Legal Services Assessment for Child Trafficking Survivors

Project Need

Child trafficking is one of the most disturbing human rights abuses of our time. It involves cases of boys and girls trafficked into, and within, the United States, for labor and/or commercial sexual services. It is estimated that thousands of children are trafficked within the United States each year. These children suffer physical, sexual, and emotional violence at the hands of traffickers, pimps, employers, and others. Much of the current response to human trafficking in the United States has addressed survivors as one homogenous group, without allowing for the special needs of children. The most recent systemic efforts to respond to the plight of child trafficking in the U.S. have focused primarily on two areas: 1) The criminal justice response, including punishment of traffickers and addressing the “demand” side of sex trafficking, and 2) the dearth of social services available to children, especially mental health services and housing. While current research indicates that legal services are a critical component of a comprehensive service delivery model, little to no efforts have been made to identify the various legal needs of child trafficking victims, whether or not contact with legal services results in subsequent access to appropriate social services and protections, and existing gaps in the provision of legal services and advocacy to survivors of child trafficking in the United States.

Project Goals and Description

The Center for the Human Rights of Children (CHRC) seeks to better understand and positively impact the role of legal services and advocacy, by advancing research into the current conditions faced by child survivors of labor and sex trafficking in the United States, including both United States citizens and non-citizens, and working to improve their future outcomes. Child trafficking survivors often experience complex legal needs across various legal systems, including assistance with criminal, juvenile justice, civil, child welfare, family, education, and immigration issues. The CHRC has initiated this project to identify existing service providers working with child trafficking survivors, the legal needs of these children, any current legal services, and gaps in those services. The project's goal is to provide recommendations for developing best practices, and to begin to develop a legal service model for this population. The results will be documented and published in a final report.

To accomplish this goal, the CHRC, with support from the Chicago Bar Foundation, will conduct a regional legal needs assessment of organizations providing services to child trafficking survivors, using Cook County, Illinois as a case study. The project will be implemented from February through the fall of 2012. This will include an initial literature review of reports, conference summaries, articles, and assessments of the legal needs of human trafficking survivors and other relevant vulnerable populations (e.g., adult trafficking victims, abused children, and orphan youth). The CHRC will then identify existing legal, social service, and health providers who may be in contact with potential child trafficking cases in Cook County. A survey instrument will be developed and disseminated, and follow-up interviews will be conducted with the aforementioned legal and social service professionals, as well as other public and
private organizations (i.e., law enforcement, faith-based organizations) that come into contact with child trafficking survivors.

Cook County was selected as a case study, in part because the city of Chicago has been identified as one of several human trafficking hubs in the United States (New York Times, 2003). Moreover, Cook County is the second most populous county in the United States, with over 5.1 million residents. It has an established community of service providers and advocacy organizations working with survivors of human trafficking in various capacities. These include the Salvation Army, the National Immigrant Justice Center, the International Organization for Adolescents, the Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation, and two human trafficking task forces led by the Chicago Police Department and the Cook County State’s Attorney’s Office. In 2010, Governor Quinn signed into law the Illinois Safe Children’s Act, which decriminalizes juvenile prostitution, and reconciles the state’s law with federal anti-trafficking legislation with respect to child trafficking victims.

**Regional and National Impact**

To provide a national, comparative perspective of the issue, the project will also include assessments of legal service providers and service models for child trafficking survivors in jurisdictions outside of Illinois. Furthermore, as part of our research, we will identify current funding streams supporting legal services and advocacy, best practices, and gaps in existing services. Our final report will include a suggested legal services plan for child trafficking survivors in Cook County. This plan, while tailored to the legal service community of Cook County, will likely address common challenges and include key recommendations for jurisdictions across the country. We hope that this project informs and mobilizes national efforts to improve legal services and protections for child trafficking survivors, and ultimately, improve overall protections and advance the well-being and outcomes for all child trafficking survivors in the United States.

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