



# USDOT COUNTER-TRAFFICKING PUBLIC AWARENESS & OUTREACH GUIDE

Raising public awareness about the risks and indicators of human trafficking is a cornerstone of the U.S. Department of Transportation's counter-trafficking strategy. Well-designed outreach helps strengthen prevention, detect trafficking, and build public support for action across federal, state, tribal, and local levels. Accurate and targeted information better equips communities to recognize and report suspected human trafficking.

Effective public awareness and outreach efforts are guided by four principles:

- **Person-Centered:** Prioritize the dignity, needs, and interests of people affected by trafficking.
- **Trauma-Informed:** Acknowledge trauma's impacts and avoid re-traumatization.
- **Culturally Responsive:** Reflect the cultural, linguistic, and behavioral contexts of target audiences.
- **Data-Driven:** Use transparent and precise supporting data.

## CORE PRINCIPLES

- **Promote an Accurate Understanding:** Depict human trafficking's complexity and diversity (inclusive of both forced labor and sex trafficking).
- **Don't Tokenize:** Represent varied identities, communities, histories, and experiences authentically to break down public misconceptions about a single "type" of victim.
- **Be Victim-Centered:** Use person-first images and wording that upholds rights, dignity, autonomy, and self-determination.
- **Show Realistic Public Encounters:** Include role-specific scenarios of what someone might reasonably observe.

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**PUT THE HUMAN  
BRAKES ON | TRAFFICKING.**

## CORE PRINCIPLES *(continued)*

- **Show Realistic Public Encounters:** Include role-specific scenarios of what someone might reasonably observe.
- **Highlight Recruitment Tactics and Context:** Depict tools and channels (e.g., social media, cell phones).
- **Show How the Public Can Safely Help:** Promote safe actions through reporting to the National Human Trafficking Hotline (NHTH), or other trauma-informed reporting channels, rather than risking anyone's safety through direct intervention. The NHTH's online Referral Directory includes direct service programs that offer emergency, transitional, and long-term support.

## MESSAGING TONE AND WORDING

- **Be Empowering and Hopeful:** Use positive framing that elevates protective factors and encourages action.
- **Avoid Re-traumatizing or Disempowering Language:** Do not use “rescue” or “save”; use strengths-based alternatives such as “support,” or “assist.”
- **Recognize Identity and Self-Identification:** Lead with humanizing, person-centered language, as not everyone affected will identify as a “victim.”

## AUDIENCE, ACCESSIBILITY, AND DELIVERY

- **Tailor by Goal, Audience, and Channel:** Use plain language and culturally responsive content.
- **Be Concise and Actionable:** Provide a clear call to action that reinforces safe reporting guidance under “Core Principles.”
- **Ensure Accessibility:** Translate into audience languages of the audience and ensure digital materials are 508-compliant.

*Adapted from the USG Senior Policy Operating Group Public Awareness and Outreach Committee Guide for Public Awareness Materials (non-binding).*



**Scan this code to learn more.**

**Visit:** [transportation.gov/TLAHT/campaign](https://transportation.gov/TLAHT/campaign)

**Contact:** [trafficking@dot.gov](mailto:trafficking@dot.gov)



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## PRACTICAL DETAILS AND SAFEGUARDS

- **Cite and Contextualize Facts:** Provide clear context (timeframe, geography, population) when using data, cite original sources, and avoid generalizations.
- **Avoid Stereotypes and Mischaracterizations:** Prioritize dignity and safety by avoiding recounting physical abuse or graphic, sensational depictions that can objectify people (e.g., melodramatic kidnapping, sexualized women, distressed children, or images of people in chains, behind bars, or handcuffed). These portrayals risk retraumatizing survivors and obscure less visible forms of coercion (emotional abuse, economic abuse, threats). Such images or statements can be dehumanizing and objectifying by depicting victims merely as objects of violence. Instead, use humanizing, nuanced images and narratives that reflect the full range of trafficking experiences and highlight individual and community strengths and nuance rather than reinforcing trends or simplistic narratives.
- **Promote Safety and Confidentiality:** Don't encourage risky interventions. Direct audiences to trauma-informed reporting channels and vetted service options (see "Core Principles").
- **Comply with Citation Requirements and Licensing Requirements:** Credit sources, secure permissions for stock photos and third-party content, and avoid using unlicensed or improperly attributed materials to prevent legal and reputational risks.

## LIVED EXPERIENCE ENGAGEMENT

- Engage lived-experience experts with fair compensation throughout design, development, dissemination, and evaluation. Ensure contributors feel empowered in their roles and that their input remains confidential. Never depict or disclose survivors' identities or personal stories without their informed consent and agreed compensation. Obtain explicit permission from any other parties depicted.

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