a lot of personal pride and feeling like it's giving them stability by being able to access jobs and more education. "—Advocate*

Project Structures

The projects took varied approaches to implementing the primary VHT-NC objectives of outreach, case management, and service delivery, as illustrated in **Exhibit 5**. Four of the projects had a centralized model (Structure 1) in which the award recipient was the primary entity conducting VHT-NC activities with various types of referral services support from community partners (e.g., assistance with outreach, referral for enrollment, service referral).

The two remaining projects had unique structures. The first was co-led by two programs within the award recipient agency that provided oversight and administrative support and embedded community-based advocates into four regions of the state to implement VHT-NC activities (Structure 2). The second project's award recipient implemented VHT-NC activities in its service area region and provided training and technical assistance (TTA) to a subrecipient partner to carry out VHT-NC activities in a different service area region (Structure 3). Community partners also provided referral services support to both projects.

Exhibit 5. Visual Representation of the VHT-NC Project Structures



Project Staffing

All VHT-NC projects faced impediments to implementing their award objectives due to staffing-related challenges. Projects found it difficult to identify qualified candidates, which was complicated by issues surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath and the challenging subject matter of human trafficking. Advocate roles typically spanned all the primary VHT-NC Program objectives: case management, outreach, training, and partnership development. The VHT-NC award recipients prioritized hiring Native staff who brought deep understanding of the cultural context, cultural values, and issues surrounding victimization for Native people. Further, advocates were recognized for exceptional soft skills and their ability to provide trauma-informed care. Near the end of the project, most were fully staffed and had accomplished many of their objectives.

> The evaluation brief, *"COVID Has Taken Its Toll on Us": The Pervasive Effects of COVID-19 on Programs Supporting Native People Who Have Experienced Human Trafficking*, provides more information about how the COVID-19 pandemic affected project implementation.

Staffing Structures, Roles, and Core Competencies

All VHT-NC projects were staffed with direct service positions (i.e., advocates) whose roles consisted of the primary VHT-NC Program objectives: individualized case management, outreach, training, and partnership development. In most sites, project directors, coordinators, or managers assisted with outreach, training, or partnership development to a limited extent, based on their expertise and time allotment on the project. The projects varied in the number of advocate positions (from one to four) and whether these were full-time or part-time. One VHT-NC project started with a part-time case manager and later restructured this into a full-time role, which they believed was more beneficial to the work and to job retention.

Advocates typically bring three core competencies to their work: (1) experience in social services and case management, (2) experience related to

human trafficking or adjacent populations (e.g., domestic violence, homelessness), and (3) cultural competency. Several advocates were newer to social services, although they had work experience that translated to the tasks included in their role. Other advocates brought over a decade of experience, including case management and advocacy experience in domestic violence/sexual assault, juvenile justice, adult and juvenile probation, labor regulations, education, and more. Human trafficking was also a new area of focus for many staff, although they brought relevant experience working with adjacent or co-occurring populations (e.g., domestic violence/sexual assault, legal system-involved, MMIP).

Cultural competency was a requirement for all VHT-NC advocates. Most were Native-identifying and actively advocated in their community for Indigenous issues. Non-Native staff had extensive experience working with Native populations and described strategies to build relationships with Native community members, demonstrate cultural humility and respect, and develop rapport.

Staffing Challenges

Hiring, Turnover, and Staff Retention Challenges

Burnout, staff turnover, and hiring are cyclical, interrelated problems that affected all VHT-NC projects during the first 2 years of implementation. Some of the primary causes of these staffing-related challenges were the COVID-19 pandemic, followed by economic insecurity from the recession and inflation (as described in the Interim Report). Several projects described turnover or job transitions occurring across all levels of leadership within their organization. These impacted the project's ability to hire for vacant positions, historical knowledge about the project, and staff oversight. Respondents reflected on the unique context this issue has for Tribal-based programs, which may be small and have limited award management capabilities. In hindsight, respondents expressed a desire for additional tailored TTA on award management, succession planning, and project documentation.

Hiring for vacant positions proved to be challenging for VHT-NC projects. Challenges included low staff capacity due to turnover, a changing work landscape due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and a narrow pool of qualified applicants. For example, one site intended to use Master of Social Work practicum students on this project, but no students expressed interest. Another site adapted by hiring staff with minimal social service or human trafficking-related experience and focused on providing training and development for them.

SHARING KNOWLEDGE: STAFF TURNOVER AND THE IMPACT ON TRIBAL PROGRAMS

*"I think there's just **a lot of stigma** [for Tribal programs], too. And I think I feel that, too, where we're just supposed to know what we're doing. And the reality is...**social services have so much turnover**. And especially, we have a lot more support with [parent organization] and a grants team, but especially with some of our smaller organizations and Tribes we work with. **They don't have somebody who has this historical knowledge and has worked on 50 grants before. And I think, a lot of times, the grantors assume that you know all these things.** Or they held a grant orientation for the grant four years ago that somehow, magically, the same person's in the same role and has the knowledge, or it's been passed on appropriately... When you have so many grants, you have so much information you have to hold onto, and I think that there could probably be more training from them also of helping navigate that more than one time at the beginning."—Project director*

SHARING KNOWLEDGE: IDENTIFYING QUALIFIED STAFF AND SETTING THEM UP FOR SUCCESS

"I think a really important lesson is the intentionality behind recruitment efforts.... I think, in general, in this work of human trafficking... when you are specifying down to provide culturally competent services, ***obviously we're seeking a very foundational set of skills or qualifications that exist or that can be built upon****. The next lesson is...whether you're bringing in someone who has that experience, qualifications, and is ready to go, or someone who has the foundational but needs that building and training, is to make sure you have an* ***adequate, consistent, thorough onboarding plan****."*
—Project director

Impact on Meeting Award Objectives

These staffing challenges impacted VHT-NC projects' ability to meet their award objectives and establish their programs. Many activities were put on pause until staffing levels were adequate to resume them. For many VHT-NC projects, this issue was exacerbated by the fact that they were developing a new program or expanding into a new scope of work (i.e., Native-specific, human trafficking). Although the staffing challenges impacted morale, VHT-NC project staff remained committed to the success of this program, driven by their passion to meet community needs.

LEARNING THROUGH REFLECTION: THE IMPACT OF STAFFING ON COMPLETING AWARD OBJECTIVES

"So, when I took over the position, we had had the grant for over almost two years, and it had only been staffed for six months. So, I think that really put a hold on things. And when I took over, there was stuff that was supposed to be completed within the first year that still had not been done. So, ***it was kind of catch up****."—Advocate*

"And we've been honest this whole time about how much transition there's been since we got this award, right? And just the leadership, the direct service staff. And just, you know, I've been transparent about the frustration that you feel as a program staff and program leader, especially because this program is really, really important. And ***I've put a lot of mental and emotional labor and work into building this program up and bringing others to the table*** *to help redesign, reshape and, like, carry it forward. And we so badly needed this funding because we have this population right here and this model that is needed."—Project director*

"And I think in the first year of this project, our attention shifted to where it was most obvious in that we need our direct service staff trained. We need to provide them the support so they can serve the [participants] because they are here... And I think unfortunately, just with some of ***the transition in our leadership and the turnover and the disconnection, that disruption that happened every time at a program level****, that really put those other objectives that don't fall on the work that our [advocates] carry out at risk of being completed, if that makes sense."—Project director*

Challenging Work, Staff Burnout, and Secondary Trauma

Respondents shared descriptions of burnout and secondary trauma concerns related to working on human trafficking services. They described complex situations with participants who had legal system involvement, mental health and substance use care needs, experiences of homelessness, and a modulating readiness to engage in services. Advocates were challenged in balancing their work and time boundaries with being available and flexible for their participants. Respondents shared that this project seemed to have higher burnout and staff turnover than other social services within their organization. Respondents found that that their Native-identifying staff were particularly impacted by this work.

LEARNING THROUGH REFLECTION: TRAUMA FATIGUE AND BURNOUT AMONG STAFF

"I think serving their community, the part of their community that is experiencing this type of victimization, is something they weren't ready for and something we were not ready for as [an] employer to help them navigate. Because we did hear from one of our staff like, ***'These are my people, these are my neighbors, these are my family members. This is my community.' And seeing firsthand what they're experiencing is an extra heavy thing to carry*** *if you've never been exposed to that. Or you've been exposed to that all your life, and to know, like, this is still what your community is facing."—Project director*

"One of the big challenges for myself that I've had, and I've noticed more the longer I did it, was that I think ***I was impacted in a different way than a non-Native service provider*** *would've been because* ***I was identifying with them and I was relating to some of their experiences****, or I knew that I was close to having some of their experiences. That's been a challenge, an additional toll it's taken on me like spiritually and mentally. Because you get more burnt out easier if you're feeling their experience and that's been hard."—Advocate*

Staffing Strengths

Prioritizing Hiring Native Staff

Hiring Native staff from the local Native communities was a priority for the VHT-NC projects. Native staff said that their lived experience gave them deeper understanding of Native issues, such as contexts surrounding victimization, disparities in health and legal systems involvement, and historical trauma, as well as an understanding of cultural nuance, needs, and values. Many Native staff indicated feeling very connected to and energized by the VHT-NC project because it allowed them to focus on the Native community. Many described a sense of giving back to their community.

Secondary Trauma and Burnout Prevention

Projects described their efforts to prevent and mitigate secondary trauma and burnout. These include supervision practices (e.g., debriefing after challenging situations), leave or time-off benefits, supportive team and workplace culture, wellness stipends, in-house wellness resources, and individual self-care practices. Overall, respondents expressed satisfaction with their organizational culture, benefits, and offerings related to secondary trauma prevention, but a desire for more offerings and intentionality around self-care. A small number of respondents felt that they had to assertively advocate for self-care. One respondent shared an idea to have VHT-NC Program funds set aside for staff wellness.

Exceptional Trauma-Informed Service Delivery and Soft Skills

Most advocates brought deep understanding of trauma, victimization, and trauma-informed care to their work. Respondents shared anecdotes that demonstrated care, commitment, and passion for serving Native people who have experienced human trafficking. These skills are spotlighted given the challenging nature of this work. One project director celebrated advocates' ability to be non-judgmental and build rapport during outreach to the homeless encampments.

Lived Experience within the Projects

Several respondents shared lived experiences of victimization and felt this heightened their ability to build rapport and connect with people who experienced human trafficking. Some of these staff were open with their colleagues about their lived experience, while others did not feel comfortable sharing.

CELEBRATING STRENGTHS: CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE, TRAUMA-INFORMED STAFF

"I definitely feel that identifying as Indigenous makes it easier for me to be able to try to put myself in a space to gain understanding of the issues afflicting my community. *And because it is my community, I grew up here, I'm innately aware of some of the various traumas that my community's suffered, a lot of the present-day traumas, racial tensions, intergenerational traumas that my people carry. And I think that even for Indigenous people that are working in Indigenous communities that are not their own, you find a lot of similarities."—Advocate*

"It's really been nice to come back and be a part of the community in a way where I get to work for the people. *Because there's not a lot of Natives* ***that understand our traumas and our history and our pain and the things that we see and endure on a daily basis, and are strong and courageous enough and healed enough to bring that knowledge back to the community*** *and go, 'No, this is why. This is why.' And we don't have to do these things anymore, you know, like, we don't have to do this."—Advocate*

"I think there are organizational things that could improve within their big organization. But specific to my work on here, it's comfortable to be, ***I'm safe to be a Native person, I'm safe to smudge, I'm safe to have these culture-specific things in this space****... Right now we're doing the work from the ground up and I'm happy to serve the community. I'm happy the [award recipient] got these funds and they're doing it the way they're doing it."—Advocate*

Culturally Responsive Approaches

The VHT-NC projects infused each program component with culturally relevant methods and approaches. In this section, we describe the culturally relevant strengths the projects demonstrated, as well as some of the relevant challenges the projects experienced.

Positive Culturally Specific Outreach

Language Access: Although many Native Americans are fluent in their language[k] and English, accurately interpreting English words or concepts is crucial to avoid misunderstandings. Projects addressed language issues and challenges by providing linguistically accessible services, including hiring staff fluent in their Native language and creating age-appropriate and relevant informational materials.

Culturally Relevant Materials: With input from partners, VHT-NC project staff developed culturally specific outreach materials with culturally relevant imagery for their communities and intended service populations. Indigenous community members better identify with culturally relevant outreach materials to learn about human trafficking and the VHT-NC projects and resources.

CELEBRATING STRENGTHS: CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE OUTREACH MATERIALS

"We took time to kind of develop some materials that address some of the needs that we felt our communities had. ***Having materials that people could identify and see themselves with****, as opposed to the sort of blanket information that we all send out, I think that was one thing we have actually been successful in doing…I definitely think that's helpful."—Project director*

Incorporating **culturally responsive approaches and resources** is essential to supporting participants' healing journeys.[12] The evaluation brief, *Culturally Responsive Approaches to Anti-Human Trafficking Programming in Native Communities*, describes the VHT-NC projects' experiences integrating culturally responsive approaches into programming components.

Peer Support: VHT-NC projects involved peer-to-peer support and mentoring opportunities by enlisting people with lived experience of human trafficking to accompany project staff during outreach in homeless encampments, share their personal service experiences, and refer potential participants. One project hosted community talking circles where a community cultural expert taught attendees ways to conduct and facilitate sessions. These activities helped the projects gain trust, build community relationships, and respectfully apply the strengths and abilities of people impacted by human trafficking.

Connection with Staff: As noted, several VHT-NC project and partner staff were Native or lived in the communities they served, enabling them to incorporate shared heritage, which contributed to service engagement. Consistent outreach and creative approaches enabled one project to offer canvas and paints to help a participant express herself through her art and accept other service offerings.

[k] It is important to note that many Native communities, including some served by the VHT-NC projects, have few or no members who fluently speak their Native language due to colonization, forced relocation, forced assimilation, and family separation.

CELEBRATING STRENGTHS: SHARED CONNECTION WITH STAFF

*"[Advocate 1 is] also talking as a member of this Native Tribe. So, she's always trying to incorporate that into everything she does, I think she does a really great job with that… And [Advocate 2] does that as well…**talking about heritage to connect with survivors on that level too** because they feel like they get a lot more Native survivors coming to them because they can identify."—Project director*

Positive Learning Experiences with Community and Partner Training

Community and Partner Education and Training: VHT-NC projects reported partnering with local service providers to design culturally relevant training and to co-host educational opportunities at community events with local organizations serving Native people. Education efforts focused on increasing cultural competencies by increasing community understanding of human trafficking risk factors for Native communities and developing cultural-based curricula with service participants.

Staff Development: All VHT-NC projects participated in the National Human Trafficking Training and Technical Assistance Center's culturally specific SOAR (Stop, Observe, Ask, Respond) for Indigenous Communities training, either in person or online. Several projects conducted supplemental courses or enlisted partners to host trainings aimed at increasing cultural knowledge and competencies and becoming informed about the collective historical trauma experiences of Native peoples. Staff also participated in culture-related education offered by communities. Culturally specific staff training included (1) cultural skill-building, (2) culture-specific ways to address human trafficking and victimization, (3) cultural or Tribal-based issues, and (4) gender or race-related topics.

SHARING KNOWLEDGE: COMMUNITY AND PARTNER EDUCATION AND TRAINING

*"Some things that we have kind of seen be beneficial, especially when working with communities and doing trainings, is identifying what in that community **is a support and talking how can we bring in elders into the conversation**."—Project director*

*"Native Talking Circles, or **Healing Circles, offer curricula and educational opportunities that screen for and help prevent occurrence of domestic violence, sexual assault and human trafficking** while building community resilience and support."—Progress report*

*"When we're providing training and technical assistance around different topics, in particular working in Native communities, our philosophy is that we do it jointly, whether it's with [staff] or one of her advocates or with someone who is actually from the community that we're trying to address, because **I don't feel like we can truly provide adequate training if someone who is of the culture and understands the nuances is not there**."—Project director*

Positive Culturally Responsive Case Management

Cultural Strategies Supporting Participant Engagement: Critical VHT-NC project strengths included trust building and recognizing the innate cultural strengths staff can tap into for participants. VHT-NC staff recognized participants' core values by integrating culturally responsive services tailored to Native participants. They acknowledged the sensitivity of discussing human trafficking and incorporated strategies like talking or healing circles or cultural immersion activities to build trust. To create an inviting environment, project offices displayed Native art and played Native music. Immersion activities included viewing Native films, storytelling, culture camps, family culture nights, crafting, participating in community gatherings, and drumming. Project care packages included cultural items like traditional medicines, sage, cedar, sweetgrass, tobacco, scents, cultural foods, and Native-branded clothing.

Culturally Enriched Approaches, Tools, and Measures: Projects incorporated cultural methods and approaches into their case management approach. One project infused culture into their model by adding a wellness medicine wheel, Native-specific social determinants of health, and Native-specific motivational interviewing, including Indigenous stages of change and life skills. Several projects integrated cultural methods for identification, screening, assessment, safety planning, and service planning. One site worked with service partners to adjust screening and assessment tools, adding more relevant questions about Native participants. Others modified data collection tools to include culturally relevant measures, such as cultural immersion activities, methods, approaches, and services, and adjusted fields to ensure inclusivity and clarify the project's service population. For example, one project recognized that the gender response categories they were using to record participant demographics were not inclusive of how their participants would self-identify. As was indicated in a progress report, "The sex indicator had limited answers: Male, Female, or Other. Our staff know from experience that [participants] often will not identify with the gender binary, and the label of 'Other' is not how we would generally approach this. Particularly with the Native American community we're serving, we think it's important to track indicators in a more culturally competent way—for example, [having] 'Two-Spirit' as an option."

Culturally Specific Services: Projects added cultural-based options to service plans, such as a designated healing room and access to Native healers' services for sweat lodges, smudging, brushing, burnt offerings, art therapy, and spiritual and traditional counseling. One project director explained that they were able to contact healers from different Tribes to ensure their participants "have their choice of healers." Culturally responsive service changes included increasing the length, dosage, and frequency of services participants received. Several projects incorporated community or grassroots support from individuals offering their homes as safe houses, grief workers, doulas, or surrogate aunties and uncles.

One project collaborated with a shelter specifically for Native youth, which facilitated referrals and services. The shelter had multiple case managers, harm reduction–based strategies, outreach workers, access to coordinated entry, a mental health worker, and three meals daily. Additionally, VHT-NC projects sought Tribal-based service providers, such as Indian Health Services clinics, instead of county or city healthcare workers. These efforts aimed to offer comfortable and appealing services for their Native participants, including traditional and spiritual healing, behavioral health, substance use treatment, and medical and dental services. One project assisted Native participants in obtaining Tribal citizenship and accessing Tribal benefits.

CELEBRATING STRENGTHS: CULTURALLY SPECIFIC SERVICES

*"**We transport the client to meet with [a traditional healer].** So that's a big strength. …We are starting a women's support group soon. During those times, we provide a 1-hour meal to women and children. We offer childcare and **a three-hour drum healing circle**. I found out that 1 hour isn't enough to allow people to share and experience the healing that they need…**We want people to feel welcome, we want them to feel heard, and we want them to experience that healing.**"—Project director*

Culturally Responsive Partners: VHT-NC projects served populations with multiple and diverse cultural and Tribal-based needs. Each project worked with internal partners, such as Tribal cultural departments, and external partners to strengthen culturally responsive capacity and capabilities to augment VHT-NC project offerings, such as through culture camps, youth summits, shelters, and community service. The partnerships enabled access to Native healers, health services, cultural experts, and knowledge holders, which enhanced services or filled service gaps. One project shared in a progress report that they were consulting with a "Hands-on Healer who conducts energy healing and traditional healing ceremonies. She works to bring awareness and healing to the 'root cause' of illness and cultivate wellness and harmony in the full body—the body, mind, and spirit." Partners also contributed resources for offering cultural foods, smudge kits, crafting items, care packages, Native-branded clothing, blankets, and toiletries.

Challenges with Culturally Responsive Program Implementation

Many of the challenges projects encountered incorporating culturally responsive approaches were the same or similar to the challenges described previously. The historical trauma that permeates Native American communities affected outreach efforts. This trauma has resulted in a *culture coerced to be silent* (often mistakenly referenced as a *culture of silence*), and discussion about human trafficking is rare.

Language loss due to colonialism continues to impact Native peoples' ability to communicate using words most comfortable to them to express the trauma or the victimization they are experiencing. This loss contributes to coerced silence. Some projects encountered challenges in finding proficient Native translators who were willing and able to interpret concepts and activities from the Tribes' language to English and vice versa. Sensitivity to language loss posed challenges for projects aiming to create inclusive communication processes for speakers with varying levels of fluency or none at all.

LEARNING THROUGH REFLECTION: IMPACT OF HISTORICAL TRAUMA

*"We don't discuss sex abuse, nevertheless human trafficking. This is especially when it happens intra-familially. **As a culture, it's not something we talk about. We call it 'hush-hush.'** That's a barrier when it comes to us being able to do the healing work within our community. We know it exists, but only to the extent that people are able to talk about it."*

—Project director

Several VHT-NC projects indicated the need to educate communities about the intersections of Native communities and human trafficking. These projects highlighted that some groups with narrowly focused views or purposes lead grassroots efforts that do not resonate with Native people or communities, and Native people may be reluctant to use non-Native resources or services. Additionally, historical trauma factors may impact partner relations and collaborative problem-solving. One project described this challenge in a progress report: "Indigenous survivors of human trafficking tend to seek support from more trusted community-based and culturally specific organizations. Intensive efforts to build collaboration and educate victim services about historical stigma and intrinsic bias are needed."

As noted, project sites in rural or remote areas had minimal service choices and even fewer that were culturally relevant and trauma-informed for Native people impacted by human trafficking. Some VHT-NC projects serving small Tribal communities also encountered data collection concerns related to privacy and confidentiality. This required thoughtful planning to create safe settings to discuss programmatic data collection approaches and methods. Project staff also expressed concerns with documenting cultural data, identifying measures, and learning to track and describe cultural data in reports. Some were able to consult with local cultural experts to help develop and refine culturally relevant data collection tools.

Trauma-Informed Approaches

We asked respondents to share their definitions of and perspectives on trauma-informed care or approaches. Many emphasized the need to understand the impacts of historical trauma, culturally responsive approaches, and trauma-informed practices as essential elements of a trauma-informed approach to working in Native communities (see **Exhibit 6**)—further highlighting the importance of these concepts, which were continually raised in our discussions.

Exhibit 6. Essential Elements of Trauma-Informed Care for Native Communities

SHARING KNOWLEDGE: TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE IN NATIVE COMMUNITIES

*"I think [a trauma-informed approach is] anywhere from **thinking about what it feels like for someone to walk through that front door**, right, that we're showing our medicines there, that we're purposefully trying to be **inclusive of cultural symbols, cultural statements**, whether it's on a poster, anywhere from the art to the fact that you might walk in the door any given time and **smell sage**, right. Like, not every workplace is going to have that."—Advocate*

*"I think trauma-informed means that you have a really **clear understanding of [what] true trauma looks like** in a person's life, and that **can be various types of trauma**. One of the traumas that we deal with here is **historical trauma**. And of course, we have people who are dealing with **polyvictimization**." —Partner*

Trauma-Informed Strengths

VHT-NC projects demonstrated their knowledge and application of trauma-informed principles in their outreach and case management approaches, including embracing flexibility and meeting participants where they are. Project and partner staff were aware that trauma impacts individuals' behaviors and decisions and understood the need to approach each person with open-mindedness, curiosity, and humility to learn about the participant's experiences on their own terms. The projects' trauma-informed approaches also emphasized soft skills such as listening; showing compassion; and building comfort, safety, and trust.

CELEBRATING STRENGTHS: BUILDING TRUST WITH POTENTIAL PARTICIPANTS

*"When I work with my clients, **I'm very open and very honest** with them. And I have clients who will call me just to get a ride, and I'll take them because they may not have transportation. I'm always available to them no matter what time because I have clients that don't drive. I have clients that don't have the ability to do certain things. Some of my clients, if I have to help them with food, I help them with food. So, if they need a ride to court, I take them to court. I'm very open with my clients. **I make sure that they feel comfortable enough to be able to talk to me, to be able to trust me with their life story.**"—Advocate*

*"**I'm trauma-informed because of my lens as a Native person.** So, I'm able to see how these things affect community members. I can be intentional about viewing people deeper than their addiction and kind of saying, '**What happened before? What caused this?** What's driving this?' And there's usually some huge, dramatic life experience that happened… so we're able to find **compassion** in there to do the work with people who may have outstanding life experiences. And so that translates into providing trauma-informed care."—Advocate*

Trauma-informed approaches to outreach included using materials with simple language, culturally appropriate imagery, and non-problematic graphics or pictures to represent human trafficking. Projects also implemented trauma-informed intake protocols, such as focusing on relationship and rapport building with potential participants, offering to conduct the intake in locations preferred by the participants, and adhering to timeline protocols for follow-up. Two projects amended their intake protocols to be more trauma-informed by reducing the number and type of questions asked. Individualized and participant-led services allowed participants to define their needs, goals, and service plan.

Project staff described how they also created trauma-informed spaces, such as with privacy in location, the presence of security, curating a relaxing or home-like environment, and the availability of Native art and traditional medicines like sage.

CELEBRATING STRENGTHS: PROJECTS HELP TO ENSURE PARTICIPANTS' SAFETY

*"Just the sheer fact that they had enough **security** at their office that I could go in, **feel comfortable** walking in knowing no one's going to follow me, no one's going to do anything, and if they did, they couldn't get in the building at all. To me **they're warrior aunties** and that's how I've classified them. They're **people who care unconditionally and want your safety and well-being to be taken care of**. That's the sense they gave me when I first went to the project."—Participant*

Finally, respondents shared how trauma-informed principles intersect with partners and their referral processes. Overall, key project partners had shared understandings of trauma-informed principles and practices. However, project staff believed that some of the greatest challenges to trauma-informed principles came from working with systems and partners. One project director described providing advocacy for a participant whose landlord was attempting to evict them: "I don't know if there's that type of consistency [with trauma-informed care] externally, and I know that our team have navigated instances where that wasn't the case and having to, I guess you would say, peer coach other organizations or community partners around some of the responses that they are seeing to [participants] or community members that are not uplifting and holding the value of being trauma-informed and trauma-centered."

Challenges to Trauma-Informed Practice

VHT-NC staff identified some challenges to incorporating trauma-informed approaches. First, some projects worked with participants who were very vulnerable, living at the intersections of homelessness and substance use. These project staff described trying to meet their participants' needs in a trauma-informed way, while acknowledging that participants were in survival mode and had difficulty engaging in planning or goal setting. They used a harm reduction approach to help prevent revictimization, although this raised questions for staff around the project's capacity to serve participants with intensive needs. Additionally, several projects believed that enrollment requirements for disclosure challenged their ability to be trauma-informed. Despite this, projects held steadfast in their trauma-informed approach to promote participant-led decision making and participant-led disclosure.

Survivor Engagement

The VHT-NC projects faced several challenges to incorporating survivor engagement into their project design and implementation resulting from staff capacity and their prior experience or preconceived conceptions about how to do survivor engagement ethically. There was great variation in the VHT-NC projects' implementation of survivor engagement activities and strategies, which included

- informal feedback from project participants and people with lived experience;
- feedback surveys for project participants;
- hiring people with lived experience on staff;
- establishing a partnership with a survivor leader to consult on outreach and case management strategies; and
- partnership with survivor-led service providers who provided consultation on project activities.

Survivor engagement is the process of incorporating the input, feedback, and knowledge of people with lived experience of human trafficking into project design and implementation. Survivor engagement was an encouraged component of the VHT-NC Program. Engaging people with lived experience supports programs in ensuring their service delivery and approaches are responsive to community needs, particularly around cultural needs and values and trauma-informed approaches. Survivor engagement can happen across a spectrum, from soliciting input and feedback from current program participants to consulting positions for individuals or advisory groups. It is best practice to compensate people with lived experience for sharing their expertise.

Most projects described informal ways of gathering input and feedback from people, mostly participants, with lived experience. One project reached out to participants to gather feedback on how to make their services as inclusive as possible as part of their process of creating a project manual outlining equitable practices for working with people who have experienced human trafficking. Another respondent said their organization has a grievance process in place for participants to provide feedback on services, although no participants had so far taken advantage of it.

All respondents emphasized the overall importance of listening to and learning from those with lived experience and said they hoped to increase their capacity to incorporate survivor engagement in the future.

Survivor Engagement Challenges

Most projects struggled to incorporate survivor engagement into their programs (and one did not at all), which was mostly attributed to their challenges with staffing and capacity. Some projects indicated prior experience with survivor engagement, such as experience running Youth Advisory Boards and administering participant surveys, while other projects indicated minimal experience or knowledge. The lack of experience and knowledge likely was a driving factor behind the lack of engagement activities. One project planned to establish a Survivor Advisory Board, which is a more time and labor-intensive survivor engagement activity, but was delayed due to staff capacity.

Projects shared their perceptions around challenges to survivor engagement. Respondents were concerned about ethical ways to engage with people with lived experience that did not re-traumatize or stigmatize them or push them to disclose or share their experiences before they were ready. One project partner noted challenges to survivor engagement when projects work closely with law enforcement, because people with lived experience are "really not keen on working with law enforcement…or offering their input because they're like, 'What are you going to do with this information?'" One project director said it was difficult to find people with lived experience who have the stability and readiness to provide their consultation and that those who have this stability and readiness, "are already on so many things like committees that they're overextended, too. So, you're competing with all of these organizations who want that person to be on their projects or board." The concerns around re-traumatization, stigma, and disclosure are valid ethical concerns, although surmountable with intentionality and ethical trauma-informed engagement. There are many ways to engage people with lived experience that are not focused on asking them to retell their experiences and that protect their anonymity and privacy. The anti-trafficking field is growing in the number of resources and guidance for ethical survivor engagement to address those concerns.[13]

One project consulted with a person with lived experience who shadowed their advocates on outreach activities and provided guidance to improve their outreach and case management approaches. The project was unable to pay for their time due to organizational restrictions, which was mutually dissatisfying.

SHARING KNOWLEDGE: THE VALUE OF SURVIVOR ENGAGEMENT

*"**When we allow [survivors] the opportunity to use their voice and their story**, and when I'm talking to them, **whatever they share helps raise the vibration for everybody else**. And beyond the fear. There's no shame, no guilt, no fear that is allowed in here. This is your safe space. It doesn't leave here. It stays here. And we smudge it, and we cleanse it."—Advocate*

Survivor Engagement: Looking to the Future

Project and partner staff described various plans to improve or strengthen their capacity for survivor engagement. One internal project partner said their participation in a local taskforce made them aware of how crucial survivor engagement is to designing and implementing programs that cater to the needs of people who have experienced human trafficking. In the future, some projects aim to incorporate survivor engagement through more formal means such as surveys, a Youth Advisory Board, taskforces, a Survivors' Network, and pathways to offering participants jobs as peer mentors. Project staff said these types of activities would help solidify survivor engagement as a core aspect of their programs even past the VHT-NC award period.

Many respondents said that while they hoped to incorporate survivor engagement into their projects in the future, numerous factors had to be taken into consideration before they could do so ethically. One VHT-NC project staff said although many people with lived experience want to help others by sharing their experiences, programs need to acknowledge the fear that comes with publicly identifying yourself as a survivor of human trafficking. Additionally, an external partner said it is crucial to pay those with lived experience for the time and emotional labor, saying, "I think that our willingness to do the work for free is taken advantage of."

Overall, most respondents agreed that when incorporating survivor engagement into project design and implementation, it is necessary to consider first and foremost whether people with lived experience themselves are benefitting from providing their input and knowledge. One advocate said that while doing outreach with a partner with lived experience, they were reminded to "keep shifting my thinking to what they want for themselves and not what I want from them."

LEARNING THROUGH REFLECTION: THE POWER OF PEER REFERRAL

"I think it's out there, that women are being trafficked, but I think we need to speak up more. Those that have experienced it. So, I can see the ones that are more new into it not wanting to right now—they're still scared. But ***I would love to be able to help other women by voicing my opinion and showing them that there is help, there is hope****, and with these programs it's capable of getting help."—Participant*

VHT-NC Partnerships

Partnerships are a critical part of building a project to effectively serve Native people who have experienced human trafficking. The VHT-NC formative evaluation Interim Report described the projects' efforts to identify, partner, and collaborate with a range of Tribal departments and programs, Native-specific organizations, mainstream non-profit organizations, grassroots organizations, and more to build out their service and resource networks. The strengths that facilitated partnership building and the challenges the projects faced in the first 2 years of implementation are also detailed.

The VHT-NC projects maintained their focus on partnership development and strengthening in the final award year. In this section, we provide a high-level overview of key characteristics of the projects' primary partners. Then, we describe overarching partnership challenges and strengths shared by respondents.

Partnership Characteristics

The six VHT-NC projects partnered with a variety of organizations and agencies within their service area to increase their capacity to provide services to those experiencing human trafficking. Partners—both formal and informal—served as information sharing resources and referral sources to the VHT-NC projects. VHT-NC partnerships included the following types of organizations: shelter and housing; behavioral health; human trafficking; domestic violence and sexual assault; family and youth services; Tribal or Native-specific; cultural services; MMIP advocacy; outreach, education, and civic engagement; health care; legal advocacy; law enforcement; and corrections and re-entry.

Exhibit 7 details the types of organizations with which each VHT-NC project formed key partnerships (e.g., not including referral only sources). VHT-NC projects most commonly partnered with organizations focused on shelter and housing; behavioral health; human trafficking; domestic violence and sexual assault; family and youth services; Tribal or Native-specific; cultural services; and outreach, education, and civic engagement. Notably, in our interviews, respondents highlighted challenges connecting to law enforcement, healthcare providers, and schools (potentially due to competing priorities during the COVID-19 pandemic).

Partnership Development and Collaboration

Common partnership facilitators and challenges that respondents identified often paralleled each other. **Exhibit 8** aligns corresponding facilitators and challenges, showing how certain factors can shift to one or the other depending on a partnership's strengths or barriers. As shown, communication, transparency, consistency, flexibility, and buy-in from Tribal or organizational leadership were viewed as partnership facilitators.

Exhibit 7. VHT-NC Projects' Key Partner Features

Partner Type*	Site 1	Site 2	Site 3	Site 4	Site 5	Site 6
Shelter/housing	◆	◆	◆		◆	
Behavioral health	◆	◆			◆	◆
Human trafficking	◆	◆		◆	◆	◆
Domestic violence/sexual assault	◆		◆	◆		◆
Family/youth services	◆	◆	◆		◆	◆
Tribal or Native-specific	◆	◆	◆	◆	◆	
Cultural services	◆		◆		◆	◆
MMIP				◆	◆	◆
Outreach, education, civic engagement		◆		◆	◆	◆
Healthcare	◆			◆		◆
Legal advocacy	◆			◆		◆
Law enforcement	◆					◆
Corrections/reentry					◆	◆

*Note: Partners can fall into more than one category.

Exhibit 8. Challenges and Facilitators to Successful Partner Collaboration

Partnership Facilitators	Partnership Challenges
◆ Consistent communication and transparency	◆ Lack of communication
◆ Stability and consistency in the relationship	◆ Staff turnover (may lead to loss of connection and instability)
◆ Flexibility	◆ Lengthy or burdensome approval or administrative processes ◊ Particularly impactful for smaller organizations or individual community members
◆ Buy-in from Tribal or organizational leadership	◆ Perceived or actual lack of buy-in or commitment to VHT-NC from leadership

Developing Meaningful and Trusting Partnerships

VHT-NC project and partner staff alike shared that the time needed to develop meaningful relationships was a challenge in the sense that projects were working within the award time limits and they felt the urgency to provide participants with access to as wide an array of services as quickly as possible.

Respondents highlighted that partnership development often encompassed many steps, resulting in a lengthy process that included

- research to identify appropriate potential partners;
- initial outreach and engagement;
- ongoing trust building;
- education or training about Native communities, human trafficking, or both;
- understanding each other's services and capabilities;
- agreement about roles and responsibilities (formal [e.g., Memorandum of Understanding] or informal); and
- ongoing communication and coordination.

This process could be impeded by project or partner staff turnover if steps had to be repeated.

LEARNING THROUGH REFLECTION: TIME AND STABILITY HELP TO BUILD MEANINGFUL PARTNERSHIPS

*"**Partnering is hard**, and it's all I do. I know how hard it is. And just **to form those meaningful partnerships—some of it I just think is time**, you know? Time, **keeping people in their positions** in a way that they can actually focus on what they're trying to do. That's really important."—Partner*

Conducting outreach and raising awareness and understanding about the VHT-NC projects was an essential step not only for potential partners but also within the larger community. Respondents explained that establishing connections and gaining trust and acceptance in the community might be necessary before conducting outreach to specific organizations. Several respondents also advised that maintaining visibility in the community you are hoping to serve is important as it indicates commitment to the people and the issues being addressed.

LEARNING THROUGH REFLECTION: BUILDING COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS IS FOUNDATIONAL

*"[For outreach], I've just been focusing on how we can **create more of a community partnership** because [the project hasn't] been able to create connections with…a health center…and that's the kind of place where everybody's going to go to. And I think it would be imperative that they have a connection there…and just **create a space, because everyone will see you there**… I really think the community connection could be stronger and I feel like doing a more party outreach, you know, and **inviting them in for food and drinks and connection would go farther**."—Partner*

*"I think what **we've really learned is we're not going to go into a community and say, 'Hey, we're [organization], want to talk about trafficking**?' And so, I think that's just been so much more beneficial, **the longer periods of time we're able to go** [to partner's service area], because we're able to just **meet with community members**, go into, depending on the place, clinics… We're getting to go into [specific industries] and **just have conversations with people**."—Project director*

Potential partners had varying levels of understanding about human trafficking, which can be a sensitive topic to discuss openly. As such, building a partnership with the goal of responding to human trafficking in Native communities needed to be approached with care. Building trust was essential to these partnerships and could not be rushed. Respondents reflected that strong relationships are often developed through regular communication and information sharing but also highlighted the strength of being in community together (e.g., helping at each other's events or participating together in community events). Some respondents said that it was also important to spend time together informally (i.e., not necessarily related to the project or work), and several noted that gathering to share food and company is a valued, traditional way to connect with each other.

SHARING KNOWLEDGE: TAKE THE TIME TO CONNECT AND KNOW EACH OTHER

"I think a lot of [partner engagement within Native communities] is just directly being out there in the community… We have tabled at events, going to other events… To marches… To the MMIP events… ***Being in spaces where we can directly engage with the community and introduce ourselves and so they know we're out here, we're doing this work… That's been our main approach****… We've done flyers and…round tables and brown paper bag discussions… We've done those, but I think our main thing is just being out in the community."—Project director*

"[Successful partnership] is not just about the constant communication. ***It's really about meeting in person, communicating at community events****. The more you see each other at a community event seems* ***to really create that connection and create the desire to want to work together****. I see that with other departments, as well, that it's like, 'Hey, it's me again, hey, see you again.'… When you do reach out and go, 'Hey, we need this,' it's like, 'Oh, I remember you, and I know you personally, and I'm going to be a little more enthusiastic about working with you'…* ***Because you've created that kind of relationship, which I think is true about most of Indian Country****. It's always about building those relationships."—Partner*

Identifying Appropriate and Experienced Partners

The project communities' existing service capacity was often a barrier to identifying partners who could provide appropriate services for VHT-NC participants. Projects wanted to ensure that participants were receiving trauma-informed and culturally responsive care, and they recognized the harm that can come from referring participants to a provider unequipped to work with Native people impacted by human trafficking. One advocate shed light on this barrier: "I don't want to send anyone to somebody that's inappropriate … Somebody that's going to…revictimize them just in conversation because they don't know…what human trafficking is… It's very sensitive. We want to make sure we give them the best possible resources."

Identifying appropriate providers required research and vetting, and there were several levels of competency to consider:

- competency to provide the needed service (e.g., mental health, emergency housing);
- competency to appropriately work with people who have experienced human trafficking; and
- competency to appropriately work with Native people.

To this last point, it is important to remember that many of the projects served large urban areas, and their participants represented a variety of Tribes or Native communities with unique cultural values and traditions. The number of providers who possessed all three competencies was often small, and in some remote areas, potentially nonexistent. One partner identified this challenge in their service area: "Human trafficking is new. It was really taboo to talk about. Same with domestic violence—really, any type of victimization… So, the services, really, in our region are minimalistic."

Project staff continually searched for appropriate resources, and some sought input from other providers when their research did not yield results. One respondent identified limited staffing capacity as a barrier because most project staff were also simultaneously responsible for or assisting with other project components (i.e., outreach, case management, training). As one project director said about relationship building, "Most of the challenges have been… We just haven't had the capacity to consistently be out there and can do that relationship building… Some places…we just didn't know who exactly to reach out to, to set up those meetings."

LEARNING THROUGH REFLECTION: ACKNOWLEDGING SERVICE AVAILABILITY GAPS

"Some of the other partnerships that we see are critical are a little harder to build and sustain… What we are seeing is a huge, ***huge need for us to really have…one or few specific partnerships with culturally competent or culturally specific mental health providers and substance use providers****. That's a huge piece. And* ***we, unfortunately, in the 3 years of this project, haven't had a lot of luck identifying a local resource in our community*** *that we want to try to intentionally build that relationship with, and for the most part have just been* ***relying on word of mouth of different providers*** *that we will then try to get more information on. Or if we are going to connect a [participant], that we're really intentionally doing that handoff, taking them there, all of that type of stuff."—Project director*

"The time frames…to do certain things that they're requiring of us, it's really hard, especially coming out of the pandemic. It's been hard for us to be able to negotiate the avenue of connection. So, it's coming slowly. We're getting the outreach done and making those connections—the referrals, ***trying to find the most appropriate and best practice providers for mental health and SUD [substance use disorders] and that are culturally appropriate for anyone that comes in*** *from whatever…demographic they come from… That's not something that can happen even overnight. Sometimes it takes up to a month of researching and calling all the areas because we're [in multiple regions]. So, we are trying to make sure that we find those best services. We can't provide them if we don't know… I'm finding that* ***a lot of [providers] aren't trauma-informed****, and I'm finding that a lot of them have not ever worked with trafficking victims."*
—Advocate

Building Partnerships in Fragmented Systems

Respondents also identified the need to overcome a history of silos in their communities and competition between organizations driven by limited funding and resources. Several respondents described relationship building with new partners in much the same way they described relationship building with participants, emphasizing a holistic approach to understanding each other's mission, values, work and communication styles, and strengths, and engaging in cultural activities as a way to get to know each other. One partner shared, "My first objective before…sharing my program with other programs…is to really remove whatever past history has been… I invite those programs over and we do cultural crafting activities. I call it team building. Have a little food because we work so hard."

LEARNING THROUGH REFLECTION: USING A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO IDENTIFY STRENGTHS

"I think there's a lot of critical partnerships for this project that need to be developed throughout, I'm going to guess, all of the communities that have this funding, because if their community is anything like ours, there's a lot, and it's so ***scattered and siloed****. And I think again, it's one thing to know about a resource and the information to refer someone or direct someone. But it's another thing to* ***really take the time to understand the services that we are providing, how they differ, how they're similar, where there's gaps, where there's opportunities*** *to be like, 'Oh, we're both trying to do this? Why don't we do it together? Or, you already have this? That's amazing. What can you tell us?… No one provider is going to be the expert in it all.'"—Project director*

"[My most important lesson learned is] to ***be flexible****. And really, I think that we just have kind of an assumption sometimes of what somebody can do. So,* ***getting to know them as an agency as a whole*** *versus the project that you're working on together, because I think that sometimes you're just so focused on, oh, I'm working with this certain person on this certain project, but* ***there's really so much more opportunity for referrals and partnerships*** *just as agencies as a whole."—Project director*

Respondents advocated strongly for embracing collaboration opportunities and highlighted reciprocity (e.g., helping partners with their projects or activities) as a guiding value. Respondents recognized that a fragmented system is weakened by the gaps that participants can (and do) fall through, but a system of organizations working together, each playing to their strengths and closing those gaps through collaboration and coordination, provides a fortified environment in which participants are supported throughout their healing journey. As one partner underscored, "We can't do systemic change as an individual organization."

LEARNING THROUGH REFLECTION: COLLABORATIVE SERVICE PROVISION CAN BETTER MEET PARTICIPANT NEEDS

"Sometimes it feels like doing things yourself is easier… I'll just figure out how to present on this thing because I can just do it… And it's like, oh, ***it's actually really helpful having partners and kind of not having to take everything on****, and having partners that you* ***trust*** *and do* ***communicate*** *with on a regular basis to work together…to know that they're gonna follow up if you ask them something or refer somebody… We're always kind of repping each other. And it's not about what organization…* ***It's about the [participant] and what needs would better suit this person****."—Advocate*

"[A lesson learned about partnership], it's more for me about validation of, we have to work together. That we can't succeed, and ***'we' being all service providers, can't succeed unless we are making an effort to work with one another****. It's so easy to, kind of, find like-minded people or to be siloed with the people that are doing the same work as you. And we say this, right? Like, we say, 'We can't hold it all,' or, 'I can't do the work without you,' but* ***we don't always live that****. And so, for me, it's through these partnerships that we're reminded that there's so much validity in that—I can't do my job without you. And that might change. You know, some days I might take the lead, or you might take the lead. But overall,* ***I can't be effective or most beneficial if I'm trying to do everything by myself****."—Advocate*

Partnerships Strengths

Most respondents conveyed that, over the course of the project, they were successful in building strong relationships, with some enhancing partnerships that pre-dated the VHT-NC award. As one partner described their relationship with the VHT-NC team, "Now we're like extended family… It's nice that we can ask them for help when we need it." Several respondents echoed this sentiment about being able to lean on each other, uplift each other, and amplify each other's strengths.

All partnerships need care and attention to flourish, and although all the projects experienced challenges, they showed resilience in navigating them as they continued to learn and to center participants' needs. Most respondents described their partnerships positively and in terms of growth. For example, one partner shared, "The relationship with [VHT-NC staff] is super uplifting and empowering… I see their heart and how much they're into making an impact versus just running this program… That's been super, just fruitful. And I've really enjoyed seeing them expand."

Overall, project staff and partners were optimistic about the trajectory of their partnerships and felt they were on solid footing to continue after the award's end. One project director noted that one of their partners invited them to apply for another funding opportunity together and said, "That feels really successful." One advocate expressed hope for the future of their partnerships and project goals as a whole: "I think [partnership is] still a lesson that we're learning because not all of us are sitting at the table just yet. But there's hope in that. Like, if we've gotten some of us to the table, then it's only a matter of time before we're all together and we're all working towards this goal."

CELEBRATING STRENGTHS: SUCCESSES IN PARTNERSHIP BUILDING

*"Our partnership with [partner] has really grown, and I think **it's been really awesome to be able to go back and forth in asking for support from each other**. And when events come up, having those conversations, 'Can we table together? Oh, you're presenting somewhere. Do you want to come present with us?' and vice versa. And being able to utilize each other for other projects. Also, they are making…boxes for another grant they have, and they're sending them to all of their Tribes, and then the Tribes will distribute them. They called, "Hey, we're putting these together. Do you want to add information about trafficking and [award recipient]?" And I just think that there's been a lot of great success with that partnership."—Project director*

*"I think **openness on both sides** [is what works about the partnership]. All of our partners kind of, in general, welcome us and want to be able to work with us. And so, they're willing to really learn about what it is we're doing. Why our service exists. Why it exists in the area. And I think we're coming to a place now where they are saying, like, 'I'm ready to look for this.' Because that was a huge thing before of, like, nobody wants to say that they know somebody. And so, **I'm hoping, really, that that's how all of our partnerships continue to grow is because we really are learning together** that this isn't just a "they" problem or, you know, it doesn't happen here… You see that we don't have a lot of partnerships, but the ones that we have are **meaningful** in the fact that **we support one another** and that we really are interested in **trying to help one another succeed**, and we try to make it as **reciprocal** as possible in the work that we're doing." —Advocate*

VHT-NC Outreach, Identification, and Enrollment

In this section, we describe the VHT-NC projects' outreach strategies, challenges, and successes. We also detail their challenges and successes related to participant identification and enrollment. Additional information about the projects' approaches, challenges, and successes to outreach, identification, and enrollment is available in the Interim Report, in addition to the demographics of the participants enrolled through Year 2.

Outreach

Strategies for Outreach

VHT-NC project staff described a range of outreach strategies that clustered around five general approaches: (1) having a presence at community events; (2) partnering with other organizations within the community; (3) conducting direct street-based outreach to people who may be experiencing human trafficking, often including the distribution of flyers or other resources; (4) pairing human trafficking education with events addressing intersectional issues in the community, such as domestic violence or MMIP; and (5) highlighting the culturally specific knowledge and connections among project staff and partners. These approaches are not mutually exclusive; many of the outreach strategies employed by VHT-NC projects included elements of several of these approaches.

Community Events

Across VHT-NC sites, project staff described efforts to conduct outreach at community events. Although in the early years of project implementation, several sites conducted virtual outreach events due to the COVID-19 pandemic, by the end of the demonstration award period, all project sites were conducting most of their outreach in person. However, some programs maintained at least a few virtual outreach activities, including an annual social media campaign and virtual awareness-raising presentations. Even when the restrictions of the pandemic eased, virtual events allowed for broader reach, especially in sites with expansive rural regions.

LEARNING THROUGH REFLECTION: MAINTAINING SELECT VIRTUAL PRACTICES

*"It's a very **spread out region and also very difficult to access** out of all places, because a lot of them are very small, remote communities and islands. But they're going out to their communities doing a lot of outreach. They do a lot of virtual things…they're just **trying to bring awarenes**s."—Project director*

Project staff from all sites described beginning to conduct in-person outreach at community events as pandemic restrictions eased. Several projects described setting up tables at community events, ranging from small gatherings to large multi-day convenings, including MMIP events at the state capital, multi-day conventions for professionals from across the state, marches, healing circles, school events, annual powwows, events at local museums, and homecoming gatherings.

At these gatherings, staff described providing resources about human trafficking or the VHT-NC project. The primary objective of participating in these community events was to increase awareness of the project within the community, which staff believed would ultimately increase referrals to the project.

CELEBRATING STRENGTHS: PRESENCE IN THE COMMUNITY

*"And we do a lot of outreach. **We're at like all the community events.** But I try to put myself in attenders' or attendees' shoes, and when I'm at outreach events, I walk around and I find myself avoiding certain tables. And so, I'm trying to figure out why. What is it about that table? Why I'm trying to avoid it. What can they do to make me feel welcome to approach them? … It has to be more basic. Big, visible signage and have…some kind of activity going on…They like free things or food. So just **being creative on how to get their attention and bring them in**."—Project director*

*"We have homecoming gatherings where on Saturday before homecoming, we have people that sell their jewelry that they have made or the T-shirts with our [Tribe] everything on there. And **then I have a table over there with all my information** that I've gathered that I can give out to them and just let them know because we have a different group every year. Because **our people are not just here. They're all over everywhere**."—Advocate*

Partnering with Other Community-Based Organizations

Effective collaboration with partner agencies within each VHT-NC site community was imperative to each project's outreach efforts. Partnership with other community-based organizations for the purpose of outreach took many different forms. Some VHT-NC projects provided outreach and trainings to other victim service providers about the project's purpose and scope, with the hope that other programs might refer eligible participants who had experienced human trafficking to the project. This relationship building also offered the opportunity for bidirectional referrals: sometimes VHT-NC projects referred participants for specific services or provided warm handoffs to partner agencies if participants were ineligible for VHT-NC services. Some projects also conducted outreach to other types of community-based providers, including medical providers and law enforcement agencies, to ensure that they were aware of the availability of VHT-NC services and to offer trainings to staff.

Other partnerships were geared less toward referrals and instead focused on enhancing the ability of VHT-NC staff to conduct outreach activities. Several VHT-NC projects focused on direct outreach to homeless encampments, and these project staff often benefitted from partnerships with other organizations with an established and trusted presence within these settings, such as those providing food and safety resources. As one advocate described, there were multiple benefits to this collective outreach, including increased safety and less focus on the VHT-NC staff's identity as anti-human trafficking service providers. Partnering with a different type of outreach worker helped soften the perception of VHT-NC advocates among community members.

Because VHT-NC projects were new, it was also useful to engage with more established community-based organizations to understand the landscape of existing service provision in communities and the range of service availability. Other projects were able to articulate their own services and navigate the development of complementary but not overlapping services.

For VHT-NC project staff who were non-Native, community partner engagement was critical to establishing a trusted presence within the community. One advocate described engaging community partners as a strategy to ensure that the project goals and objectives were responsive to the actual needs of the community.

LEARNING THROUGH REFLECTION: INCORPORATING THE KNOWLEDGE OF COMMUNITY PARTNERS

"I'm very much an outsider. So as much as I can try my best to use what I think are appropriate cultural strategies, it may just not work sometimes because that's how it is, right? ***So, for me, I've tried lots of community partner engagement. So, trying to get in with those who are already established in the community, who are from the community, speaking with various group leaders and discussing with them our services, what we offer, what our goals are, and then asking them, 'Does this fall in line with what you see the needs are*** *for this community?'"—Advocate*

Relationship building with other agencies took many forms, ranging from building on existing relationships to establishing new relationships with service providers who VHT-NC staff met through trainings, working groups, or other community collaboratives. One VHT-NC advocate described taking a creative approach to building relationships with community providers by opening their own doors for other community-based advocates to come and use their resources, such as their healing room.

CELEBRATING STRENGTHS: OFFERING HEALING RESOURCES TO OTHER ADVOCATES

"[We have] opened up our healing room to our community partners that we have here. I was able to offer them, this week, to come to the Reiki as well. So, ***offering healing to the advocate community****. The other thing that we talked about is we'd like to do an advocate retreat. We've got some space so that could happen."—Advocate*

Direct Outreach

Many VHT-NC projects included direct outreach as a component of their work. Several projects focused on street-based outreach within homeless encampments in which there was known or suspected human trafficking activity. Staff who engaged in this direct outreach often noted that a strategy to engage with community members during these efforts was to bring and distribute basic necessities, which offered the opportunity for initial conversations as well as ongoing rapport building if these efforts were repeated over time. These efforts were also described as helpful to normalize the presence of VHT-NC staff so that if a community member was seen talking with a staff member, others would not assume the conversation was about human trafficking victimization. As one advocate explained, "My presence is normalized and them seeing me with other folks. Like this little old man who is very helpful, I'll go and I'll hang out with them, talk…with him for a while. So that way they see that I do that with everyone." Respondents described providing sleeping bags, food, and hygiene products as part of their outreach activities.

SHARING KNOWLEDGE: BUILDING RAPPORT THROUGH DIRECT OUTREACH

*"We've done street outreach going into the homeless encampments and talking to some people in those camps. They're getting transported from multiple homeless camps, crossing counties even… **We put together a team and go out there and provide outreach bags and offer services, do intakes with people who are willing to accept our services.** I call it a can of worms because it just keeps going and going."—Project director*

*"So, when it came to outreach, people have not really sought us out. We've definitely been more so trying to talk to people…[about] what exactly human trafficking can look like, and our services, how we can help folks even if they have experienced human trafficking or are in a current trafficking situation. So, for us, we started mostly with the homeless encampments. **We get a lot of donations from the local food bank, so we would provide them with food donations, hygiene donations, things like that and kind of explain about our program and what services we provide**."—Advocate*

Some VHT-NC projects also conducted outreach by reaching out to personnel in locations where human trafficking might occur, such as in motels or casinos on or near reservations. Project staff also described distributing or displaying flyers about human trafficking awareness or the resources available through their specific projects in locations such as motels, truck stops, gas stations, clinics, and other medical facilities.

Pairing Trafficking Awareness with Other Intersectional Issues

Respondents commonly expressed that human trafficking was a difficult topic to broach within their communities. In two sites, instead of pursuing outreach and awareness activities specific to the issue of human trafficking, VHT-NC staff described framing human trafficking as a correlated issue to intersectional topics that are more openly discussed in Native communities, such as the MMIP crisis or intimate partner violence. Opening conversations with a more familiar orientation allowed these staff members to introduce the issue of human trafficking in a way that was less stigmatizing to community members. As one project coordinator said, "They don't want to go to a trafficking meeting, but they would go to a MMIW prevention training or meeting. And so, how [can] we make it something that they are interested in… I think MMIW has opened that door."

Highlighting Culturally Specific Knowledge Among Project Staff

A final approach to outreach among VHT-NC projects involved efforts to distinguish VHT-NC programming from other programs in the community by highlighting culturally specific services, cultural relevance, or culturally specific knowledge among project staff. One advocate described infusing culture into their outreach practices by creating a beading class for youth and then using this as a space to initiate conversations about topics relevant to participants, including human trafficking. Similarly, one project director described incorporating outreach into community conversations. In this site, project staff invited a community conversation about traditional medicines and medicine wheel teachings and incorporated dialogue about exploitation and resources available into these conversations.

CELEBRATING STRENGTHS: HIGHLIGHTING CULTURALLY SPECIFIC KNOWLEDGE AND SERVICES

*"I think we really need to be advertising ourselves as culturally competent. Right? The cultural specificity piece comes in where, you know, for us, we have this funding to do this anti-trafficking work specifically for the Native community, and **we know that access to culture and tradition is a protective factor.**"—Project director*

Outreach Challenges

Respondents described a variety of outreach challenges. Across these challenges, a dominant theme emerged: the importance of building trust within communities.

Limited Staff Capacity for Outreach Activities

Several VHT-NC project staff noted that a major challenge to effective outreach was limited staff capacity. Several projects had VHT-NC project roles that remained unfilled for substantial amounts of time, and other projects experienced a high degree of staff turnover. For some projects, this meant that staff responsible for direct service provision were also tasked with outreach activities.

Another consideration among VHT-NC project leadership that impacted outreach was staff safety. Although multiple sites reported that street-based outreach was an effective form of community engagement, these sites often developed safety protocols for these efforts that mandated outreach be done in teams or in partnership with other community-based providers, which could be difficult to coordinate.

During the first year of the project, the COVID-19 pandemic prevented some outreach activities, and at least one VHT-NC site reported that their outreach efforts were hampered when project staff became ill. While some sites successfully pivoted their outreach efforts to virtual modalities, at least one site noted that members of their community did not have widespread or consistent internet access and could not participate in virtual outreach events.

Human Trafficking is a Taboo Topic

Several VHT-NC staff reported difficulty discerning how to talk with community members about human trafficking in a relatable way. One advocate described trying to engage community leaders to support outreach efforts and being met with resistance, which they attributed to a lack of familiarity with the topic, the feeling that it could not happen in such a tight-knit community, or that the topic of human trafficking is taboo. “I think for some folks, it is denial, because we’ve heard…no, it doesn’t happen here. But there’s also this cultural piece that comes in of, you know, we protect our own. We wouldn’t do that. And so, I think we’re not ready to confront that just yet.” One respondent believed that “a lot of [human trafficking] is familial, and…it’s like, intergenerational trauma. It’s really difficult to talk about with folks. And doing outreach is super awkward still.” An external partner in another site echoed this sentiment but added that an antidote to addressing the taboo nature of human trafficking is active relationship building with community members.

Need for a Broader Definition of Outreach

Several respondents described the narrow VHT-NC definition of outreach, which did not include raising public awareness, as a barrier to effective outreach. Many respondents conducted wide, sweeping outreach efforts to Native populations that may be vulnerable to trafficking, but described this as broader than what was expected of VHT-NC projects. However, due to the sensitive nature of the topic of human trafficking and different levels of awareness within the VHT-NC communities, some respondents believed that taking a sweeping approach to outreach and awareness activities was not only helpful but critical. Importantly, the FY2023 Notification of Funding Opportunity for the VHT-NC Program allowed awareness activities based on feedback received from the VHT-NC projects funded in FY2020.

LEARNING THROUGH REFLECTION: BROADENING INTENDED POPULATIONS FOR OUTREACH ACTIVITIES

*"What we thought of as outreach, it was redefined as more of a targeted outreach to populations that are at risk. And **when you work in Indian Country, 97% of your population is at risk for whatever it might be**. So, I go back to that training mindset. I think when you have services in Indian Country…and in rural Indian Country and communities, your community agencies and your public need to see what your services are before they'll trust you or know exactly what you're offering them. And so, I consider outreach exactly that. Let's get our word out there. Let's get our services out there, and people will know to contact us. So that might sound more like marketing, but in our mindset, that's community outreach."—Project director*

A few VHT-NC project staff described that among the populations prioritized for outreach, people often had basic needs to address before they could possibly process any information about human trafficking. The actual process of moving from outreach activities to identification of potential or confirmed human trafficking experiences takes time, and this long process of building relationships does not necessarily fit neatly within award expectations. One project director shared their frustration that prospective participants were asking for services, but that they could not be provided until human trafficking victimization had been identified; however, this project director believed that to be able to work with the participant closely enough for them to disclose their human trafficking victimization experience, they first needed their most basic needs met.

Establishing Relationships with Other Community-Based Organizations

Finally, some VHT-NC project staff expressed difficulty connecting with other organizations in their community, which resulted in challenges to outreach. One advocate felt that, despite their efforts to establish relationships and referral protocols with local hospitals and law enforcement agencies, "they have their own people that they will work with" and "they're not quick to help." This was more of an issue for VHT-NC projects establishing a brand new anti-trafficking program than for those building off existing programs. Projects attempting to conduct direct outreach in partnership with other service providers described sometimes encountering resistance to the idea of shared outreach endeavors. One advocate shared, "As it is in a lot of cultures, trafficking and sexual abuse aren't things you talk about. And so, being able to find an organization who will allow us to talk to their participants has been pretty challenging."

Outreach Successes

Increased Community Awareness

VHT-NC staff and partners mostly felt their community outreach was successful in terms of increased community awareness of human trafficking as well as awareness of the existence and purpose of the VHT-NC project in the community. One advocate noted that their outreach resulted in having many "more rich conversations" with community members. Another advocate reported being most proud of their outreach efforts giving people a more realistic understanding of what human trafficking is (including its "subtle nature") and helping close the gap between what people think it is and what it really is so that they are better able to identify it.

CELEBRATING STRENGTHS: INCREASED COMMUNITY AWARENESS

"[We are] educating everyone slow but sure. Like last year, they had no idea. And now this year, they know, 'Hey, there's an anti-trafficking program going on. We know who the point of contact is and we know how to get these people services.' So ***our awareness is getting out there****. Now that the Tribe is opening for more in-person events…I presented at the stage of our powwow throughout the entire powwow weekend…We even had another service provider from another department bring somebody to us and say, 'these are the people you want to talk to.' So it's working.* ***They're recognizing we're out there, they're recognizing what services we have to offer, and it's starting to work.****"—Project director*

Increased Trust Within the Community

Several VHT-NC staff and partners described increased trust within the community as a critical success related to outreach efforts. This trust was important with individual members of the community, other community-based organizations, and Tribal leadership.

CELEBRATING STRENGTHS: ESTABLISHING TRUST WITHIN COMMUNITIES

"It's like layers of an onion. We've done outreach with communities that we know the most about, and now that we're ***building trust****, we're* ***doing more outreach to the communities that are hidden****. As we continue to build trust, we'll be able to continue to gain access to harder-to-reach populations."—Project director*

Along with increased trust in the community, some respondents believed that program visibility was an important outcome related to outreach activities. One project director described successful outreach as resulting in community members recognizing that the program exists and being more open to discussion or acceptance of services.

Identification and Enrollment

VHT-NC staff and partners described a range of challenges and facilitators to the successful identification and enrollment of people who have experienced human trafficking and would be eligible for project services.

Identification and Enrollment Challenges

Lack of Self-Identification

By far, the most commonly reported challenge to identifying potential participants was a lack of self-identification among people who have experienced human trafficking. Respondents described several nuanced reasons why people in the community may not want to self-identify as having experienced human trafficking. One reason, particularly for those who are in situations involving familial trafficking, is that the abuse they have experienced is so normalized, they may not think to reach out and seek services or understand that their experience meets the definition of human trafficking. As one advocate said, "The realization that the familial entity that's attached to that is frightening, and they're just so conditioned and normalized that they have no idea." Other VHT-NC staff and partners reinforced the idea that participants often came to the VHT-NC or partner programs because they needed help, but did not immediately understand or disclose that they had experienced human trafficking victimization.

LEARNING THROUGH REFLECTION: ALLOWING PARTICIPANTS TIME TO UNDERSTAND AND DISCLOSE TRAFFICKING EXPERIENCES

*"I think a big difference between working with human trafficking survivors and my past of working with domestic violence and sexual assault is that….and **when I worked in a DV shelter people were a lot more comfortable coming and saying, 'this is what I experienced, this is what I need help with**.' And I think that with most of the human trafficking survivors I've worked with, that hasn't been their initial approach. They needed help with something else and then after having worked together for longer periods of time, it has also come out that they have been trafficked."—Project director*

*"It's just like **you don't identify the trafficking until you've been working with someone for months sometimes**. It's like, oh,…I came in for this need because this was my most acute need. And also, this other thing is happening and I don't know what to make of it…because sometimes people don't even realize it or they…don't feel safe enough to talk about it even."—Partner*

Importantly, respondents also described situations in which people understood that they had experienced human trafficking but still did not want to self-identify. VHT-NC staff attributed this to several reasons, including a disinterest in participating in anti-trafficking programming. For some, this was due to the time commitment required for continued engagement with services. As one project director explained, "I think inflation and just the rising cost of living have been a huge impact to all services. People don't have the time—they'd rather be working or hustling rather than participating in services." VHT-NC staff also reported that some potential participants were reluctant to identify with the term "human trafficking," and others feared retribution from their perpetrator or other community members.

LEARNING THROUGH REFLECTION: ABSENCE OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING SELF-IDENTIFICATION MAY NOT REFLECT ACTUAL EXPERIENCE

*"I think **a lot of times it's hard to get Native people in general to identify as a victim of anything**. They just kind of want – like, when it happens, they just want it to be done and they move on…I think it's a combination of everything. It's either they just don't want the help, or last time when they did reach out for the help, they potentially got held more accountable by the perpetrator, or when they did reach out, they didn't get the help they expected to get, or they didn't want to get involved with trying to do the programming."—Advocate*

*"**People don't necessarily want help.** Realizing that we can't put on a superhero cape and go into the hotel and get her out, you know, lock him up, that it just doesn't work [that] way…That superhero cape looks a lot like an auntie hug, you know, that it's that **non-judgmental, kind and caring, somebody who is not telling me what to do, but who's there just to love me**, yeah that superhero cape."—Advocate*

*"I think about a trafficking victim that I sat down with in our domestic violence agency. I was frustrated because this trafficking victim wasn't engaging in trafficking services, and why isn't she?… Well, I sat down with that victim, **and she was not mentally able to identify as a trafficking victim for services because it was too hurtful for her**. So **that was her trauma**. How did we proceed? She was still a sexual assault victim. You can still get services. Until she…was ready to accept the services for trafficking, we couldn't force her. You're not going to be forced to label yourself."—Project director*

Several respondents spoke to the challenge of needing to confirm that participants had experienced human trafficking within a certain period of time in order for them to be eligible for VHT-NC services. One project director described this challenge: "That restriction of only being able to serve folks that we know have been trafficked is a barrier for [potential participants] that have been trafficked and won't disclose." This project director explained that they adapted their referral and screening process because they still wanted to serve these participants, but they would often be put on a waitlist for a different program their agency offered, which was not culturally specific but also did not require disclosure of trafficking victimization to qualify. While not ideal, this was the best option the project could identify "to remain as trauma-informed as possible."

Lack of Referrals

Although some VHT-NC projects were well-networked and received participant referrals from other community agencies, some projects did not receive many, or any, referrals from outside organizations. This variation in experience may be due to the varied length of time programs had been established within their communities: newer programs needed to take time to build trust and rapport within their communities, whereas more established programs could move straight into the phase of receiving referrals for eligible VHT-NC participants.

Lack of an Appropriate Screening Tool

Some project staff described challenges finding or adapting a screening tool with language that resonated with participants and was an appropriate length. One project director highlighted the importance of building a relationship with potential participants before using a human trafficking screening tool because some are "not wanting to be asked these things." One advocate described how the length and specificity of their screening tool was a challenge: "It's a lot. It's really a lot of information to gather from somebody who is in that predicament."

Identification and Enrollment Successes

Successful participant identification and enrollment depended on two main factors: the presence of effective referral mechanisms and established screening and intake processes.

Effective Bidirectional Referral Mechanisms

VHT-NC participant identification and enrollment relied heavily on referrals to the project from other community agencies. Some projects described new referral pathways established as a result of the project's outreach and relationship-building efforts, such as from Native hospitals or clinics, law enforcement, child welfare agencies, agencies supporting individuals who have experienced intimate partner violence, and other victim service or social service providers. An advocate provided the example of having two participants referred by a local dentist who participated in their human trafficking training.

Staff from two projects also described receiving peer referrals from former or current participants who shared information about the VHT-NC project with their peers.

Collaboration was often key to successful referrals. This took multiple forms, but at least two projects spoke to the benefit of having their office, or at least one staff member, co-located with other program offices. This afforded ample opportunities for relationship building as well as training that ensured that project staff understood what the other offered. Similarly, some projects participated in multidisciplinary teams that offered regular, structured opportunities for collaboration and relationship building that ultimately yielded VHT-NC project referrals.

CELEBRATING STRENGTHS: STRONG PARTNERSHIPS AND CO-LOCATION OF SERVICES

"He [client] initially came to me because he was in our building ***getting services for something else*** *and I think in intake he said something that made the person think he was in a trafficking situation. So that's when I was called in to talk to him, and he was…****There have also been a few times where I've been called in and it's really just intake doing an awesome job of listening and knowing what questions to ask.*** *My focus is on training all of the staff who would be a first point of contact for people. Our building has four floors [of services]."—Advocate*

For VHT-NC projects that cannot provide services to non-eligible participants through other funding sources or projects, having an effective system to refer participants to other community programs is paramount. As one advocate said, "If they're not eligible for receiving services through the human trafficking grant, we do our very best to find them services or referrals…We don't just drop the ball. We make sure that we have enough understanding of our community to be able to supportively refer them out."

Established Screening and Intake Processes

Once referrals had been made, it was important for projects to have established screening and intake processes. There is no standard model of what this looked like among projects. One advocate said they consider the details of initial interactions with potential participants carefully, from what they wear to the exact objectives of the meeting.

Time was an essential component of effective screening and enrollment strategies. Project staff described having ideal time frames to follow up with a referred participant, often within 48 hours.

Several projects described using screening tools during initial or early meetings to help establish a participant's eligibility for VHT-NC services. Projects varied in their individual screening protocols for trafficking: although some did this screening during initial participant meetings, others allowed advocates up to 21 days to conduct this screening. One project's intake form also serves as their screening tool. This form screens for "a broad range of crimes that a victim may experience," and if they indicate trafficking victimization, they can receive VHT-NC services. Otherwise, they will be routed to programs with different funding sources or referred to external service providers via a warm handoff.

VHT-NC staff also described the importance of having protocols that extend beyond initial screening. In particular, several projects had processes in place to ensure follow-up with participants beyond initial meetings. For at least one project, this meant setting an appointment for a second meeting before the first meeting ended. Projects varied in their approaches to participant engagement beyond initial screening and enrollment that depended greatly on participant needs.

SHARING KNOWLEDGE: PREPARING FOR INITIAL MEETINGS WITH POTENTIAL PARTICIPANTS

"We try to keep it informal. I think something that's big for this position is dressing for your day. So, if we're going to meet a [potential participant] at a homeless shelter, I'm not going to wear a blazer and heels…It's something that seems so small, but it does ***set the tone and it makes you seem more approachable and conversational.*** *The first interaction we try to be more relaxed, but we do bring our paperwork and I always try to introduce myself as a person first and then describe my role within this job. And then I ask them about themselves, we sign the paper[work]…And then we always set up that next meeting."—Advocate*

VHT-NC Case Management and Supportive Services

Providing comprehensive case management and supportive services to participants is a primary objective of the VHT-NC Program. The Interim Report provided a high-level description of the VHT-NC projects' case management and service provision efforts in Years 1 and 2. In this section, we detail the projects approaches to providing comprehensive case management (including initial and ongoing engagement activities) and supportive services (directly and through referral) across the award period. Strengths and successes related to case management and service delivery are also described, as are the challenges the projects faced and their strategies to address them.

Comprehensive Case Management

Flexible and individualized practices were fundamental elements of the case management provided by the VHT-NC projects, resulting in varying approaches tailored to participants (i.e., person-centered approaches). This variation was evident in initial assessment practices, service provision, and ongoing case management activities. As described previously, cultural responsiveness and trauma-informed principles (e.g., low barrier entry, harm reduction) were also interwoven into the projects' approaches to and interactions with participants.

Initial Engagement

Although initial meetings looked different across projects and participants, common components included introducing the project and staff, assessing needs, setting initial goals, safety planning, and providing basic needs assistance (e.g., food, hygiene products, clothing). One advocate noted that during the first meeting the participant "is interviewing us too… They're trying to feel us out."

These initial engagement components were not always completed in one meeting, and even within formalized protocols, advocates were mindful about applying modifications when needed. For example, one advocate described doing an assessment in "bits and pieces over a period of time" and incorporating a culturally specific activity to foster a participant's interest.

The VHT-NC projects also used varying approaches to assess participants' needs and to create goal, service, or case plans. Some conducted formal assessment using structured tools, and others used a more informal approach, beginning by asking participants what they needed or would like help with. Because some participants were not aware of what was available to them, advocates often reviewed a list of services or used open discussion to help identify areas where support may be beneficial to the participant.

The VHT-NC projects also recognized that goal setting should be participant-directed as their needs and goals were unique. This was embraced by all the advocates we spoke with, but some reflected that it was a learning process to not insert their own expectations and hopes. As one advocate explained, "That was one thing that I kind of learned…I needed to let them decide how I could help them. I couldn't go in with my own idea of, well, this is what I can do—this, this, and this." Another advocate also acknowledged that this could result in feeling conflicted about a participant's choices, but ultimately the best approach to this situation was to make sure the participant knew they could always reach out for support and to be there for them if they did.

CELEBRATING STRENGTHS: SUPPORTING PARTICIPANTS TO FIND THEIR PATH

*"I've noticed that the easiest thing is to **just let [participants] talk**. Let them talk about whatever it is that they feel they need to talk about, and then **from those conversations I can kind of pull out some of the information** that maybe I want to know about what's going on. And if there's maybe a suggestion I can make on something. I was talking to [a participant] and she was saying she had just gotten out of treatment, so she was in, essentially, a halfway house. **So, we talked about, 'What's the cost for that? How are you paying that? Do you want to move out and get your own place?** What's your plan?"—Advocate*

*"Never create [participants'] goals for them. I always tell them, **'If you pick your own goals, you're going to be more inclined and motivated to go for them.' But I will be there to plant the seed and help knock down those barriers** along the way."—Advocate*

Some advocates encountered challenges during initial engagement with participants experiencing symptoms of serious mental illness (e.g., delusions, disorganized thinking) or actively using substances. These participants had difficulty communicating their needs, setting goals, or sustaining their engagement. For one advocate, it felt like they were starting over each time they met with a participant. Advocates recognized that, although these were challenging situations, these participants needed services and likely faced significant barriers. As one advocate explained, "It's just hard when you can't really get tangible things from someone, and you know that they're being turned away from other service providers because they can't say exactly what they need." A project director also noted, "We are serving a lot of individuals through this project who…are not able to engage in longer-term goal planning or accessing resources or moving out of crisis. And yet, that population still so desperately needs services." Advocates felt a responsibility to explore every avenue to support participants as best they could; however, this could leave them feeling overwhelmed. Sometimes supervisors were able to provide guidance, but in some situations they also were uncertain how to navigate these challenges. When advocates' efforts were successful, they similarly described patience, mindful listening, and attentiveness to participants' behavior and actions as helpful to being able to identify participants' "actual underlying need."

CELEBRATING STRENGTHS: USING PATIENCE AND ATTENTIVENESS TO IDENTIFY PARTICIPANTS' NEEDS

*"When I first met [the participant], he presented in a way that would make you think he had mental illness. He speaks incoherently and stream of consciousness, so **if you ask a straightforward question, he wouldn't really answer it clearly** or in a way that would make sense. And so, I gave him a notebook and told him to write out all of his thoughts, and he came back the next day and the notebook was filled up… And he was like, 'It's so helpful.' And so, I gave him another notebook. And **I noticed he was coming in every day to the building**. And I was like, **'Oh, do you need something? I know we planned to meet next week.' And he was like, 'Oh, this is the only place that I feel safe.'… And I asked him if there were any steps we could take to have him feel a little bit safer**, and he was like, 'Well, I think that my phone is being tracked.'… 'Well, we can get you a new phone and a new phone number.' So, we did that… and **I could tell how he started to speak a little more clearly** when he had a new phone. So, it's not a huge thing, but for him it definitely provided a sense of safety."—Advocate*

Another common experience that advocates noted was the sense that some participants were initially testing them to see if they were trustworthy, which was understood as a likely symptom of trauma or a consequence of negative experiences with service providers (or both). In these situations, participants would not fully engage in assessment; would focus only on accessing quick, tangible resources (e.g., food, gift cards); or would decline to speak with the VHT-NC advocate. To build rapport and trust, advocates emphasized the importance of transparency, consistency, follow-through, and meeting participants where they are.

CELEBRATING STRENGTHS: PARTICIPANT ENGAGEMENT THAT BUILDS TRUST

*"[The VHT-NC advocates] shared…'I saw this person today, but **they weren't feeling good so I told them I'll come back another day**, or they weren't in the mood to talk so I told them I'll come back another day.'… They're good at that. **They don't force it upon them**… By [the advocates] coming back…**[they're] building the trust and the consistency that the person in need knows… 'She's for real**. She keeps coming back to talk to me. I'm just going to talk to her already.'"—Partner*

*"[The advocate] finds me and she always lets me know **I can call her no matter what**, she always gives me another card if I lose it. **She's just always there for me. She cares about me as an individual**, as a person, **which nobody else has**."—Participant*

Ongoing Case Management and Participant Engagement

Most VHT-NC projects aimed for advocates to formally meet with participants on a standard schedule (e.g., once a week, once a month), but in practice meetings were often scheduled on a case-by-case basis and informal communication was at least semi-frequent in between. As with other aspects of the projects' case management practices, flexibility was necessary to accommodate participants' needs and maintain a low barrier to engagement. One advocate explained that participant communication "depends on their circumstance and their comfort zone and what their needs are. Some of them need a little more of your time and your attention for support." Communication often began on a more frequent basis but gradually decreased over time. As one advocate explained, "Once [participants] start feeling more comfortable with me…then it becomes more as needed, once I build that relationship and I know that they're going to reach out when they need me." Advocates used a variety of communication modes, including in-person meetings, phone calls, texting, and email. Several advocates noted that texting is an effective and low-burden way to maintain contact or when you have "just a quick piece of information to give."

Participant engagement was challenging at times, particularly with participants who were experiencing homelessness, who preferred not to have a phone, or who had mental health or substance use care needs. Our discussions with advocates revealed staff who were dedicated to participants' well-being and were persistent in their efforts to maintain contact and ensure that participants knew they were there to support them. "I usually try…whether it be a text or a phone call, once a week just to check in and let them know that I'm still there," said one advocate. Project staff, partners, and participants shared several accounts about the lengths advocates would go to (e.g., regularly driving around to several locations to find participants or driving many hours to a partner location to meet in person).

LEARNING THROUGH REFLECTION: PARTICIPANT ENGAGEMENT THROUGH PERSISTENCE AND RESOLVE

*"**Keeping [participants] engaged is hard**, especially when they're homeless… When you go to the location, they may or may not be there… [Or] they don't want to see us or, you know, "Where have you been? I've been waiting for you," that kind of thing. But then there's all those other barriers, mental health, substance abuse… Every time you meet with them or find them it's gonna be a new, 'Hello. How are you? What is your status?… Where are you [living]?'… **Literally meeting them where they are**. And you just might have to do it four or five more times, you know, **and [see] how you can connect and just continue that relationship. You can't let it go**."—Project director*

Project staff typically had case management experience with other populations (e.g., people who experienced other types of violence or homelessness). Several of these respondents remarked that this project's case management was not like "traditional" case management. Respondents explained that participants often were dealing with several challenges (e.g., active exploitation, complex trauma, behavioral health care needs, homelessness) and this affected their ability to engage in highly structured activities or maintain consistent schedules (resulting in frequent no-shows or cancellations). Recognizing the barriers participants were facing, VHT-NC staff used trauma-informed approaches, including harm reduction, to resist retraumatization, build trusting relationships, and encourage continued engagement. Although the projects recognized flexibility as an essential aspect of participant engagement, one project was deliberating how best to balance individualizing support and maximizing advocates' time to benefit the most participants.

LEARNING THROUGH REFLECTION: ALIGNING PARTICIPANT NEED AND READINESS WITH SERVICES

*"**Substance use** has always been a challenge [and] **homelessness** has always been a challenge for our [organization's] participants. But **we've seen a lot of that exacerbated with the participants that we're serving through this project**. And it's led us to discussions about what our case management or one-on-one…services look like and how they are working really well for some participants and where they could work better for others… And so that's where we are right now, is we're seeing a lot of individuals who are **not in a place where they are ready to engage in that intensive [case management]**, where a lot of the interaction is based off of **survival and just immediate need in crisis**… We're really serving on that spectrum. But what we've realized through this project is if we are truly going to continue to serve [participants] on a spectrum, **we might need to then reconsider how we break services down to try to make it most beneficial** for where they are on that spectrum in time."*
—Project director

Participants spoke positively about their VHT-NC advocates and other project staff and voiced appreciation for the assistance and emotional support they provided. One participant underscored that they did not feel pressure to talk about their trafficking experience until they were ready. Another said their advocate had "a good rapport with people… She always makes sure she has contact with me." Another participant highlighted how easy communication was, described project staff as "vigilant as to my feelings," and expressed gratitude to hear them say, "It's OK to feel all of the emotions but know that you're in a safe place and you can feel those emotions."

CELEBRATING STRENGTHS: TRAUMA-INFORMED, NATIVE STAFF BRING COMFORT TO PARTICIPANTS

*"[VHT-NC staff] could tell I was not in a good place; I was terrified. And **they recognized those symptoms right away and helped me work through them**. They were offering me support, checking up on me daily, **making sure I was safe**. They went like the whole nine yards… The fact that **they were all Native** [made me feel comfortable]… And that they didn't even doubt anything that I was saying. **They just said 'Okay, we're here to help you. What can we do?**' And just the openness that they came to the table, with **no judgment**."—Participant*

The Value of Survivor Mentorship

One participant provided insight into the value of survivor mentorship. She described her experience as "a little bit while ago" in comparison to the people she was living with who had also experienced human trafficking. She informally took on a mentoring role, providing emotional support to others, helping them navigate new things (e.g., the bus system), and helping to be a voice for them when they were not yet comfortable to speak out themselves. For example, this participant relayed that another participant asked her to share input with us, although they preferred not to do the interview themself. She also supported the VHT-NC project's efforts by explaining to a potential participant the purpose of the project and the assistance available. Although the VHT-NC advocate had explained the same thing, this participant only decided to engage in the project once they heard the information from another survivor.

Service Provision

In this section, we describe (1) the services and supports that respondents reported participants needed or requested most and those that were most helpful, (2) how services were provided,[l] and (3) common service barriers.

Participants' Service Needs

As described, participants generally directed which services they received based on their needs and goals. Some participants needed or wanted intensive support, while others needed or wanted less, and this sometimes changed over time. One advocate described their interactions with a participant who "tells me, this is what I want to work on, and then she'll work on it. So, she doesn't need nor want a lot of support from me… She's like, right now, I need you to just hold me accountable." Alternatively, participants may benefit from support in several areas (e.g., obtaining important documentation, applying for housing, receiving a referral to behavioral health services, receiving assistance with employment). Because there is "fluidity" to participants' goals, advocates continually inquired about their needs and interests in case there were any new areas to address.

Across project and partner staff, the following services were most often reported as needed:

- basic needs assistance (e.g., food, clothes, hygiene products, a phone);
- behavioral health services (e.g., mental health treatment, substance use disorder treatment, recovery supports); and
- housing assistance (e.g., emergency housing, long-term housing, home furnishings).

The three participants we spoke with said they needed help with childcare, clothing, employment supports, housing assistance, life skills support, mentorship, Native medicines, recovery support, and relocation.

Most Helpful Services and Supports

When asked which services were most helpful for participants, the most common responses from project and partner staff were basic needs assistance and the overall support provided by VHT-NC advocates and other staff. Some respondents observed that participants are often isolated and lack a support system, and VHT-NC staff helped to fill those gaps. One partner said the VHT-NC project has been beneficial for their participants because some of them "don't have too many people in their corner to support them… So, just having that support system and having someone…believing in you gets you to start believing in yourself."

CELEBRATING STRENGTHS: ADVOCATES' SUPPORT IS ESSENTIAL FOR PARTICIPANTS' RECOVERY

*"I think what's always been **the most helpful is that one-on-one consistent support and mentorship**… Whether it's, they come to you with just that emotional support, or they come to you ready for you to help them navigate the system, like, **that human support and interaction that you get is so huge**."—Project director*

[l] Frequencies are not provided because it is possible that respondents did not provide an exhaustive list when reporting which services were needed, provided, and helpful. As such, the absence of a response does not necessarily equate to a negative response.

Some VHT-NC projects also highlighted the benefits of funding that allows for direct assistance because it facilitates rapid response to the wide array of participants' potential needs (e.g., buying groceries, paying for identification replacement, buying a tent if they are living outside). Less frequently, respondents also described the following as most helpful to participants: housing, transportation, substance use services, and "[letting] them know they're safe."

The three participant respondents noted that the following were the most helpful supports they received:

- compassion and understanding;
- "helping me to do better in my life";
- assistance moving to a safe place;
- Native medicines;
- "reobtaining everything I need to make it in this world"; and
- emotional support.

Service Array and Provision

Based on respondents' reports, participants generally received the services and supports that they needed. **Exhibit 9** details the services participants had access to across five of the VHT-NC projects[m] within the following categories:

- basic needs assistance;
- victim assistance;
- transportation;
- documentation;
- cultural and traditional supports;
- housing assistance;
- relocation;
- public benefits assistance;
- behavioral health services;
- medical care;
- employment and education assistance;
- legal assistance; and
- child and family services.

As outlined in **Exhibit 9**, services were provided (1) directly by VHT-NC project staff or (2) through referral to internal partners (i.e., other programs or departments within the award recipient organization) or external partners and resources. VHT-NC advocates and other project staff provided a wide array of direct participant assistance, primarily related to basic needs, victim assistance, transportation, help completing forms and navigating systems (e.g., for housing, public benefits), and cultural and traditional supports (e.g., smudging, traditional medicines).

A common theme that emerged was the strength of advocates' commitment to helping participants access the services and resources they needed. In practice, this translated into advocates using any resource, strategy, or approach available to them and collaborating with colleagues and their networks to explore all options. One participant who received assistance to relocate said that the VHT-NC advocates "helped me tremendously and gave me confidence… If I wasn't able to find any support where I am, they were willing to go the extra mile and look for support for me…to help me find it and connect with people."

Advocates emphasized the benefit of directly supporting participants through referral processes. Many described accompanying participants to a referral location and connecting them to staff or staying with them to complete forms or help ask questions, if needed. Similarly, advocates would support participants if they were nervous about making a services-related phone call, e.g., by reviewing the information they likely would be asked to provide, practicing what to say, or sitting with the participant as they made the call.

[m] One project did not officially enroll any participants.

CELEBRATING STRENGTHS: FACILITATING PARTICIPANT REFERRALS THROUGH DIRECT SUPPORT

"Ideally, I would like to accompany the participant to that [referral] location. ***It can be very intimidating to just walk up to a building****, you know? So going with them. Or if they need to make a phone call, just putting the person on speaker and sitting next to them… I know that* ***sometimes you don't even really know the questions to ask****, so just going over that ahead of time. But just trying to* ***make the referral as seamless and comfortable as possible****."—Advocate*

Exhibit 9 also describes the service gaps or challenges that were barriers to participants accessing services and resources. Across the VHT-NC projects, long-term, affordable housing was the most challenging service to access due to the significant lack of housing options available, an issue that is affecting communities nationwide. Respondents also reported that finding behavioral health providers who had the experience to provide culturally responsive and trauma-informed care to Native people who had experienced trafficking was very difficult. Given the shortage of behavioral health providers across the country, it is likely that the capacity to provide this specialized type of care is scarce to nonexistent in communities in general, not just in VHT-NC communities. Additionally, respondents spoke about challenges related to complex and fragmented systems, including a lack of clarity regarding processes and requirements (e.g., needed documents), which could result in delayed approvals and service receipt.

Exhibit 9. VHT-NC Service Provision, Gaps, and Challenges

Service Type	Provision	Examples	Gaps or Challenges
Basic needs assistance	◆ Directly by advocate[1]	◆ Food, clothing, hygiene products, emergency financial assistance (e.g., gift card), cell phone, diapers/wipes	◆ None reported
	◆ Information about community resources	◆ Food banks ◆ Thrift shops	◆ None reported
Victim assistance	◆ Directly by advocate	◆ Victims' rights education, criminal legal system navigation, court accompaniment ◆ Safety planning (e.g., new phone number, address confidentiality) ◆ Assistance completing victim compensation applications	◆ None reported

Service Type	Provision	Examples	Gaps or Challenges
Transportation	◆ Directly by advocate	◆ Advocate drives participant to appointments ◆ Ride-sharing apps ◆ Gas card, bus pass, etc.	◆ Lack of long-term, sustainable options ◆ Limited public transportation
Documentation	◆ Directly by advocate	◆ Assistance completing forms for an ID, birth certificate, etc. ◆ System navigation, accompaniment to appointments ◆ Financial assistance for fees	◆ None reported
	◆ Referral to relevant programs or organizations	◆ Department of Motor Vehicles, Health Department	◆ Complex processes and systems ◆ Long wait times for appointments
Cultural and traditional support	◆ Directly by advocate	◆ Medicine (e.g., sage, cedar, sweetgrass) ◆ Immersion activities (e.g., beading groups, other crafts, drumming) ◆ Subsistence activities (e.g., fishing, berry picking)	◆ None reported
	◆ Referral to partners and relevant programs or organizations ◆ Information about community resources	◆ Culture Department ◆ Traditional healers ◆ Native grassroots organizations ◆ Culture camps ◆ Language programs	◆ For projects led by mainstream non-profit organizations, difficultly identifying and establishing partnerships with Tribal or Native providers

Service Type	Provision	Examples	Gaps or Challenges
Housing assistance	◆ Directly by advocate	◆ Short-term hotel stays ◆ Assistance locating housing, completing forms, visiting available units, etc. ◆ Limited financial assistance (e.g., application fees, security deposit, utilities) ◆ Home furnishings ◆ Landlord advocacy ◆ Independent life skills	◆ Limited hotel options appropriate for participants
	◆ Referral to partners and relevant programs or organizations	◆ Shelters ◆ Tribal housing ◆ Non-native transitional and permanent housing providers ◆ Local Dept. of Housing and Urban Development Continuum of Care, coordinated entry contact	◆ Lack of trafficking-specific emergency housing ◆ Severely limited affordable housing ◆ Long waitlists for subsidized housing ◆ Barriers related to criminal records ◆ Non–trauma-informed landlords
Relocation	◆ Directly by advocate	◆ Travel assistance to new location ◆ Identification of resources in new location	◆ Limited services in new location ◆ Time to research services and develop relationships in new location
Public benefits	◆ Directly by advocate	◆ Assistance completing forms and compiling documentation ◆ System navigation, accompaniment to appointments	◆ Long wait times for approval
	◆ Referral to partners and relevant programs or organizations	◆ Tribal benefits or social services programs ◆ Non-Native benefits or social services programs	◆ Complex processes and systems ◆ Long wait times for appointments

Service Type	Provision	Examples	Gaps or Challenges
Behavioral health services	◆ Referral to partners and relevant programs or organizations	◆ Tribal behavioral health programs ◆ Native behavioral health providers ◆ Non-Native behavioral health providers ◆ Recovery support groups	◆ Lack of providers with experience working with Native Americans, survivors of trafficking, or both ◆ Long wait times for appointments ◆ Ineligible for Tribal services if not officially enrolled as a Tribal member ◆ Participants decline services
Medical care	◆ Referral to partners and relevant programs or organizations	◆ Indian Health Services facilities (e.g., Tribal/ Urban Indian Health Centers) ◆ Native health care providers ◆ Non-native health care providers	◆ None reported
Employment and education	◆ Directly by advocate	◆ Assistance searching and applying for employment ◆ Resume building, interviewing practice ◆ Financial assistance for GED programs	◆ None reported
	◆ Referral to partners and relevant programs or organizations	◆ Tribal employment or vocational programs ◆ Tribal education assistance programs ◆ Non-Native employment programs ◆ Local university or college programs	◆ Limited employment opportunities that pay living wages ◆ Barriers related to criminal record

Service Type	Provision	Examples	Gaps or Challenges
Legal assistance	◆ Directly by advocate*	◆ Assistance obtaining a protection order ◆ Information about expungement	◆ Complexity of legal statutes across jurisdictions
	◆ Referral to partners and relevant programs or organizations	◆ Tribal legal services ◆ Legal aid	◆ Limited pro bono or low-cost services
Child and family services	◆ Referral to partners and relevant programs or organizations	◆ Tribal Indian Child Welfare programs ◆ Tribal family services ◆ Non-Native family services	◆ Need for improved systems coordination

**Directly by advocate* indicates the service or resource was provided directly through a VHT-NC advocate or other project staff.

VHT-NC Community Training

Training remained an essential component of VHT-NC projects throughout the duration of the award period. As described in the Interim Report, during the VHT-NC projects' first 2 years, staff identified critical training needs for the general community and potential referral sources to help individuals understand what human trafficking is and how it may present in the community. Also during this time, project directors described a general need for training about human trafficking among their own staff. By Year 3 of the projects, these needs had shifted, in large part due to the efforts of the VHT-NC projects within their communities. Although the exact types of training needs had evolved throughout the course of the VHT-NC projects, project staff continued to prioritize training as a way to educate the general community, to establish and refine referral and collaboration efforts with community partners, and to sharpen internal staff capacity and understanding of the issue of human trafficking and its unique manifestations within their communities.

Training Received and Remaining Training Needs

For VHT-NC Project Staff

Early in the VHT-NC projects, many project leaders identified a need for general, introductory training about human trafficking for project staff. By the final year of the project, these concepts were understood by staff. To continue learning, growing, and better serving communities, project leaders expressed a desire for continued staff training to meet more specialized and nuanced needs. These included topics such as trauma-informed practices, improved response to victims with intellectual and developmental disabilities, best practices to address specific mental health diagnoses, and case management specific to human trafficking. Projects also understood that the issue of human trafficking can change and look different over time, therefore requiring updated trainings.

For Community Partners

Similar to VHT-NC staff, by Year 3 of the projects, community partners largely understood the fundamental concepts of human trafficking and their training needs were more specific. Some sites expressed a need for community partners to be trained on using the screening tool that was being implemented by the VHT-NC projects. Several project staff believed that having training about the referral and service provision processes in place would be beneficial and increase referrals and efficiency. One VHT-NC project leader described a desire for non-Native community partners to receive training about human trafficking among Native populations.

LEARNING THROUGH REFLECTION: CONTINUED TRAINING TO UNDERSTAND AN EVOLVING PROBLEM

"Things are evolving, laws are changing. And it's not just that laws are changing, but the way traffickers are accessing victims are changing. *So, you know, continuing training on like current trends. Also continue training on, you know…if your patrol comes and they come up on someone who is maybe on the autism spectrum, they're in crisis, and so they're mostly nonverbal…[or] patrol comes across someone who uses ASL [American Sign Language]."—Partner*

As was the case earlier in the award period, law enforcement training to recognize human trafficking victimization was still identified as a need, and some projects called for ongoing training as opposed to a module offered only once to cadets in the law enforcement academy.

Early efforts for VHT-NC projects often focused on providing training for the general community and community partners. However, by Year 3, especially for those actively conducting direct service provision, many projects recognized that their capacity to offer external trainings was limited and expressed a need for external providers to conduct these trainings. However, broadly available virtual trainings may not be appropriate, as project staff believed that trafficking in their community may look different from elsewhere. As one partner said, "I really think it [human trafficking] is so different in our community." Another project director articulated why community-specific training is necessary: "We understand that working with the Native community, there's that extra layer of trauma…the way Western people may view accountability is different than how it is viewed in Native communities, where it's more around healing."

Training Provided

All of the VHT-NC projects provided trainings through the end of their award periods. Although some trainings were still geared toward general human trafficking awareness, projects also described many ways that they had learned to provide this training more efficiently, including by presenting human trafficking as an intersection with other issues with which the community was more familiar, such as addressing MMIP or domestic violence, or by integrating human trafficking awareness building into cultural activities.

By the end of the award period, some VHT-NC projects had established regular and sustained trainings throughout the community. One project's partner developed several trainings tailored to the history of human trafficking within the Native communities across their state. These trainings were provided in diverse areas to a multitude of organizations and providers. Several respondents from this site spoke about the resonance of this tailored approach and believed it was impactful for training participants. Additionally, another VHT-NC project began working closely with their Tribal casino to ensure that all staff were trained about human trafficking and how it might present in casino or hotel environments. This training was offered weekly to all newly hired casino and hotel staff. This training also led to heightened awareness of human trafficking throughout the community, as most of the staff also lived within or near their reservation. This training was so well-received that the advocate was able to organize a similar training intended for casino staff across the state.

CELEBRATING STRENGTHS: ESTABLISHING SUSTAINED COMMUNITY TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES

*"The casino was just **figuring out a way to bring awareness**. [Staff] was very adamant that this problem is happening around here and we need to do something. There needs to be some sort of awareness so we can stop it. And that was coming in and now doing **orientation at the casino every Tuesday morning, doing a presentation that talks about some of the signs**, some of the specific things that they could look for in the casino or hotel, and essentially, what they might see in the community as they all live here, as well."—Advocate*

Next Directions

Several key themes emerged from this formative evaluation:

- Projects focused on supporting Native people who have experienced human trafficking in culturally responsive and trauma-informed ways are crucial and fill a gap that has existed for too long.
- Trust is essential to addressing human trafficking in Native communities.
- Time is needed to build this trust and establish partner and participant relationships.
- Holistic, empathetic, and relational approaches strengthen participant engagement and partnerships.
- Good partnership requires reciprocity, cultural humility, continual learning, and transparency.
- More can be accomplished by working together instead of individually.
- Flexibility is required to respond to the unique needs of participants, provider organizations, and communities.

These principles are cross-cutting and apply not only to the VHT-NC projects' efforts but also to partnerships between Native communities and funders.

The VHT-NC projects made significant progress in building programs that are responsive to the needs of Native people who have experienced human trafficking and to their communities. They are well-positioned to continue building on the momentum they established through formalized project protocols, critical partnerships, and increased community awareness and understanding of human trafficking. Projects and partners may seek to develop deeper understanding of the dynamics of human trafficking in Native communities, potentially through training and education that ties human trafficking to intersecting issues (e.g., MMIP) and the local context. As awareness and understanding is enhanced, it is likely that trust in and credibility of anti-trafficking efforts will increase, more providers and organizations will become involved, and more people impacted by human trafficking will be open to services.

The VHT-NC Program is an invaluable opportunity for Native communities and service organizations to enhance their response to Native community members impacted by human trafficking. The recognition that culture is a protective factor and that traditional and cultural supports are essential to Native survivors' recovery and healing cannot be overemphasized as a critical component. Continued support for the VHT-NC Program—with refinements based on input from the practitioners implementing the projects, Native people with lived experienced of human trafficking, and other community experts—is vital to ensure that the paths and connections that have been forged and the progress made is not lost.

Finally, silos and lack of coordination have created avoidable barriers to services and resources, and the systems that exist to benefit community members are often the greatest source of obstruction and frustration. Additionally, systemic issues like homelessness and housing insecurity, lack of economic opportunity, and lack of access to behavioral health care are deeply rooted in structural racism and inequities that a single project cannot solve on its own. To address human trafficking most effectively and provide the care that survivors need and deserve, communities and governments (Tribal, state, federal) must commit to addressing these larger issues through collaborative and coordinated approaches.[14]

As has been emphasized throughout this report, trust is foundational to human trafficking response, and building it takes time. As communities begin or continue their anti-trafficking endeavors, we encourage them to celebrate the people dedicated to these pursuits and embrace all forward progress, even if it seems small, as success.

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This report was developed as part of the formative evaluation of the VHT-NC Program. Broadly, the goals of the evaluation are to understand the context in which the VHT-NC projects are implemented, the projects' goals, and the paths they take to achieve their goals, using a participatory and culturally responsive approach.

The VHT-NC formative evaluation is part of the Human Trafficking Policy and Research Analyses Project, which aims to advance the scope of knowledge and data around human trafficking by identifying priority areas for learning, and conducting a series of studies that can immediately impact practice. All studies are overseen by the ACF Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) in collaboration with OTIP, and conducted by RTI International. The VHT-NC formative evaluation is also conducted in partnership with American Indian Development Associates, LLC.

For additional information about the Human Trafficking Policy and Research Analyses Project or the formative evaluation of the VHT-NC Program, please contact OPRE Project Officers Mary Mueggenborg (Mary.Mueggenborg@acf.hhs.gov) and Kelly Jedd McKenzie (Kelly.McKenzie@acf.hhs.gov) or RTI Project Director Rebecca Pfeffer (rpfeffer@rti.org).