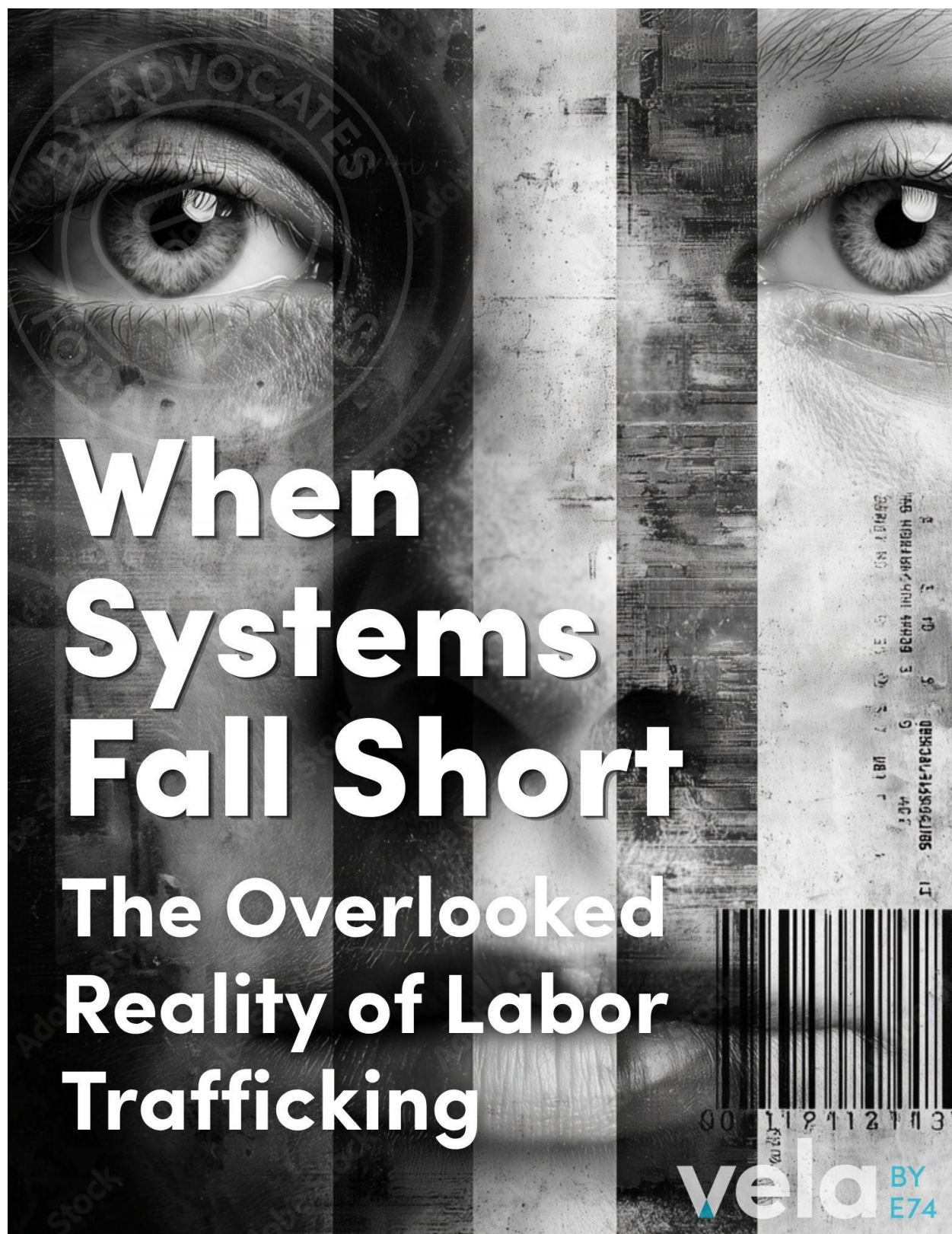




When Systems Fall Short

The Overlooked Reality of Labor Trafficking

Human trafficking is a complex issue that is often misunderstood, minimized, or left unspoken. Public conversations may focus more heavily on certain forms of trafficking than others, with sex trafficking often taking the forefront of awareness efforts, media coverage, and community response.

That attention has helped many organizations build deep expertise around safety, crisis response, housing, healthcare, advocacy, and long-term support for survivors of sexual exploitation. But trafficking is broader, and often more interconnected, than public narratives suggest.

Human trafficking includes both sex trafficking and labor trafficking. For many organizations, supporting survivors means navigating both realities, whether they appear separately, overlap, or emerge over time as trust grows and more of a survivor's experience becomes known.

The Under-Recognition of Labor Trafficking

Labor trafficking remains significantly under-identified. It can be harder to recognize, less frequently reported, and more likely to be misunderstood. It occurs across industries like agriculture, construction, domestic work, food service, and more, and often in plain sight.

To complicate the problem, survivors may not identify their experience as trafficking. Many systems are not designed to capture it, and intake processes may not even ask the right questions. As a result, labor trafficking is often underrepresented in both data and service delivery.

When something isn't clearly seen, it is harder to respond to effectively.

Different Experiences, Different Needs

While both sex and labor trafficking involve exploitation, the experiences and the paths to stability can look very different. Some survivors of labor trafficking may be navigating:

- Wage theft and financial instability
- Unsafe or exploitative working conditions
- Immigration-related concerns
- Barriers to employment and documentation

Others may need support connecting to new employment opportunities, legal services, or long-term economic stability.

At the same time, survivors of sex trafficking may have different combinations of needs related to safety, housing, healthcare, and recovery.

There is overlap. But there are also important differences. Supporting both requires flexibility, not just in services, but also in how those services are tracked, coordinated, and understood.

In some cases, those categories may not be as separate as they appear on paper. Survivors may experience both labor and sex trafficking, or move through situations where exploitation changes over time.

A person may first be controlled through work, housing, debt, documentation, or financial dependence, while also experiencing sexual exploitation or coercion. Another survivor may enter services through a sex trafficking response, only for labor-related exploitation, wage theft, unsafe work conditions, or immigration-related concerns to become clearer later.

That is part of what makes this work so complex. Survivors do not always arrive with one clearly defined experience, and their needs may not fit neatly into a single service path. For organizations, this means systems must be flexible enough to document what is known at intake, what emerges over time, and how support changes as trust is built.

Where Systems Fall Short

Many systems were not built with this full scope in mind. They may:

- Center one type of trafficking experience over another

- Lack fields or workflows that capture labor-related needs
- Assume a more uniform service path than actually exists
- Make it difficult to track employment, financial recovery, or long-term stabilization

When systems don't reflect the realities of the work, organizations are forced to adapt around them, often using workarounds, spreadsheets, or inconsistent documentation. Over time, this creates gaps:

- In data
- In reporting
- In the ability to fully understand and demonstrate impact

And ultimately, in how well survivors are supported.

The Risk of a Narrow Lens

When systems are built around a limited understanding of trafficking, they create operational challenges and even shape how the work itself is carried out.

If labor trafficking is harder to document, it becomes harder to track. If it's harder to track, it becomes harder to report. If it's harder to report, it becomes harder to fund and prioritize.

The result is a cycle where certain experiences remain less visible, not because they are less common, but because they are less supported by the systems in place.

Building Systems That Reflect the Full Reality

Supporting survivors of trafficking requires systems that can hold complexity. That means:

- Recognizing both sex and labor trafficking as real problems
- Allowing for different entry points, needs, and service paths
- Supporting long-term, evolving journeys
- Capturing outcomes beyond immediate intervention

It also means creating space for the work as it actually happens instead of forcing it into predefined categories that don't fully apply.

Moving Forward

As the field continues to grow, one thing becomes increasingly clear: What we build our systems to capture will shape what we are able to see. And what we are able to see will shape how we respond.

If labor trafficking remains harder to document, it will continue to be harder to prioritize. Not because it is less important, but because it is less visible within the systems designed to support the work.

Closing that gap isn't just a matter of awareness. It's a matter of infrastructure.

At Vela, we believe the systems behind this work should be as comprehensive as the work itself, capable of supporting the full range of experiences organizations

are navigating every day. That includes recognizing the needs of survivors of sex trafficking, labor trafficking, and situations where exploitation overlaps or changes over time.

We also know this work is led by the expertise of advocates, service providers, survivor leaders, coalitions, and anti-trafficking organizations in the field. Vela's role is to listen, learn, and help build technology that better reflects the realities you are navigating.

Connect With Us

If your organization supports survivors of human trafficking, we would welcome the opportunity to better understand your workflows, reporting needs, and service documentation challenges. Your insight can help shape systems that support the full complexity of anti-trafficking work.

Explore Trusted Anti-Trafficking Resources

For teams looking to deepen their understanding of human trafficking and comprehensive survivor support, trusted resources are available through:

- [The Office for Victims of Crime](#)
- [The Office on Trafficking in Persons](#) and [NHTTAC](#)
- [The Department of Justice](#)
- [The National Human Trafficking Hotline](#)

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.

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