

THERE IS NO LINEAR PATH



Understanding
Survivor
Journeys in
Trafficking Work

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Understanding Service Journeys in Anti-Trafficking Work

For people who do not work in the anti-trafficking field, it can be difficult to understand what it is truly like to support a survivor of human trafficking. The process can seem straightforward:

Identification.

Intervention.

Recovery.

But in reality, anti-trafficking support rarely follows a predictable, linear path.

People who have experienced trafficking may engage with services in different ways, and those experiences are shaped by trust, timing, access to resources, and individual circumstances, all of which can shift over time. Understanding that reality is essential to supporting organizations doing this work in meaningful and sustainable ways.

Progress Doesn't Follow a Straight Line

For many people, engagement with services is not a one-time event. They may connect with support, step away, and return later. They may choose to participate in certain services while declining others. They may move forward

in one area while navigating new challenges in another.

Progress can look like:

- Reaching out after a period of disengagement
- Securing temporary housing, then navigating a change in housing needs
- Beginning employment while addressing new challenges
- Reconnecting with services when the time feels right

These experiences should not automatically be interpreted as a lack of progress or commitment. A trauma-informed, person-centered approach recognizes that each person's experience is unique and that individuals should have the autonomy to make decisions about the support they choose to receive.

Trust Takes Time and Consistency

Trust is not built in a single interaction.

Organizations can help foster trust by communicating transparently, maintaining confidentiality, following through on commitments, and respecting each person's choices. Consistency helps create an environment where people

know what to expect if and when they choose to engage.

Trust cannot be rushed, and it does not follow a predetermined timeline.

Needs Evolve Over Time

What someone needs at one point in their journey may not be what they need later.

Depending on the individual and the organization's role, priorities may include housing, employment, legal services, behavioral health care, education, financial assistance, transportation, safety planning, or other personally identified goals.

These priorities may overlap, change, or emerge in no particular order. Access to different types of services may also vary depending on a person's circumstances, available community resources, and program availability.

Organizations often need ways to document changing priorities, coordinate referrals, and maintain continuity without assuming every person will follow the same service path.

The Work Often Continues to Evolve Over Time

There is no universal length of service for people who have experienced trafficking. Some interactions may be brief, while others continue or recur over months or years.

During that time, organizations may be:

- Coordinating with multiple service providers and community partners
- Navigating housing, legal, employment, or financial resources
- Documenting services, referrals, and outcomes
- Supporting person-identified goals
- Maintaining relationships across multiple points of engagement
- Meeting grant and reporting requirements

This work often requires patience, flexibility, coordination, and sustained effort.

Where Linear Systems Fall Short

Many systems are built around linear assumptions:

- A clear intake
- A defined service path
- A predictable progression of services

But when the work itself is not linear, those assumptions can begin to create challenges. Organizations may find themselves:

- Reopening records or documenting the same information multiple times
- Working around rigid workflows
- Losing visibility into long-term engagement
- Struggling to reflect the full scope of their work through data

Over time, this creates friction, not because the work is unclear, but because the system doesn't always reflect how the work actually happens.

Rethinking What Progress Looks Like

If we expect every person's experience to follow a straight path, we risk misunderstanding both the work and the outcomes.

Progress is not always immediate, it is not always visible, and it is not always linear. Sometimes progress is reconnecting with services. Sometimes it is identifying a new goal. Sometimes it is simply knowing support is available when someone is ready.

Organizations play an important role in documenting and supporting that work while recognizing that each person's experience is their own.

Moving Forward

Supporting people who have experienced trafficking requires more than responsiveness in a single moment. It requires systems, structures, and approaches that can support complexity over time. That means:

- Supporting re-engagement without unnecessary administrative barriers
- Documenting evolving needs and person-identified goals

- Tracking services and referrals across multiple points of engagement
- Supporting continuity while meeting reporting requirements
- Reflecting the work as it actually unfolds

At Vela, we recognize that expertise in anti-trafficking services belongs to survivors, people with lived experience, advocates, and the organizations doing this work every day.

Our role is not to define what a person's journey should look like. Our role is to provide technology that helps organizations document services, coordinate their work, and manage reporting in ways that reflect the realities of the work they do.

There is no single path, timeline, or outcome that represents every person's experience. The systems behind this work should leave room for that reality.

Connect With Us

If your organization supports survivors of human trafficking, we would welcome the opportunity to discuss what aspects of case management, reporting, and coordination support would make the greatest difference in your work.

Your insight can help us strengthen our understanding of the realities of anti-trafficking work today and how Vela can continue to support organizations in ways that are practical, thoughtful, and grounded in the work itself.

Want to learn new ways to simplify your work or explore features you may not be using yet? Visit veladirect.com or reach out to our team. We're always here to help.



Developed with input from advocates at every stage, Vela by Element 74 is a trauma-informed case management and reporting platform built specifically for domestic violence, sexual assault, and human trafficking organizations.

info@veladirect.com | (573) 332-7474