



Human Trafficking
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Analyses Project

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

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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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Overview

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) 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, is overseeing a formative evaluation of these VHT-NC projects. RTI International and American Indian Development Associates are conducting 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 grant 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 American 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 interim report provides a summary of the first two years of implementation of the six VHT-NC projects, including their challenges and strengths. Report sections describe (1) human trafficking within the VHT-NC communities, (2) project design and structure, (3) project partnerships, (4) outreach and identification approaches, (5) case management and service delivery, and (6) community training.

Key Findings and Highlights

- The VHT-NC projects made significant progress in Years 1 and 2 developing their programs and are well-positioned to build on their strengths and successes.
- Key strengths and successes: Inclusion of Native staff, strengthened partnerships, development of culturally responsive and trauma-informed processes and project materials, service provision that largely meets participants' needs, and improved understanding of human trafficking.
- Common barriers to project implementation: The COVID-19 pandemic, need for increased awareness and understanding of human trafficking in Native communities, and the need for time to build strong foundations.

Methods

The interim report primarily draws from two semi-structured virtual interviews conducted with the six VHT-NC project directors or a designated person (e.g., project coordinator) during two timeframes: March–June 2022 and September–December 2022. The report also includes information abstracted from VHT-NC projects' grant applications and performance progress reports submitted quarterly to ACF (i.e., eight reports across Years 1 and 2).

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 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 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, is overseeing 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 are to understand the context in which the six VHT-NC projects are implemented, their goals, and the paths each project takes to achieve those goals.

Interim Report Overview

The purpose of this interim report is to provide a summary of the first two years of VHT-NC project implementation, including challenges and strengths, across the six sites. Report sections describe (1) human trafficking within the VHT-NC communities, (2) project design and structure, (3) project partnerships, (4) outreach and identification approaches, (5) case management and service delivery, and (6) community training.

The report primarily draws from two semi-structured virtual interviews conducted with the six VHT-NC project directors or a designated person (e.g., project coordinator) during two timeframes: March–June 2022 and September–December 2022. The report also includes information abstracted from VHT-NC projects' grant applications and performance progress reports submitted quarterly to ACF (i.e., eight reports across Years 1 and 2).

Overall, several common factors impacted multiple aspects of the VHT-NC projects' implementation:

- **COVID-19 pandemic and restrictions** heightened human trafficking vulnerabilities and affected project and partner staffing, partnership development, outreach activities, case management, service delivery, and training activities.
- The **need for increased awareness and understanding of human trafficking in Native communities** affected partnership development, community relationship building, participant outreach and identification, service delivery, and community training.
- The **need for time**—exacerbated by the pandemic—to build out the foundational components of these newly established projects using culturally responsive and trauma-informed approaches. A strong foundation is critical to effective response to human trafficking and project sustainability, but building such a foundation is time- and labor-intensive and may delay participant enrollment and service provision.

<p>Human Trafficking in VHT-NC Communities</p>	<p>Project directors described characteristics of human trafficking in their communities, including contributing factors (e.g., homelessness and housing instability, substance use and addiction, mental health, poverty) and locations (e.g., hotels, motels, highways, truck stops, casinos, encampments of unhoused persons, social media). Most indicated more familiarity with sex trafficking than labor trafficking. All the VHT-NC projects participate in regional or statewide anti-trafficking task forces or multidisciplinary response teams. Many are also involved in activities related to MMIP, including local coordinated response or support for families and search efforts.</p>
<p>Project Design and Structure</p>	<p>Grant recipients' experience in human trafficking often related to intersecting issues or populations (e.g., people who have also experienced domestic violence or sexual assault, MMIP, child welfare involvement). Identifying Native people who have experienced human trafficking within these populations motivated grant recipients to enhance their communities' responses to human trafficking through the VHT-NC Program. Several also set out to build on successful program models and activities they had developed. The projects experienced staffing challenges related to turnover and hiring, which were heightened by the pandemic. A primary strength of the projects is that all have incorporated Native staff, many of whom are affiliated with the Native communities being served by their project. Project directors identified other staff strengths, like cultural humility, adaptability, and experience working with Native peoples, addressing human trafficking, or both.</p>
<p>Project Partnerships</p>	<p>Partnership development and relationship building have been primary focuses of the first two years of VHT-NC implementation. A wide variety of partners are involved in various project activities. Primary barriers to partnership development included the pandemic, grant recipient and partner staff turnover, the need for increased trust and understanding of human trafficking, and a history of community silos. Respondents highlighted several partnership facilitators, including reciprocity, patience, mindful planning, respect, transparency, frequent communication, and demonstrated commitment to the partnership.</p> <p>Primary partnership successes included expanded networks, strengthened collaboration and coordination, formalized processes, increased capacity to serve Native peoples who have experienced human trafficking, and community resilience in response to challenges.</p>

Participant Outreach and Identification	<p>Projects conduct direct outreach across multiple settings (e.g., on the street, encampments of unhoused persons, community or cultural events) to identify potential participants for project assistance. Participants may also reach projects through referral (e.g., self-referral, partner referral) and formal coordination between project and partner staff. Project awareness, which aids outreach and identification, is supported by integration into other project activities, project champions, and the use of culturally responsive project materials.</p> <p>Primary barriers to outreach and identification included COVID-19 restrictions, staffing capacity, and reluctance to discuss human trafficking, which hindered confirmation of participants' trafficking experiences. Primary successes included collaborative development of culturally responsive and trauma-informed project protocols and materials, improved human trafficking identification, formalized standard procedures, increased information sharing, and improved relationships with the communities being served.</p>
Case Management and Supportive Services	<p>Case management is provided to all enrolled participants. Similar to the factors that impacted outreach, the pandemic, staffing capacity, and the need for increased trust affected case management and ongoing participant engagement. Person-centered and trauma-informed approaches to engagement helped mitigate these barriers.</p> <p>Generally, participants received the services and help to obtain public benefits they needed. Some services are 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 projects continue to build their resource networks to improve availability and accessibility of services. Importantly, project directors shared how culturally specific services and traditional practices have been integrated and are significant supports for participants. Other service delivery strengths included nurturing relationships with partner contacts, regular case coordination, warm handoffs to referral partners, and proximity to other service providers. Encouragingly, several of the projects have identified a long-term goal of building toward holistic, coordinated service delivery approaches.</p>
Community Training	<p>Project directors described significant need for improved awareness and understanding of human trafficking in their communities. Accomplishing this is a critical step toward successful identification of and enhanced response to Native people who have experienced human trafficking. Projects provided training and education (e.g., Stop, Observe, Ask, Respond [SOAR] to Health and Wellness; SOAR for Indigenous Communities) to their staff, partners, and others in the community, and several respondents reported that understanding of human trafficking improved.</p>

The VHT-NC projects have made significant progress developing their programs by laying the essential groundwork and fortifying an infrastructure to support continued implementation. They

exhibited resilience and adaptability in the face of unprecedented challenges and are well-positioned to build on their strengths and successes.

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, or Pacific Islander) people who have or are experiencing human trafficking through the provision of direct services, assistance, and referrals. In addition to the required activities of outreach, comprehensive case management and supportive service provision, and

training of community partners (**see below**), the VHT-NC projects are also expected or encouraged to:

- 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 American people 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.

The VHT-NC Program broadly focuses on three components:



- **Outreach** efforts to increase identification of Native American people who have 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

ACF's Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE), in collaboration with OTIP, is overseeing 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 are to understand the contexts in which the six VHT-NC projects are implemented, the projects' goals, and the paths they take to achieve their goals. The formative evaluation is guided by the questions listed in **Table 1**. Through data collection and engagement of Native community members with expertise in human trafficking, we learn from the VHT-NC projects and communities and help to tell their stories in ways that are informed by and respect their knowledge, values, and traditions.

This report summarizes interim findings using the data outlined in **Table 2**, which presents the data source, respondents, mode, frequency, and timeline. This includes information abstracted from grant applications, quarterly performance progress reports submitted by the projects to ACF, and two semi-structured virtual interviews conducted with VHT-NC project directors or a designated person (e.g., project coordinator).

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, quotes from project director interviews are presented throughout the report. Importantly, the results shared in this report represent a journey in progress. As the projects continue to grow and the evaluation's exploration deepens, we will have a more holistic understanding of the VHT-NC Program.

Table 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 grant recipients, primary partners, and project participants?
How do VHT-NC projects develop and maintain partnerships and intergovernmental relationships?
What are the outreach approaches VHT-NC projects use to identify Native American 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 American people who have experienced human trafficking in project design and implementation?
How is community training provided?

Table 2. Overview of Data Sources

Data Source	Respondents	Mode	Frequency	Timeline
Grant application	n/a	Document review and abstraction	Once	May 2021
Performance progress reports (including performance indicators)	n/a	Document review and abstraction	Quarterly (n = 8)	Oct 2020–Sep 2022
Project director interview	Project director (n = 6)	Semi-structured virtual interview	Twice	1: Mar–Jun 2022 2: Sep–Dec 2022

Human Trafficking Within the VHT-NC Communities

LaFrance & Nichols incorporated the core value of *people of a place* in their Indigenous Evaluation Framework, emphasizing the need to understand the context in which project implementation occurs.¹ Context encompasses many factors and is a significant area of exploration for the formative evaluation. In this section, we focus on the ways human trafficking is happening in the communities served by the VHT-NC projects, system responses, and intersections with efforts to respond to the MMIP crisis.

Human Trafficking Trends

Respondents described the presence of factors that may increase vulnerability to human trafficking within their communities or surrounding areas. Most grant recipients indicated more familiarity with and described sex trafficking happening in their communities, as opposed to labor trafficking. Therefore, the contributing factors to human

The **COVID-19 pandemic** was an inescapable contextual factor that has greatly affected all aspects of VHT-NC project implementation. The pandemic's impacts, which are diminishing but still present, are described throughout the report.

trafficking respondents discussed pertained mostly to sex trafficking; they included homelessness and housing instability, substance use and addiction, mental health needs, poverty, high unemployment, and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). As VHT-NC project sites are situated in a variety of communities, the social and situational factors that respondents noted were somewhat varied; however, respondents from several sites noted that COVID-19 and inflation have exacerbated existing vulnerabilities.



SHARING KNOWLEDGE: LOCAL FACTORS RELATED TO HUMAN TRAFFICKING

*“Thinking of trends as a whole, not just in the communities we’re serving in this project, we are identifying quite a lot of **youth** being trafficked or groomed. We are seeing quite a bit of people being targeted specifically in areas of **high poverty and high crime**...We are seeing a lot of **substance abuse treatment needed** with a lot of the survivors we are working with.”*

*“Thinking about our Native and Indigenous populations, we are seeing a lot of younger youth who are...encountering **online exploitation** and exploitation via the ramp of **social media**. In our older youth population...who are experiencing that **homelessness and high mobility**, we are seeing a lot more **survival sex and also third parties profiting off that exploitation of individuals**. In particular, urban parts of our...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.”*

*“**COVID has impacted job security** for a lot of people, so we see **substance abuse increasing** in our communities. We are also seeing a lot of people who are out of work who are also more vulnerable to being trafficked.”*

¹ LaFrance, J., & Nichols, R. (2008). Reframing evaluation: Defining an Indigenous evaluation framework. *Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation*, 23(2), 13–31. <https://doi.org/10.3138/cjpe.23.003>

Respondents described different aspects of the marketplace and operations for human trafficking—primarily sex trafficking—happening in their communities. Locations of trafficking include hotels and motels, highways, truck stops, casinos, street locations, encampments of unhoused persons, and online or via social media. Other known trends in the marketplace and operations for trafficking include youth and young adults, the 2SLGBTQIA+ (Two-Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, Asexual) population, familial trafficking², and survival sex³.

Half the respondents described their community as rural or near rural communities. This is helpful context when assessing the varying nature of human trafficking operations, risk factors for trafficking, and access to resources, services, and job opportunities. Other respondents described seasonal and geographic factors that contribute to human trafficking in their communities, such as tourism and proximity to highways, casinos, and commercial venues.

Systems Response to Human Trafficking

Respondents shared insights into the systems responses to addressing human trafficking, specifically in Native communities. All the VHT-NC projects participate in regional or statewide anti-trafficking task forces or multidisciplinary response teams. Many of these efforts are in partnership with other victim service providers, coalitions, local law enforcement, the FBI, and (at one site) a state governor’s office. For example, one project director described being a part of a statewide service provider network for people who have experienced human trafficking and youth who have experienced sexual exploitation. Another project director



SHARING KNOWLEDGE: MARKETPLACE AND OPERATIONS OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING

*“To reiterate what we see happening in our community, we do still see **street exploitation**⁴ happening, but we know that a lot of exploitation platforms are happening **online on social media**. We do see a ton of youth engaging in **survival sex** who are often experiencing **homelessness and high mobility**.”*

*“We also have gang violence in our area and are finding out **a lot of the human trafficking, sex trafficking, in our area is gang-run**...We’ve done street outreach and going into the **homeless encampments** and talking to some of the people in those camps, they’re getting transported from multiple homeless camps, crossing counties even. They’re just going in a big circle is what we’re being told.”*

*“With [State], we are a pretty large but rural state, so **we are seeing quite a bit of labor trafficking** in addition to sex trafficking, we are seeing a lot of combination of both. We are seeing a lot of **agriculture** work and different things within **hospitality** industries.”*

described being a member of a “core group” of various systems professionals who work to address human trafficking. The VHT-NC grant was a primary or contributing factor in implementing several of these coordinated response efforts (further described in Section 4), which have facilitated outreach strategies, referrals, project enrollment, and training efforts. Three projects indicated that these coordinated activities are raising MMIP awareness.

² **Familial 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.

³ **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.

⁴ **Street exploitation** typically refers to experiences of trading or selling sex to meet basic needs in public settings such as along roads or parks. For children under the age of 18, engaging in sex acts in exchange for something of value is sex trafficking.



CELEBRATING STRENGTHS: GOALS OF A COORDINATED RESPONSE TO HUMAN TRAFFICKING

“So, the task force is really trying to bridge services. Sometimes there are these gaps between law enforcement, victim services, and sometimes legal...**We’re trying to bridge those services, so survivors aren’t having to retell their stories over and over again.** So, people aren’t just saying, ‘Oh hey, this person provides services.’ More doing warm handoffs, trying to create ROIs [releases of information] between us for information sharing, building protocols around that. Doing a lot of talking about training for all the different fields but really making sure that law enforcement has appropriate training.”

Respondents described several barriers to effective systems responses to address human trafficking in Native communities. A common theme across the VHT-NC projects is a lack of awareness and understanding of human trafficking. This has ripple effects, impacting potential for partnerships, outreach and identification efforts, and training efforts (further described in Sections 4, 5, and 6, respectively). Project directors also identified limited coordination, siloed responses, and legal implications when working with tribes as barriers.

Broader issues of systemic racism, stereotypes of Native peoples, and insufficient engagement of Native communities present ongoing challenges to building an effective systems response. One project director described that their state’s “movement” to address human trafficking had a persistent lack of engagement with disproportionately affected communities. Similarly, respondents noted a scarcity of culturally responsive or appropriate services and resources that are essential for addressing human trafficking in Native communities.



LEARNING THROUGH REFLECTION: RACISM AND LACK OF REPRESENTATION IN ANTI-TRAFFICKING RESPONSES

“**There is a lot of historical contexts that can paint the picture of why our Native and Indigenous populations and communities have been underserved** in all areas, but in this especially. Seeing Native and Indigenous folks as disposable, as a population that doesn’t have hope...those stereotypical, historical ideas and concepts and the way some people view that population. **Racism and inequity are still at large** because of some of those ideas and concepts. **The lack of asking ‘How do you need these services and what do they look like?’** versus ‘We are going to design these, here they are, and if they aren’t working for you that’s your problem.’”

“One of the biggest complaints and concerns I’ve had with our state is that **the people at the table never really represent the people who are being trafficked.** I felt like there is a very clear lack of inclusion from marginalized communities and spaces for them to have a voice and a microphone within our communities and [State] as a whole when it comes to anti-trafficking work...Traditionally a lot of trafficking efforts have been law enforcement led...or it has been led by our sexual assault coalition. The other group that has led a lot of the efforts is grassroots faith-based groups...it has been a lot of white Evangelists who are leading the movement and doing the work. A lot of people get left out because **people don’t want to interact with law enforcement or they’re not specifically going to those sexual assault agencies, they are going to culturally specific agencies that help them with everything else, not just trafficking.**”

Intersections With MMIP

A few grant recipients highlighted activities related to the MMIP epidemic. These activities, which the VHT-NC Program encourages because of the issue's strong connection to human trafficking in Native communities, include participating in MMIP task forces, establishing partnerships and cultivating relationships, and educating other providers about the intersections of MMIP and human trafficking. One project director discussed incorporating MMIP into their human trafficking training: "So a lot of times when we're doing trainings, in particular, we don't just talk about human trafficking, we also talk about

MMIW [Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women] and how that connects to human trafficking."

Two respondents described the direct experience the VHT-NC projects and staff have working to recover or identify Indigenous missing persons. This includes using flyers or social media when someone goes missing or advocating for systems response to search for someone. Based on their own outreach experience, one respondent observed that social media is an effective communication platform when someone goes missing.



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. In this section, we describe the projects' design, planning, structure, and staffing approaches.

VHT-NC Project Design and Planning

The VHT-NC projects approached project design and planning in various ways. Each project brings unique strengths to their community's response to Native peoples experiencing human trafficking. Most project directors described organizational capacity and expertise working with intersecting issues and populations, including people who have experienced domestic violence or sexual assault, MMIP, child welfare involvement, people on probation or involved in criminal legal systems, and youth. Often, the grant recipients' experiences identifying people who have experienced human trafficking occurred while working from within these other populations of focus. This catalyzed a desire to specifically serve people impacted by human trafficking. Of the non-tribal grant recipients, two described their expertise working with their local Native communities. They

Six VHT-NC projects were awarded to a diverse group of grant recipients:

- Two federally recognized Tribes
- One Native justice advocacy organization
- Two social services organizations
- One state government agency

wanted to use their VHT-NC grants to respond to their communities' needs and equip partners to provide culturally responsive services. Three grant recipients described wanting to use the VHT-NC award to build or expand capacity to serve the intended population by replicating successful program models or activities.

Several project directors identified key champions within their organization who were already working on issues of human trafficking within Native communities and were well-suited to kickstart the project or push the work forward.



CELEBRATING STRENGTHS: INFLUENCE OF LOCAL CHAMPIONS

*“Also [project staff member]’s domestic violence and sexual assault agency project that she already worked on focuses in [geographic areas, some] that had higher instances of trafficking...We wanted to **target where she already had people doing the work and has built the relationships.**”*

*“**Without [project staff member] we probably wouldn’t have these grants.** She’s a...tribal member. She came into our program as a senior admin assistant, but her heart was dedicated to MMIW because of her own personal story. So, through all this MMIW work that she’s been doing, she’s been noticing a link to human trafficking and the rates of Native American people being human trafficked across the nation. So, she started doing her own research and a lot of her own work, on her own time...So, she sought out [this grant].”*

Three respondents described how the use of data, including Indigenous ways of knowing through storytelling, influenced their project planning process. These included a community needs assessment, an interactive dashboard with victimization data and service usage, and a Native leaders meeting group. One project director described how an organic storytelling process led to their VHT-NC project.



CELEBRATING STRENGTHS: SERVICE GUIDED BY COMMUNITY VOICE

*“It definitely was through conversation with some of the Native leaders and my supervisor. Because one Native leader had shared about his personal experience with somebody that he knows that was trafficked. And then having to understand that we were going to need to start from scratch. And that’s how it came about. And then through these conversations—it’s a Native leader quarterly meeting to **get together and talk about issues within the Native communities, and that is really how this started.**”*



Project Structure

The projects have taken varied approaches to implementing the primary VHT-NC activities of outreach, case management, and service delivery. Four projects have a more centralized model, in which the grant recipient is the primary entity conducting VHT-NC activities with various types of support from community partners (e.g., assistance with outreach, referral for enrollment, service referral, training). One site differs slightly because the grant recipient also has a subrecipient partner (i.e., the partner receives VHT-NC funding) to provide specific services.

The two remaining projects have unique structures. One is co-led by two programs within the grant recipient agency that provide oversight and administrative support. The project's advocates are embedded in programs and tribal centers in specific regions of the state to conduct VHT-NC activities. The other grant recipient conducts VHT-NC activities in its region and provides training and technical assistance (TTA) to a subrecipient partner to carry

out VHT-NC activities in a different region (note, three subrecipients were involved initially). Community partners also support both projects.

Project Staffing

Project Staff Turnover. Hiring and retaining staff has been a significant challenge to all projects' implementation efforts. Each has experienced turnover of project leadership positions (e.g., project director, project coordinator), direct services positions (e.g., outreach worker, case manager, advocate), or both. Loss of staff not only affects the capacity to conduct VHT-NC activities but may result in loss of historical knowledge of the project; loss of expertise about Native communities or human trafficking; need for retraining; a gap in connection to partners; and increased workload for remaining staff. Some project directors shared that staffing challenges were not isolated to their VHT-NC project and that the issue was widespread throughout their organization or community.



LEARNING THROUGH REFLECTION: STAFF TURNOVER AND EFFECTS ON IMPLEMENTATION

*“Yes, **turnover was definitely a huge thing for our agency.** We lost our director and assistant director very quickly. That was a huge challenge trying to figure out where we’re at with grants and trying to **continue services as smoothly as possible.**”*

*“So, the only challenge is, like I said, the **high turnover in management and having to get everybody on board again** with our meetings and our goals and stuff. Same with our program, we have a **high turnover in our shelter portion**, just because it’s like an entry level position and it’s kind of high demand...But yeah, it’s a high staff turnover, we’re **still short staffed**, we’re still trying to fill our open positions.”*

*“I just feel like **staffing is the biggest issue because we would have more time to connect with the partners.** Because I feel like all of our partners are really willing and supportive as much as they can be, but we need to be able to **reach them on a more frequent basis** so they can do what we need from them to make this project successful.”*

*“A major challenge has been filling that **full-time outreach position.** When this grant first started, we had a part-time outreach position and as of the second year of the award we should have had a full-time and that is when the person resigned, so that was a huge gap. Looking at **the follow-up and services that some of the clients needed just didn’t take place, and the connection with that subcontractor** to make sure that not only are we doing the initial intervention and assessment, but the referrals to those cultural healing places. So, that was a big gap and challenge.”*

Hiring and Retention Challenges. Project directors identified several barriers to filling vacant positions, including COVID-19, lengthy recruitment and approval processes, finding people with appropriate experience, and a competitive labor market. One project director explained, “We’ve posted [a position], and because of the salary that it’s posted as, the person won’t accept the position. So, we’ve posted these jobs at least three times each... we’re really struggling with hiring people for these positions.” Inability to provide competitive wages was also cited as a retention challenge.

Project directors identified other barriers to retaining staff. Some projects had personnel who were out for long periods or left the project entirely due to COVID-19 or other health-related reasons. Some respondents underscored how overburdening staff often resulted in burnout and reduced individual capacity because people were stretched too thin. One project director reflected, “I’m sure everyone wishes for having more time in the day but...if we could go back in time and rewrite for this project, I think we would write for an additional staff person to help us with this.”



LEARNING THROUGH REFLECTION: BARRIERS TO HIRING AND RETAINING PROJECT STAFF

*“First of all, it takes so long because we work for [organization]. The **hiring and recruitment process takes a long time** as it is, and then we select a candidate we feel strongly about [and that] has to go to our HR, and then through our executive directors, and then their boss, and then [organization]—so all these steps of approval. I think that’s how we honestly **lost a couple really good candidates, because they had to wait too long.**”*

*“I think **it’s been challenging to find advocates who have any prior knowledge or background of working with survivors of human trafficking.** It’s very rare finding people, but even having a case management background around DV [domestic violence] or sexual assault or MMIP. I think those are all really important to have some kind of background when diving into these projects and especially when we’re working with these partner agencies...I feel like this [grant] is one you have to have some background because you can’t go in and be [organization]’s representative and say ‘I’m going to help you build this project’...if you don’t have some background knowledge. So, I think that was definitely a challenge was finding people that have prior work in anti-human trafficking.”*

*“The last three interviews that we conducted, two of them, all the applicants were no-shows. **Only one applicant showed out of all of them.** Even HR [human resources] is saying that it’s happening so often, it’s not just our programs, it’s other programs that are interviewing...It’s something they haven’t seen before, like, the pandemic era.”*

*“I think staffing is an issue and I think it’s a trend throughout the agency. So, we’ve been talking a lot about retention and how to retain. A lot of times with nonprofits, this is people’s starting point, and then they get degrees, or they get certifications or licensed, and then they just realize that then they’re worth more. And **a nonprofit is not able to compete with, a lot of time, the wages that are offered through private companies, or state companies, or federal companies.**...So, it’s really just trying to fill that vacancy, find the right person who would be the right fit for the community we’re serving, and then **also thinking about longevity. How do we maintain them?**”*

Benefits of Including Native Staff. Despite these challenges, respondents described many positives to celebrate. Importantly, all projects have incorporated Native staff, many of whom are affiliated with the specific Native communities being served by their project. Project directors shared that having Native staff with similar backgrounds to those served positively influences the support project participants receive. One said it is “definitely beneficial because they can relate, they share the common culture,” and explained

that staff’s ability to use a localized language style helps develop trust while out in the community. Another respondent illustrated that having a Native male staff member presents another critical side of representation, offering a valuable resource that is not always accessible to participants. One project director emphasized the benefits of Native staff representation, while acknowledging and addressing participants’ potential concerns around confidentiality due to small community size.



CELEBRATING STRENGTHS: REFLECTING THE COMMUNITIES YOU SERVE

*“I think [having staff with Native heritage] has influenced [the project], and I know **[project staff member 1] always brings her own things she grew up with when she is working with youth, or things she learned.** She always likes to say, ‘I don’t want to speak for all Native people, because this is just what I know and what I learned.’...I think it’s really nice now that we have [project staff member 2]...Because I think generally just in this field, we tend to see a lot more female-identifying people working, so I think **it’s great to have a male-identifying staff person just to be that positive role model** and also because I know we have been getting a lot more male referrals. And a lot of them tend to want to work with a male. I think it’s great that we can offer that now. And also, for even our female participants, for them to see a male in this positive role, I think it’s really awesome. And I think it’s really great to have someone who represents another tribe to also be like, ‘Yes, there are these other traditions.’ And **for our youth who don’t identify as [Tribe] to also see themselves represented as well is really awesome.**”*

*“So, **our staff being majority Native American, it’s an accepting environment for clients who come in for services. The artwork that we have, the beadwork that we share with them, how to do cultural activities, a lot of them give a sigh of relief.** Like, ‘I feel so comfortable here, you’re not judging me like I’m from somewhere else.’ It’s really hard to explain the environment when Native American clients come in and see Native American employees helping them. A lot of clients do ask, ‘Who are you? Where are you from? Who is your family? I want to know who you know.’ All because it’s a confidential issue, they want to know who you know, who you’re related to, what you’re going to say to somebody. So, **we always go through our confidentiality list with them, like if we breach confidentiality here are the rights that you have available to you.** ‘You can do a grievance against somebody,’ we tell them. When we’re doing an intake with them, we give them a blank grievance paper and it tells them exactly how to turn it in if they have any complaint about our staff. That way it’s not like, ‘Oh, I have a complaint about somebody, what do I do?’ They don’t have to disclose that, they can just do that right away.”*

VHT-NC Project Staff Strengths. Project directors highlighted a variety of strengths of their VHT-NC teams. Several talked about the importance of coming from a mindset of learning, reflecting on how things are going and what could be better, and being adaptable and open to change. Some described how experienced staff and existing relationships strengthened their projects. One project director, who connected their prior role as a practitioner to their current VHT-NC work, stated, “Establishing community partnerships was really huge for me... When I took on this role here it was important that

I continue to do that and branch out and bring in other services and keep those good relationships.” Another project director emphasized how a case manager’s anti-human trafficking experience, including developing and delivering trainings, and work in a nearby Native community contributed to their ability to carry over partnerships to the VHT-NC project. The following project director quotes illustrate the values (e.g., trauma-informed, cultural humility) and experience that staff bring and how they strengthen the projects.



CELEBRATING STRENGTHS: “EACH STAFF HAS THEIR OWN GIFT THAT THEY BRING TO THE TABLE”

“I think just having the mindset—and this is both culturally and just respect...[of] **being the learner**. So not being afraid to ask or inquire. Teach me, help me learn, help me understand what your practices are, what your beliefs are, what your values are. So definitely the biggest skill is just going in as a learner and not as an expert, and **listening** to their stories...because it makes the relationship that much more rich. And then, we are all **trauma-informed**, trained in...a trauma-informed approach to services. And then also trained in **cultural humility** and **cultural diversity**, and just **knowing how to pivot** when you need to pivot and just really **meeting the participants where they’re at**.”

“[Project staff are] **super creative** in thinking about what internal and external partnerships and opportunities we can create...[T]hey have been contributing a lot of cool ideas that also really focus on **partnering with local Native and Indigenous folks** especially those with small business, nonprofits, or provide these types of services. Their **resiliency** as well. So many things come with piloting a new program so I’m also proud of our ability to sit down and say, ‘oh I think we messed up here’ or ‘oh I think we need to go back a step...’ Being able to admit when we need to **revisit, redo, or rethink** this. We have been able to have **brave spaces** within our team to talk about some of that stuff and be vulnerable with other partners. Their **passion** is amazing and what drives it all.”

“I think the primary [team] strength is **adaptability**. Because no matter what we need to get done, we get together, **we figure out how to get it done**, regardless of staffing or challenges that we’re facing.”

“[Project staff member] has a very mindful approach about not going into communities saying, ‘Let’s talk about human trafficking!’ She has a good understanding of how to approach things and just doing work of **being there** and offering activities and then having really **mindful conversations**. She has a lot of **experience and connections throughout the communities** and so it’s been really cool with her coming here. And people are reaching out that we’ve never worked with before, communities saying, ‘Oh! [Staff] is there now, she’s come to our community before, can she come back?’ So, I think that’s really cool that people we’ve never worked with before are reaching out because they have this connection that [Staff] had from other human trafficking programs.”

Supporting Staff Wellness. Some project directors discussed the ways teams are supported to engage in self-care, which is important for reducing stress, avoiding burnout, and promoting wellness. Strategies include encouraging staff to take personal time, empowering staff to advocate for themselves, checking in with staff regularly, debriefing after

challenging situations, and participating in non-work group activities. “We watch out for one another. If we see someone starting to burn out or get frustrated over something we say, ‘We got this, you go home, take a personal day, go do what you need to do for yourself,’” said one project director.



CELEBRATING STRENGTHS: CREATING SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENTS FOR STAFF WELLNESS

“The way that we do that is we have **retreats**, so I usually plan at least quarterly for all of our team...We try to have a retreat where we do downtime, lunch, might be yoga, might be massages, whatever we want to factor in. **We also know to check in**, so it’s like that biweekly check-in, but also individual check-ins I am very big on. And everybody on our team can tell you, if you need a mental health day, **take a mental health day**. Or if you need a mental health hour. And I feel like people are really comfortable saying, ‘You know, I can’t take this on right now. I need a couple hours.’ **Because we do a lot**, because all of them are filling in for a lot of pieces that we don’t have currently. And so, I think that’s one of the biggest ways that a lot of us are trying to do that. We even **go for walks** when all of us are in the office, we take time to take a quick walk around the block just to debrief.”

“[Having] an **open-door policy** of, always feel free to come to us if you have a hard meeting with a [participant]. Because we don’t ever want you to carry what happens in a meeting with one [participant] to the next meeting...But **that doesn’t just mean you take it home with you**. So, we always try to be really good about debriefing and also knowing that self-care isn’t just bubble baths, even though **it can be bubble baths, but it is more intentional than that**. So recently our youth and family services contracted with...a crisis therapist...to help on **debriefs with crisis situations**...Because we know in general, **doing this work takes its toll and it can be hard**...We try to promote an open culture with **team bonding**, we’ve had a staff paint night, and it’s like, ‘Let’s just relax, unplug, don’t talk about work unless you want to.’ But it’s on the clock, let’s just relax and **be with each other in community** and offer that space.”



VHT-NC Partnerships

A foundational component of VHT-NC project implementation has been building and strengthening partner and resource networks. All grant recipients are well-established in their communities; however, the focus of the VHT-NC Program on Native communities and human trafficking presents new areas for some and necessitates that they widen their existing circles. Most project directors cited their relationships with partner organizations as a strength, but acknowledged the importance of continued and proactive outreach to form new connections. In this section, we describe the types of partnerships the grant recipients have formed, relationship building efforts (including strengths and barriers), and key successes so far.

VHT-NC Partnership Characteristics

Grant recipients have involved a variety of entities (e.g., Tribal departments, community-based organizations, government agencies) as partners that represent an array of service specialties and/or populations of focus (**see below**). Grant recipients brought different levels of experience working

with Native communities and people who have experienced human trafficking, which influenced the types of partners they have sought to support their projects. Some project directors noted that the prevalence of human trafficking in specific geographic areas guided partner selection. Other partners were pursued to fulfill needs related to services (e.g., culturally appropriate services) or expertise (e.g., human trafficking). Most partners that have been involved from the projects' beginning had an existing relationship with the grant recipient.

Partner contributions to the VHT-NC projects vary widely. At the direct services level, they might assist with outreach and identification, provide referrals, provide supportive services, or coordinate on cases. At the project level, partners might deliver or participate in TTA, raise project awareness, co-develop protocols and materials, participate in ongoing collaboration, or assist with evaluation or data collection.

Types of partners involved in the VHT-NC projects:

- Providers of basic needs (e.g., food pantries)
- Children, youth, and family services
- Culturally specific
- Domestic violence/ sexual assault
- Employment
- Evaluation
- Health
- Housing
- Law enforcement
- Legal services
- Local government
- Mental/behavioral health
- Native/Tribal
- Schools
- Social services
- Substance use/ addiction
- Trafficking-specific
- Training and technical assistance



CELEBRATING STRENGTHS: STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS TO DEVELOP NEEDED SERVICES

“There are a few culturally specific serving agencies in [City] but fewer when we zoom in on sexually exploited and trafficked youth services. Some of the agencies that we are talking about might have one advocate who does that work specifically at their agency, and so we really saw [the project] **as an opportunity to contribute to the further development of services that would be specific to this population.** Again, wanting to do so in a way that **we are partnering because no one agency is the expert of services or can meet all of the needs.**”

As described in Section 3, VHT-NC grant recipients have incorporated partners into project structures in varying ways. The partnership matrix (see sidebar) illustrates the relationship between two dimensions of partnership: agreement type and level of involvement. The vertical axis represents the type of agreements VHT-NC grant recipients and partners have in place. Some have formal contractual partnerships, meaning a subrecipient receives VHT-NC funds. Some have less formal agreements in place (e.g., memoranda of understanding [MOU]), while others have no formal agreement. The horizontal axis represents the level of partner involvement, from narrow to substantial. **Table 3** demonstrates how project activities may correspond to different involvement levels. These dimensions of partnership are not static. For example, a partner may start by informally providing referrals to the project and have their role grow as the relationship strengthens, which results in the signing of an MOU.

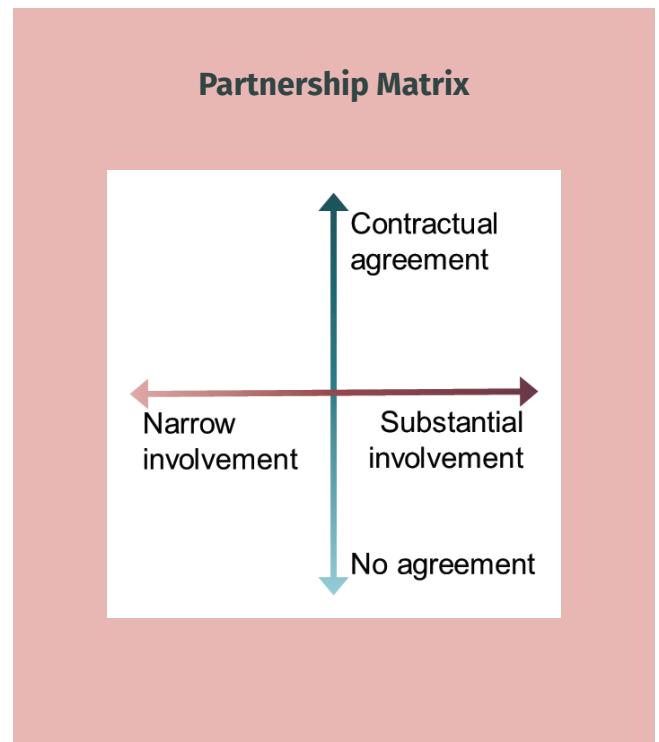


Table 3. Activities Reflecting the Spectrum of VHT-NC Partner Involvement

Narrow Involvement	Medium Involvement	Substantial Involvement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partner only refers potential participants to project Partner only receives referrals for services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partner conducts defined tasks, limited in scope or time (e.g., community needs assessment, technical assistance) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partner carries out primary VHT-NC activities (i.e., outreach, case management, service delivery) Partner participates in ongoing work group meetings

Building Relationships

As partners are essential to the success and sustainability of community initiatives, relationship building has been an integral part of the first two years of VHT-NC project implementation, including strengthening existing partnerships and developing new ones. Most project directors described having strong relationships with community partners and a broad network of resources from which to build.

Project directors also recognized the importance of continuing to explore partnering and services opportunities. Proactive outreach and engagement are helpful to continue raising awareness of and interest in the project to develop new relationships. With more connections, word of mouth can help expand a project's resource network: “[Project staff member’s] really good at networking. So that was something that helped also to further the needs in the community too, people are asking now that they know she’s networked with all of these different agencies.”

Facilitating Successful Partnerships. Project directors named many values and practices that facilitate relationship building and ongoing collaboration. One value voiced by all project directors is reciprocity—ensuring that partners also benefit from their participation in the project. Examples include providing training and resources to build capacity, developing training materials for partners’ use, helping to revise partners’ screening tools and outreach materials, referring people to partners, supporting partners’ events, and sharing data. One grant recipient is building a sweat lodge with their partners that will benefit tribal members and has become an opportunity to share traditional knowledge.



CELEBRATING STRENGTHS: STARTING WITH A STRONG FOUNDATION OF PARTNERSHIP

*“If we call on any of our partners, I can’t think of a single one that if we call on them because we need their support in some capacity, they will not show up for us. They will show up for this project. So, to me, **that is a strength, is to have project partners who will participate and show up if needed.**”*

*“I think that is very unique about our Tribe and Tribal community, is that we do have some **pretty strong tribal departments that are inclusive of their services...**[We] have an **Indian Health Services tribal clinic**, so it is pretty big and offers some pretty expansive services. We’re very fortunate to have that as foundation to be able to build on and work through those agreements not only in a health capacity but **community health** capacity and **mental health** services. We are seeing some other growth in our **youth services** here...It really helps to have those strong partnerships with our **school systems** as far as referrals for any kind of victim services. I see those as strengths. **Community partners are really big in this community.**”*



CELEBRATING STRENGTHS: VALUING RECIPROCITY IN PARTNERSHIPS

*“If there is information that we know [partners] could benefit from, that might have nothing to do with this project, but we try to make sure that we get that to them. But it’s also things like [project staff member] has taken time to create handouts from the local programs and things like, here are the numbers around DV/SA [sexual assault] and human trafficking...So, when they’re doing grant writing and things, they already have this document that they can use. We provided training and education...and we constantly serve as a resource. And so, I think that helps us with the relationship, because **we try to make sure that our partners know, and they call us all the time, but it’s not just a relationship where we’re benefiting, but how can we help you to help the people in your community?** So, I feel like that’s a big piece, is really telling them as much as possible we’re going to be there.”*

*“From planning the [sweat lodge], it’s bringing a lot of elders and healers together to come and educate us, which is really awesome. I didn’t realize how much goes into a sweat lodge until I started having meetings and talking to elders about it. Just **having that traditional knowledge passed down to us, and we can share that with our clients, as well as working with all of the other programs.** That’s a huge change compared to 10 years ago.”*

Respondents also described the importance of patience and incorporating time into the implementation process for the following:

- trust building,
- training necessary to respond to Native peoples who have experienced human trafficking,
- partner input on project processes and materials,
- obtaining required approvals (including tribal), and
- respecting seasons for subsistence⁵ activities (if applicable).

These actions strengthen relationships and increase cultural responsiveness by infusing cultural approaches and knowledge into the project.



CELEBRATING STRENGTHS: GIVING SPACE FOR PARTNERSHIPS TO FLOURISH

*“Overall, just lots of **time and patience.** Because these are not our communities, and **we can only provide them what we learned, and they decide if it is a good fit.** And maybe the folks that we’re meeting with have to run that by—especially with tribes, you can’t just make a decision—**they might have to run it by their tribal leader.** Or, we have to check with our supervisor, or is this our mission and vision of each one of these agencies, to make sure that those tools really fit and their approach fits.”*

*“But I think also just being able to build the relationships and being patient. Because I think one thing we all wanted to do was be gung-ho, jump in and get going, but forgetting that **you have to build those relationships and that takes time and having the patience and understanding that.** I think that’s a huge piece in collaboration.”*

*“**Subsistence is big**—we’re very respectful during the summer because that’s their livelihood and we definitely don’t want to say, ‘Oh by the way, have you trained law enforcement?’ Well law enforcement is busy taking care of the community during subsistence time. And putting that added burden on these agencies.”*

⁵ **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.

Project directors also identified the need for respect, transparency, frequent communication, and commitment to the partnership demonstrated through action and quality of work. For some grant

recipients, communication and relationship building were supported by project staff being co-located or in close proximity to key partners.



CELEBRATING STRENGTHS: OTHER VALUES AND PRACTICES THAT FACILITATE PARTNERSHIP

*“Different perspectives and different cultures and the level of respect that’s at the table is something I really observed right away. And just **being open**, I think that was really important. Knowing that **they felt safe** to tell us, we don’t know what we’re doing...And us brainstorming, well this is what we learned and how we can see if this model would fit in your community. I think all of our partners being **culturally appropriate and relevant**, having that **input and voice**, because so many times we see within the state that people may come into these communities and provide them with resources, but nobody really sticks around to follow through with those. So, they’re saying, ‘Here’s all these great ideas, bye!’ And they see that **we’re here to stay**.”*

*“But our subcontract is a **learning** project itself. Making sure we’re **transparent** with our subcontract...And just trying to keep them as in the loop and as close as we can in our work, keep us **focused on the goals**...**Communicating** with that subcontract...Having every other week meetings, going over the goals and realigning what we want to do training on together, just those kinds of conversations to keep having with them.”*

*“**Showing up and following through**. Because when people see that you actually **do what you say you’re going to do**, that’s one thing, but the fact that you don’t show up or you mean to do something well-intentioned but you don’t get it done, I think plays a huge part in collaboration not working.”*

*“[Project staff member] and I dropped by [a new shelter serving only Native individuals] and was like, ‘Hey, this is our program,’ and kind of introduced ourselves. And then they sent one referral to us and was like, ‘Hey, I think I may have someone who you could work with.’ And it turned out to work amazingly well, **they loved the way we were working with them**, and ever since we’ve just always gotten referrals from them.”*

*“The benefit is that our human trafficking program is in the same building as them so it makes a much more cohesive partner in case they need consultation or simple questions answered. **We are readily available to them**, and they don’t have to drive for miles and miles to just meet with someone about a question.”*

Formal and Coordinated Collaboration

The VHT-NC projects have benefited from formalized and ongoing collaborative efforts. Two projects have created formal groups specific to VHT-NC that comprise critical partners like youth and family services, behavioral health services, other supportive services, and law enforcement. Meetings are held regularly and are used to provide training and education about human trafficking and each other's services, co-develop materials and processes, identify people who may be eligible for the project, and conduct case coordination (described further in Section 5). These formal groups create a mechanism to keep partners engaged, build relationships, implement project activities, address issues as they arise, and improve system coordination.

Additionally, as noted in Section 1, all the grant recipients are involved in formal groups that are addressing human trafficking broadly, including regional anti-trafficking task forces, state human trafficking coalitions or commissions, and local human trafficking alliances. These groups help project staff stay informed about and respond to human trafficking in their communities. As one project director noted, "It's hugely beneficial...Being that it's a local task force, they're networking with other local providers and community members. So, I think that's the biggest benefit, next to staying current on issues surrounding human trafficking and/or the community they're serving."

Barriers to Partnership Development and Sustainability

Project directors reported contextual factors that have inhibited relationship building efforts. These include grant recipients' previously limited presence in the service communities, organizations historically being siloed, and competitiveness between service providers driven by limited funding and resources. Interestingly, one project director observed less competitiveness within their Native



CELEBRATING STRENGTHS: EMBEDDING FORMAL COLLABORATION INTO A VHT-NC PROJECT

*"So, we [meet about] these specific tribal members who are in emergent need. From having these meetings, we're finding that they are experiencing trafficking. So, all of these **departments are not only learning about it as we go, but we're also educating them on how to assist them right then and there. How to identify.** And if they have a follow-up appointment, to call on us to come in and assist. We've done that numerous times... It's almost like **it was all hidden but now it's coming to light now that everyone's starting to work together.** Because we were all siloed...It's all falling together. We're working together, we're assisting the tribal members, we're assisting the community members. And on our way, we're figuring out what policy needs to be in place and what needs to be edited or revised."*

and Indigenous communities, reflecting Indigenous values of community and interconnectedness. The pandemic was also a primary barrier, as in-person activities and events were restricted for much of the first two years of implementation. Partner interaction was further complicated for those who did not have the technology to collaborate virtually.

Another obstacle was the need for increased awareness and understanding of human trafficking in many of the Native communities served by the projects. Building partnerships for a project that focuses on a topic that often is not well understood, is hidden, and is stigmatized, requires trust and capacity building. This is aided by embodying the values already described, like respect and patience. Also, one project director identified that acknowledging past harms to Native communities is helpful. Grant recipients are also providing training to build capacity, which is described in Section 7.



LEARNING THROUGH REFLECTION: OBSTACLES TO RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

*“We’re building systems and **we’re brand new to some of those areas...**And we work alongside the communities to build the response. **What works best for us may not work best for them.**”*

*“Some of the biggest hurdles were **everybody operating in silos**, especially around the human trafficking issue. If we were to take a community agency that is not directly in the tribal structure, like our school district, how are services continued after potentially identifying a human trafficking victim? That was a real issue. How do we communicate with law enforcement?...With follow-up services? **There was no guidance.**”*

*“We do have this network...so there are a lot of agencies to seek out to fill gaps and needs that we can’t meet...I think there are still some **challenges and barriers that exist for more authentic partnership and collaboration**, unfortunately, I think there is a competitiveness lens there. When we zoom in on our Native and Indigenous communities, we see a lot of opportunity, potential, and desire to partner and contribute to one another. I think that is another strength when we zoom in on this population. Again, the **understanding of community and the need to work together to create impact and lasting change, and less of a competition over resources...**We have been really welcomed into other agencies as we step into newly doing this work. There are some hesitations as well, understandably so, but our experiences thus far are showing that to be true.”*

Similar to grant recipients, COVID-19 created staffing challenges for partners, leaving many “stretched to capacity,” as one project director described. Staff turnover among partners can have compounding consequences; for example, losing a main contact may result in lost project knowledge or connection with an organization. This requires efforts to rebuild the relationship and re-educate the partner about the project’s purpose. Staff turnover can be particularly impactful if the partner provides a critical service, e.g., cultural services, which may be interrupted or stopped completely. For one project, the staffing capacity of two key partners were already strained when their communities were devastated by a natural disaster that required reprioritizing to help in the aftermath. Ultimately, these partners no longer could participate in the project, as they simply did not have the staff or resources available. As noted in Section 3, a grant recipient’s staffing challenges can also negatively affect their partnerships, often because they do not have the capacity to sustain needed levels of communication.



LEARNING THROUGH REFLECTION: PARTNER STAFF TURNOVER HAS CASCADING EFFECTS

*“Some of those [partner] agencies have also experienced staff turnover. So, we have made good connections and the **key people have become aware of services and then have left...**[S]o reorienting those **key staff to our services**. And then capacity and time, **everyone is stretched** no matter what position you’re in. I think there is interest in further collaborations but capacity and intentionality, I think it is really going to be about identifying key people within our agencies and within our partners who can contribute to some of these collaborations and being really clear about what we’re hoping for.”*

Finally, for some partners, aspects of the program requirements were a barrier, including reporting and “how time-sensitive everything is,” as one project director stated. Partners’ familiarity with and access to technology or software impacted their ability to complete grant requirements.



LEARNING THROUGH REFLECTION: CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR PROGRAM REQUIREMENTS

*“They also didn’t have the knowledge or somebody with background in grants and accounting, it was difficult for them to figure out [the matching requirement] or sending us bills. It came to a point where they were asking us for nothing, they were like, ‘**We would rather just have you not reimburse us because doing the paperwork part is just too difficult.**’ We just don’t understand.”*

*“It is forcing us to be more intentional about data collection and wrapping our head around that. Because that too is a barrier with the amount of services they have in the community, **we can’t just assume everyone has the capacity to utilize a data source tool** or maybe even have Excel.”*



Key Partnership Outcomes

The VHT-NC projects and communities are already identifying positive outcomes of their collaborative efforts. All grant recipients have formed and maintained new partnerships, creating wider resource networks that improve service availability and accessibility for project participants. Most project directors also observed increased and improved collaboration and coordination with their community partners. Several respondents spoke about the benefit of being able to, for example, “lean on each other and help each other” and “help each other work through certain situations.” Many of the projects are collaboratively developing processes, protocols, and materials (e.g., screening tools), which can strengthen buy-in, improve participant identification and service provision, and

increase cultural responsiveness. Formal protocols (e.g., standard release of information [ROI]) also facilitate information sharing and referrals. Through their collaborations, grant recipients and partners have increased their capacity to support project participants by improving their understanding of human trafficking, of Native communities, or both. Despite the challenges grant recipients, partners, and their communities have faced, the VHT-NC projects continue to demonstrate community resilience,⁶ regrouping as necessary to keep their focus on their project goals and supporting participants. These initial outcomes demonstrate the vital groundwork that has been laid for continued partnership and enhanced response to human trafficking in Native communities.



CELEBRATING STRENGTHS: COLLECTIVELY IMPROVING THE RESPONSE TO HUMAN TRAFFICKING

*“[The strength of our partnerships is] the **networking**. Like ‘can you do this? Can you do this? What are your thoughts on this?’ Being able to go and pick someone’s brain on how to best serve this participant or how to get them \$500 for their utility bills and then kind of go from there. So, it’s been having **all of us pull together in the best interest of the participants.**”*

*“I would say **open conversation** [is our main success]. That seems so little but when you work with communities that... don’t talk about trauma, and assault, especially sex in general. I think **people are becoming more comfortable** in talking about such strong conversations. Once we start as people, it continues on to the state level. So, you might see it more on the news, who’s doing what. So, then it’s more of a conversation in the community. So, if anything, it’s helped conversation. And also, to **really get to know each one of the organizations** on what they do and don’t do.”*

*“The number one thing I would give credit to...our team is the **relationships**. We have wonderful relationships... with different groups and agencies and I think that helps us **when we can’t do, we can call on them to assist us** to get it done with capacity. That’s been a really good strength. We just have a team of people who really, really get the **intersectionality of all these issues** but also the importance of really ensuring that we have **culturally inclusive services**...I feel like that is a huge strength because we’re starting to inform the work that our state does on more than just trafficking—on being culturally inclusive and really shifting some thoughts around.”*

⁶ Kirmayer, L. J., Sedhev, M., Whitley, R., Dandeneau, S., & Isaac, C. (2009). Community Resilience: Models, Metaphors and Measures. *Journal of Aboriginal Health*, 7(1), 62–117.

VHT-NC Outreach and Identification

Project outreach is essential to any services program, particularly for newly established ones like the VHT-NC projects. In this section, we provide an overview of the projects' strategies to identify Native peoples who have experienced human trafficking for project assistance; we will also discuss barriers, strengths, and successes.

Approaches to Outreach and Identification

Participant Outreach and Identification. Most projects broadly focus on serving populations that meet VHT-NC Program eligibility (**see sidebar**). Additionally, one project narrowed their focus to serving youth and young adults up to 24 years old. All projects defined geographic areas where outreach and service delivery primarily occur, including a specific rural community, a large urban area, a Tribal reservation, to several counties or regions within a state.

The projects have taken varied approaches to outreach and identification, typically using multiple strategies to increase the number of pathways through which a person could reach the project. One is through direct outreach in which project staff, and sometimes partners, are in the community talking and building relationships with people in various settings, including on the street, in homeless encampments, at motels, at casinos, at partner locations (e.g., shelters, housing programs), and at community or cultural events (e.g., drive-through events, candlelight vigil for MMIP, powwows). Two project directors noted using virtual outreach approaches; one director's project is monitoring

People Eligible for VHT-NC Program Services

Native American people who have experienced severe forms of human trafficking, as defined by the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000, as amended:

- Sex trafficking, 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; and/or
- Labor trafficking, 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.

social media sites because, “[We’re] finding the community...they use social media like 911. They’ll post a picture and say, ‘I’m concerned about this person, this is happening on the reservation.’” This also informs where the project conducts physical outreach.

Participants also connect to the VHT-NC projects through referrals—most commonly via self-referral but also through internal partners (other programs or departments in the grant recipient organization), community partners, family members, and peers. One project director had observed an increase in self- and peer referrals and attributed this to a collective spirit of helping one another.



CELEBRATING STRENGTHS: COLLECTIVELY IMPROVING THE RESPONSE TO HUMAN TRAFFICKING

*“Under this grant specifically, we have seen a **huge increase in self and peer referrals**. I think one strength that highlights is that **community connection and care amongst individuals**. Resource sharing amongst the [participants] we’re serving we are seeing a lot, which I think is a huge strength and I always thank [participants] for passing our information along or getting a friend connected.”*

As described in Section 4, two projects have developed formal VHT-NC-specific groups, which directly support their outreach and identification efforts by providing regular opportunities to discuss and improve their ability to identify signs of human trafficking, modify tools and processes to improve screening, and collaboratively identify potential participants.

Project Outreach and Awareness. Most project directors acknowledged the importance of outreach to raise awareness about the VHT-NC project and services. Project awareness is closely intertwined with participant outreach and identification and success in one area tends to positively affect the other. One respondent reflected, “If your community’s perception of your programming isn’t there, you’re not going to get the referrals and people aren’t going to know about your services. That outreach piece is really huge.”

One successful approach has been to utilize other project activities, such as community and partner training and education sessions, community outreach events, and formal groups (e.g., task force), as opportunities to share project information. One project director emphasized the value of a project champion who proactively creates connections between tribal departments and reaches out to community organizations: “She’ll be like, ‘Hey, you’re new. This is what our program does.’ She’s on it... She’s just always making connections somewhere else just to move this program forward. She’s awesome.” Uniquely, awareness of one project was elevated by being identified in a newly developed tribal code on human trafficking. Another project director observed that community-specific materials facilitate interest in their project. By the time of our second round of interviews, some project directors reported increased project awareness and interest from community partners.



CELEBRATING STRENGTHS: PROJECT AWARENESS SUPPORTS PARTICIPANT OUTREACH

*“We even had another service provider from another department at the powwow 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.”*

*“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 blanketed 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.”*

Outreach and Identification Barriers

The projects encountered several challenges in outreach activity implementation and potential participant identification, especially given the COVID-19 pandemic's profound effects on their work. Grant recipients applied for funding and conceptualized project designs during the early stages of the pandemic (May–June 2020), a time of great uncertainty. With project activities beginning in earnest in late 2020, implementation began and continued under circumstances for which the projects could not have planned.

COVID-19 restrictions prohibited most in-person activities and greatly reduced outreach opportunities. Many such restrictions stayed in place for a long time, particularly in Native

communities that were being disproportionately affected by COVID-19 and often implemented strict prevention measures as a result. This led to some modified outreach approaches, though respondents generally felt these were insufficient. As described, the projects experienced frequent staff turnover due to the pandemic; some had key positions (e.g., outreach workers) open for long durations. The lack of capacity required shifting of responsibilities and caused many project directors to be concerned about their staff's wellness and potential for burnout, particularly considering the pandemic's impact on all facets of life, not just work. Additionally, one project director attributed their project's lack of referrals to COVID-related staffing issues and restrictions.



LEARNING THROUGH REFLECTION: IDENTIFYING PARTICIPANTS IN THE MIDDLE OF A PANDEMIC

*“If this, yes we will still have to build up staff capacity and this’ but then **everyone’s capacity changed and feel like when we were writing [the application] we were like, ‘Oh, we will easily be able to make a plan for those of our staff doing direct work, their focus needed to be on doing direct work.** It definitely has impacted and slowed our ability to do some of that for sure. I think obviously working through a pandemic and these type of direct services has had a **huge impact on staff’s wellbeing.**”*

*“Before COVID we could have had general, broad outreach services, just groups open to the public and when that shut down **it really damaged the relationship between the providers and the community** because they had to try to find ways around making that connection with your clients.”*

*“COVID impacted us being able to get started on this project. **We had to change the way that we do outreach,** for instance. The **advocates have been so creative** in finding ways to still reach people but **at the same time, the reach is not the same.** They have done drive-thrus where people can drive through to get food, masks, resources, and other things they need, connection to a provider, but stay in your car.”*

*“Outreach with COVID has been really hard because we are so dependent on bandwidth. Initially we were going to [go] out to the communities and provide [training], but **because of COVID restrictions we may not be allowed in those areas.** So, it’s put a hindrance on outreach itself. And the turnover, honestly, has been terrible. But, just **people trying to navigate through new systems at home with school, with COVID, trying to work, and everyone’s super exhausted.** This is not just internally; all of our project partners are having a tough time obtaining any type of consistent support.”*

*“This is a challenge not only we face, but all of the other grantees within this project have faced, is referrals, and so one of our goals has always been to increase that amount with the outreach we’re doing. Because **we know there are people out there who need these services** and would benefit from them, so **our goal has been to work within that community, build that trust, and to be able to serve them.**”*

Another recurrent theme that also affected outreach and identification was about the need for improved understanding of human trafficking. Some project directors reported a need to learn how trafficking is happening in their community to inform outreach populations and locations, and about trafficking in general to improve identification and response. As one respondent noted, “This much human trafficking assistance and awareness that we’re doing right now is very new to the Tribe.”

Some project directors shared that they have encountered people’s reluctance to talk about human trafficking, both in general and about their personal experiences. One project director commented, “A lot of people don’t want to talk. They’ll share a little bit, but they don’t share a lot.” Having new project staff who have not yet built trust

and are unfamiliar to the Native communities being served exacerbates this unwillingness to discuss such a sensitive topic. Several respondents also stated that people often do not disclose experiences of human trafficking. In their experiences, indications of trafficking often emerged while they were working with intersecting populations, e.g., people who have experienced domestic violence or homelessness. They reflected that although some may not discuss their experiences of trafficking due to stigma, others may not realize that they have experienced human trafficking or that there are services available to support them. An essential strategy to overcome these challenges is to build rapport and trust with people and communities. During COVID-19, the inability to conduct in-person activities hampered such relationship building.



LEARNING THROUGH REFLECTION: BRINGING HUMAN TRAFFICKING TO THE SURFACE

*“When we look at...our [agencies] on the number of trafficking victims even they were serving in those communities, they were pretty low although they have some of the biggest risk factors there. So, our thought was **that it wasn’t so much about identifying more but helping them understand how to do it.** We felt like they were missing the mark on identifying, how to connect, how to make those referrals, so really **focusing on getting them informed in those communities about the issues.**”*

*“I think when it comes maybe to **recognizing the signs of what trafficking actually can be,** I think that is an area that [partner] might benefit from. So that is something we’ve talked about, is actually going in there and doing a **training for staff there, as well as also doing outreach...and actually taking in resources...**[W]e can also go in there and maybe meet participants who we maybe could serve and maybe don’t feel comfortable, or maybe staff there aren’t recognizing that they could benefit from our services.”*

*“Once we started completing the screening tool, we’ve been finding that some of **our domestic violence victim clients have also been high risk or they’re survivors or they’ve experienced some sort of human trafficking** sometime in their life, if they aren’t right now. It’s crazy because **they’re not identifying themselves as being trafficked.** If you say that to them, they still don’t connect it. They’re like, ‘No, that’s not me. No.’ So, we’re trying to figure out the verbiage to use when working with clients to identify as, like, hey you were a victim of this. Or, if someone’s calling for services, what’s the key word that they’re using that we can link to, maybe they’re a victim of some sort of human trafficking.”*

*‘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’ve also been trafficked...A lot of times **it’s really building those relationships first, so I think that’s the harder part of survivor engagement.** It can’t always be that we’re trying to engage survivors of human trafficking, we’re trying to engage survivors of victims of crimes and we’re learning later on that they’ve also experienced trafficking.”*

Some respondents noted barriers related to program requirements. Given the widespread need for human trafficking awareness and comprehension, some project directors shared that the restriction on public awareness activities hindered the potential effectiveness of other project activities. Importantly, this restriction was removed from the FY2023 VHT-NC Program Notification of Funding Opportunity in response to this feedback. Also, one project proposed serving a narrowly defined geographic area, which proved to be too limiting. Although the project received approval to expand their service area, it was not until the end of Year 2. Another project director shared that hiring difficulties and the requirement that ACF approve staff left them unable to “charge time and participants” to the grant while their case manager position remained open for many months. Some project directors also reported that confirming their participants’ trafficking experiences was challenging, particularly when, as noted, there is often reluctance to disclose, especially during initial engagement.

Outreach and Identification Strengths and Successes

A primary success has been the collaborative development of culturally responsive and trauma-informed project protocols and materials. Several of the projects are using protocols and materials that have been developed with input from partners, including those with cultural and trafficking expertise. For example, one grant recipient worked with their partner to develop a thoughtful, appropriate, and culturally specific victim service protocol, screening tool, and project brochure that would resonate with the Native peoples in the partner’s region. As the project director explained, the partner took “OTIP’s screening tool” (likely the screening tool developed by the National Human Trafficking TTA Center) and modified it “to be a more culturally responsive screening tool that worked



LEARNING THROUGH REFLECTION: BALANCING TRAFFICKING DISCLOSURE WITH TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICE

*“Just that **restriction of only being able to serve folks that we know have been trafficked is a barrier for [people] who have been trafficked and won’t disclose or people right at that risk point...**We wanted it to align with [our] program model, which again is we will never require a...person to disclose in order to get services. It wasn’t until after we approved and signed off that we realized there was some misinterpretations of the requirements of the federal funding that said ‘Yep, actually within 30 days of opening them you need to confirm that they have experienced this.’ So, we **adapted and changed our referral and screening process to remain as trauma-informed as possible.** We obviously have our other services they can go into [that don’t require confirmation of trafficking], but there is a waitlist there. So, not only are they not going to get their culturally specific services, they are probably going to be put onto a waitlist simply because we cannot confirm... It was a big blow to serving this community particularly because of the **red tape** that it creates and that **often communities of color will also be the last to identify their experiences** within the very certain definition that limits it to.”*

better for their area...The OTIP questions are great, but they are very, very lengthy and that just doesn’t really work for our communities.”

Not only have grant recipients developed project- and culturally specific screening tools, but some are also helping partners integrate questions that better identify potential human trafficking into their own screening processes. Some of these efforts have been supported with external TTA from Native, trafficking-specific, or legal-focused organizations. Collaboratively developing culturally relevant and trauma-informed screening protocols increases likelihood of partner buy-in and effectiveness of participant identification.



CELEBRATING STRENGTHS: BUILDING PARTNER CAPACITY FOR IMPROVED IDENTIFICATION

*“That [training] will delve a little bit more into **how each program tailors their policies and procedures and protocols so that they are inclusive of human trafficking victims.** Meaning [Partner 1] will then change the way they do their intake form so that they are specifically asking questions about human trafficking, or [Partner 2] is specifically asking unaccompanied youth about those at-risk factors for human trafficking.”*

Projects have also focused on formalizing and refining their identification and referral procedures. This was critical given the history of siloed services in the communities. Even when partnerships existed, most had not coordinated at this level. In response to people’s reluctance to discuss human trafficking, one project adjusted its process by extending the timeframe for completing the screening tool to one month. This project also began periodically reminding staff and partners to complete screening questions with other programs’ (e.g., domestic violence) existing clients, not just new clients, because “that’s where we were missing some.” Some project directors have found it helpful to have an MOU or a shared ROI completed as standard procedure to facilitate referral and case coordination. Another project director advocated for warm handoffs (accompanying a participant to their first meeting with a referred provider) as standard practice to improve referrals.

Ongoing collaboration between grant recipient project staff and partners was a noted facilitator to participant identification, with ripple effects of increased knowledge about human trafficking (e.g., potential signs of trafficking, how to provide immediate assistance), increased information sharing about resources, and strengthened relationships.



CELEBRATING STRENGTHS: IMPROVING PROCESS AND COORDINATION TO BETTER ASSIST PARTICIPANTS

*“I really think our [group is] amazing. All those **service providers have all come together. If they have a client that is in need, we get on the meeting.** There’s always an ROI before this meeting if we’re discussing a certain person. Once the ROI is cleared, the service providers...start discussing, ‘What can we assist with? Here’s our plan.’ We safety plan together before we bring that plan to that client. And if the client does their intake with a different department, let’s say they go to [internal partner, they] will work with them as if they were a trafficking advocate. **If that client is like, ‘No, I don’t want to work with anybody else but you,’ that’s not a dealbreaker for them receiving services...** So they’ll communicate with the advocate, or even with me, and I’ll be like, ‘Ok, this is what we have in our assistance...**But if that’s overwhelming for you, feel free to bring them over to our program and we can take it from there.**’ We’re always thinking outside of the box, all of us. And we’ve all come together to help individuals when needed. It’s working out great.”*

Project directors identified valuable strategies that helped build relationships and trust with the communities being served. These include partnering with people or organizations that have existing relationships with the community and integrating outreach and project awareness into other service provision. For example, one project has partnered with an organization to share VHT-NC project

information and resources while they distribute menstrual care products to people experiencing homelessness. Trust building is also facilitated by the use of trauma-informed and culturally responsive approaches, which prioritize safety, respect, privacy, transparency, and choice; avoid re-traumatization; and recognize that building rapport takes time and consistency.



CELEBRATING STRENGTHS: EARNING TRUSTWORTHINESS BUILDS FOUNDATIONS

*“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.**”*

*“We’re going to partner with [organization], and their clients can also come and participate in creating our healing garden, our sweat lodge—hopefully, **we build a relationship with them where they feel comfortable** sharing locations on where this type of victimization is happening.”*

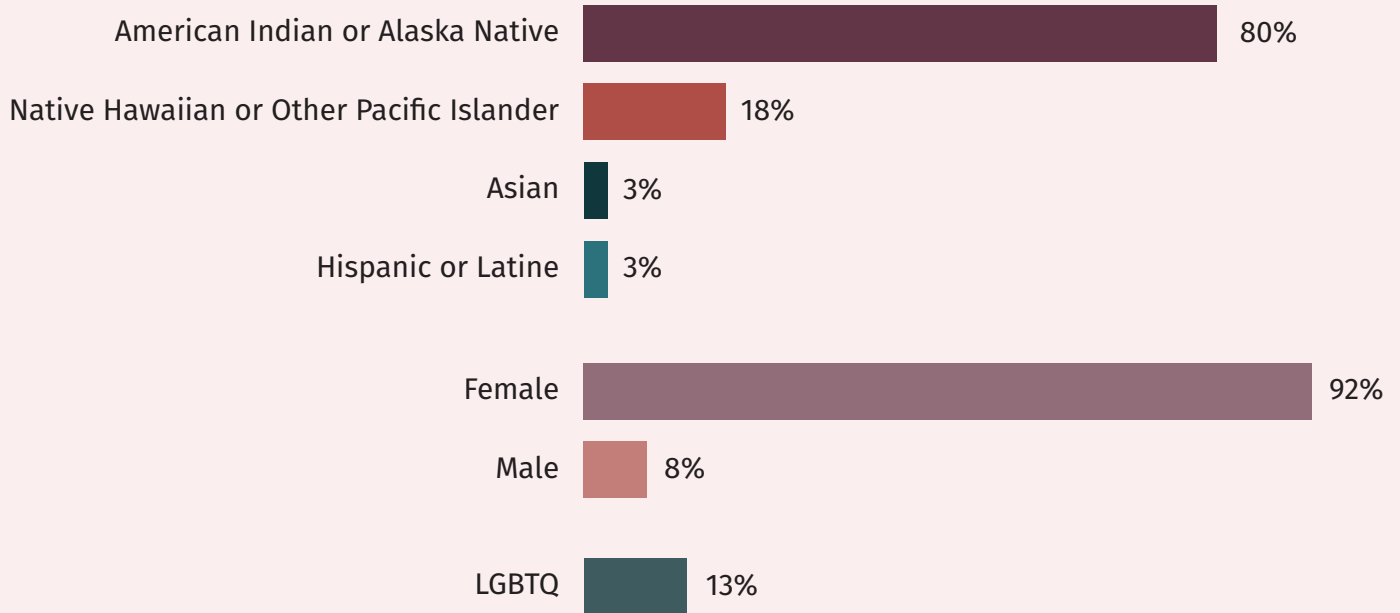
*“What this project has benefited from is **having those conversations [about human trafficking] internally with [partner] organizations**, and I think that’s why it took so long for them to come up with screening tools. Because **they were being so sensitive with it**...Instead of the Western way of doing things, where we are just addressing the need and we’re popping out these questions, which are very thoughtful, but it doesn’t have the impact like it would if you were asking somebody from your community those questions, who **may have to share something about their own husband or their boyfriend that is trafficking them**...The benefit in their [cultural] strength is having that **care and compassion of the person as a whole and the community as a whole.**”*



In spite of implementation challenges, 39 participants were enrolled across four projects through the end of Year 2.⁷ The average age of participants (n=37) at enrollment was 32; ages

ranged from 15 to 61. **Exhibit 1** presents other participant demographics, including race and ethnicity, gender, and identification as a member of the LGBTQ community.

Exhibit 1. VHT-NC Participant Demographics



Note: For gender, female and male were the only response options available on the data collection form. LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning) is used to mirror the terminology used on the data collection form. We recognize the limitations of this acronym, particularly the absence of Two-Spirit/2-Spirit identities.

⁷ Two projects had not yet enrolled participants and, as described, all faced enrollment challenges including, for example, COVID-19 restrictions, low staffing capacity, and the need for improved understanding and awareness of human trafficking.

Case Management and Supportive Services

Provision of comprehensive case management and supportive services are two primary components of the VHT-NC Program. Although our discussions with project directors across these topics were limited, we conducted case manager/advocate interviews that were more in-depth and will be detailed in a separate report. In this section, we provide high-level information about VHT-NC project case management features and supportive services delivery.

Case Management

All projects provide comprehensive case management to enrolled project participants. Responsibilities of staff providing case management (e.g., case managers, anti-trafficking advocates) vary by project and may include:

- assisting with participant outreach and identification, project awareness, partner collaboration, services/resource development, and training;
- completing intake assessments, safety planning, goal setting, service planning, and data collection or reporting;

- engaging participants and providing participant advocacy, referral to services, and case coordination;
- providing direct services (e.g., to meet basic needs, crisis support, transportation, life skills, prosocial activities); and
- connecting to cultural resources (i.e., traditional healing, culturally relevant services or providers, and cultural education and exposure).

Barriers described above—COVID-19, staffing capacity, the need to build trust—were also challenges to case management. One respondent reflected, “[Because of COVID], we were in survival mode...We weren’t worried about doing X amount of groups, X amount of trainings...For this project specifically, [our focus was] building up our staff capacity internally and orienting them to [our] model.” Additionally, one project director noted that participant needs for crisis or immediate supports may affect their engagement in the project.



LEARNING THROUGH REFLECTION: PRIORITIZING BASIC NEEDS AND CRISIS INTERVENTION

*“This is also coming up in the work our [staff] are doing directly with [participants] and some of the challenges they have with engaging [them], and a lot of it is basic need. **[Participants] who are experiencing this are often going into crisis mode and it is just those most basic needs, food, clothing, hygiene, rides, transportation, and there are challenges in engaging and building up that relationship and rapport.** How can we adapt services? We have **focused on the outreach and the crisis contact first** and being able to get those needs met. The model of our program is always meeting basic needs first.”*

To improve participant engagement, projects use person-centered and trauma-informed approaches, which include:

- staff training on trauma, including vicarious or secondary trauma
- efforts to reduce re-traumatization
- meeting participants where they are
- participant-directed goal setting and service planning
- individualized, voluntary, and flexible services
- culturally responsive practices and services



CELEBRATING STRENGTHS: EARNING TRUSTWORTHINESS BUILDS FOUNDATIONS

*“We do work with them on a case plan and it’s very much a **self-led case plan**. We don’t come in and say, ‘You need a job and these are your goals.’ It’s very much like, what does safety look like to you, **what are your goals, what do you want to work on?** Because I do think there are a lot of programs out there where you walk in and they say, ‘Oh, you don’t have income this is the first thing you have to do.’ When the reality is that you can’t go find a job when you don’t have somewhere safe to sleep at night and you aren’t getting your basic needs met.”*

*“I think it’s **meeting each individual where they’re at, not pushing our services on them**. That we’re here if they’re ready to receive services. We’re making the effort to meet them where they’re at, guide them along the way, provide them with education, and hope they come around to services when they’re ready.”*

*“The life coaching model, **we are coaching lives not managing cases**...We wanted a program where [participants] could come in and **tell us what they need**, get those basic needs met, and then **be a part of designing their services**. There was also **no rigid expectations** on, ‘We need to see you once every week or you will be discharged,’ or things like that.”*

Service Provision

Projects generally have access to a wide array of resources for participants, and the services they provide are driven by needs assessments and participant input. Some service delivery strengths that grant recipients practice include nurturing relationships with partner organization staff, regular case coordination with service providers, warm handoffs to referral partners, and being co-located with or close to other service providers. Project directors also shared how they have integrated culturally specific services and traditional practices, which are significant supports for participants. Some unique supports that are being provided by projects include pet care (“a lot of our clients refuse to leave

their situation because of a pet”) and cell phones, which were particularly helpful during the pandemic when virtual engagement was necessary.

Incorporating **culturally responsive approaches and resources** is essential to supporting participants’ healing journeys.⁸ A separate report highlighting how the VHT-NC projects are doing this is in development and will be accessible on OPRE’s [website](#) and RTI’s HTPRAP [website](#).



CELEBRATING STRENGTHS: SERVICE DELIVERY THAT SUPPORTS PARTICIPANT HEALING

“We always try to take a **very collaborative approach**, so all service providers are in communication knowing how best we can support [participants]...We had such a **great communication** set up between all of us that we were able to provide [a participant] with great services. And I know sometimes [participants] get hesitant with letting providers talk to each other...And we always try to tell them...It’s so we can make sure that you’re **getting the most that you can out of programming.**”

“We have a **really good relationship with [partner] staff** on site...as well as they have someone who goes in there to do coordinated entry assessments [for housing assistance]. So, we have one [participant] who actually never stayed at [partner organization] but lost housing and we’ve been able to take her to [partner] and meet with the staff person who does coordinated entry assessments to get that done there, even though she’s never stayed at their shelter.”

“A strength is that, because we’re under this umbrella of the [organization], we’re inside this building that has a **huge array of resources...**[W]e can literally walk [participants] to the next area, if they’re looking for recovery services, or... are needing family support, they’re wanting to go to groups, or maybe needing help applying for TANF [Temporary Aid for Needy Families] or other benefits, needing help with job resources. We have onsite childcare, like we just have this amazing building with all these resources right here that I think is just really special. Along with the **cultural aspects, we’re doing so many engaging things around that.** People are coming in and we’re having these hard conversations and have these needs and we’re saying, ‘Hey, let’s help you do those things but also, as an agency we’re offering [traditional garment]-making, and we’re going out berry picking in the summer and we’re fishing,’ and doing all these things to make sure that, especially people from rural communities are still **getting to do subsistence things.**”

“Most clients don’t know that [a traditional healer] is an option so I’ve reminded staff when they’re working with someone, offer that service. If they want that service, they sign a release of information, **we contact our [partner] and they schedule with a traditional healer.** And then we would transport the client to meet with them. So that’s a big strength. Also, 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 3-hour drum healing circle.** A lot of the support groups are usually 1 hour, and I always wondered why our previous director made our support group 4 hours...I found out that 1 hour isn’t enough to allow people to share and experience the healing that they need. It really shut me down when I was in the middle of sharing [during a support group] and someone interrupted me and told me my time was up. So, I never went back... We want people to **feel welcome**, we want them to **feel heard**, and we want them to **experience that healing...**And we do **cultural activities.** We’ve had someone come in and teach us how to make rattles, and drums, and we made friendship necklaces, which was a huge hit. It was amazing!”

⁸ Masotti, P., Dennem, J., Bañuelos, K., Seneca, C., Valerio-Leonce, G., Inong, C. T., & King, J. (2023). The Culture is Prevention Project: Measuring cultural connectedness and providing evidence that culture is a social determinant of health for Native Americans. BMC Public Health, 23, 741. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-023-15587-x>

Exhibit 2 shows the services that participants needed (i.e., participant requested or project staff assessed as being needed) at intake and the services they received (i.e., project staff reported the service was received during at least one reporting quarter). Participants' service needs are largely being met—as shown in Exhibit 2 and affirmed by several project directors, services that meet immediate needs (e.g.,

safety planning, transportation, victim advocacy) are often provided first. Longer-term supports, like behavioral health or traditional healing, may not be provided immediately for several reasons (e.g., a participant may not be ready for a particular service, a service may not be available or is hard to access, or it just may take time to connect a participant with the appropriate service).

Exhibit 2. Needed and Received VHT-NC Services

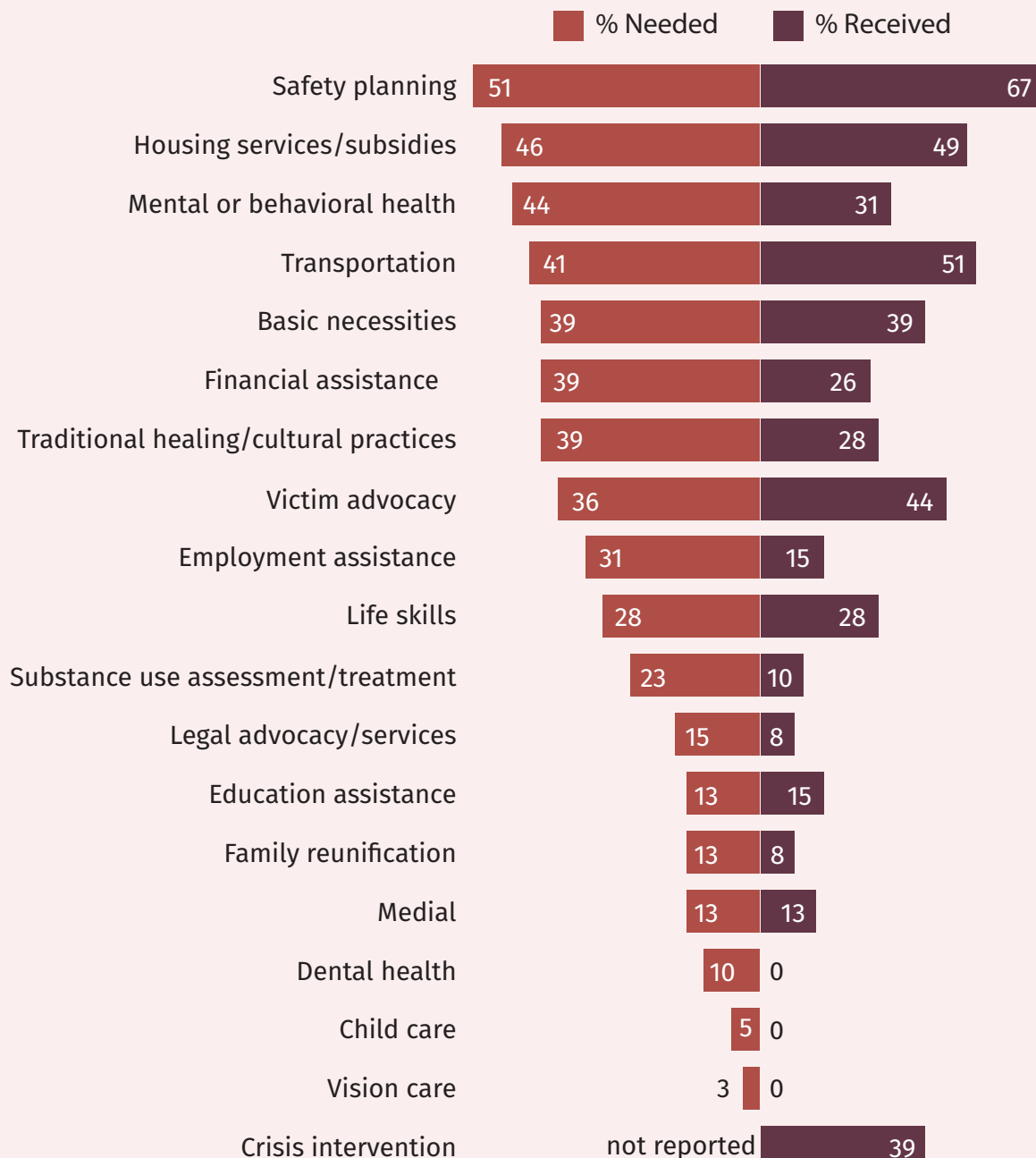
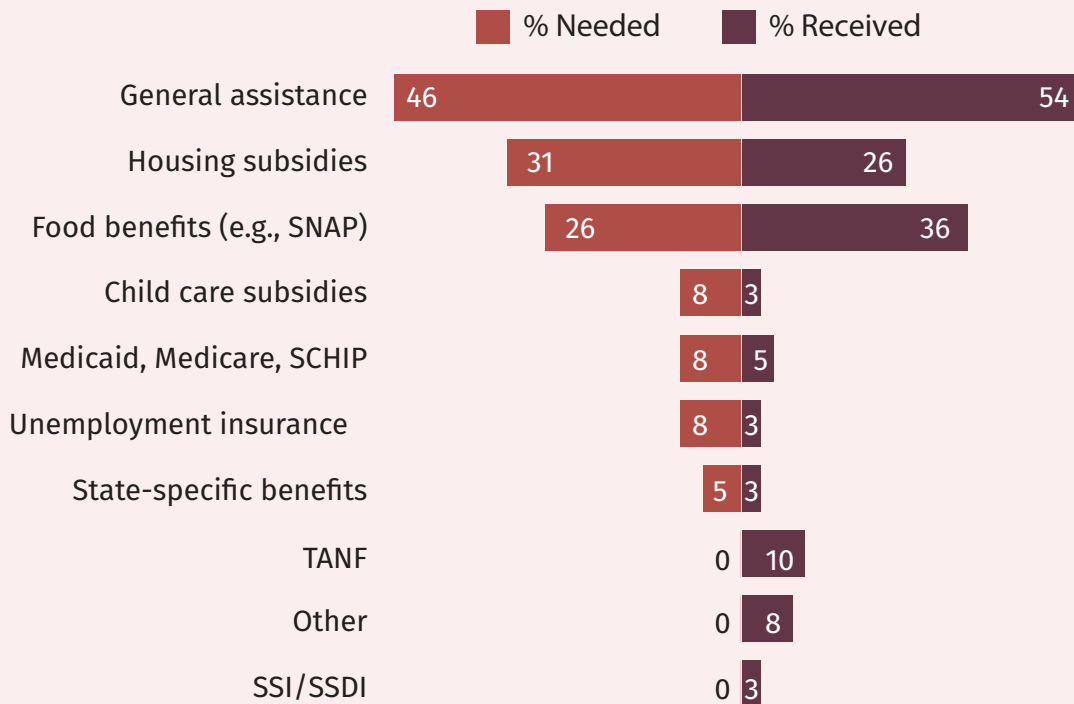


Exhibit 3 shows the public benefits that participants needed (i.e., participant requested or project staff assessed as being needed) at intake and those they received (i.e., project staff reported the service was received during at least one reporting quarter). Participants are receiving the assistance needed to obtain public benefits, which often includes help obtaining necessary documents

(e.g., identification card), completing forms and applications, and navigating complex systems. Interestingly, participants often receive services or benefits that were not reported as needed. We will explore potential explanations (e.g., the participant is eligible for a benefit that was not anticipated, the need arose after intake) with projects in future data collection.

Exhibit 3. Needed and Received Public Benefits



Note: SCHIP=State Children’s Health Insurance Program; SNAP=Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program; SSI/SSDI=Supplemental Security Income/Social Security Disability Insurance; TANF=Temporary Aid for Needy Families. Food benefits include Tribal Commodity programs and WIC (Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children).

Service Provision Challenges. Some project directors reported barriers providing some services, primarily cultural services, traditional healing, behavioral health services, and housing, which aligns with the projects' reported data shown in **Exhibit 2**. Respondents noted that these services are often limited or nonexistent, difficult to access, or do not provide an appropriate level of care. Specifically, some projects have had difficulty finding appropriate providers of traditional healing or cultural services, particularly non-Native grant recipients who do not have a direct connection to a culturally

specific partner and projects serving people from a variety of tribes and Native communities. Also, some projects have had difficulty finding mental or behavioral health providers who are equipped to provide treatment and services to people who have experienced human trafficking. Such services require a trauma-informed approach and may differ from the care provided to people who experience other types of crime or trauma. As described in Section 4, projects continue to strengthen and expand their partner and resource networks to improve availability and access to needed services.



LEARNING THROUGH REFLECTION: SERVICE NEEDS AND BARRIERS

*“We have a really well-developed...supportive service network in [State], but I think where there are **gaps are in those culturally specific services**. That is where demonstration grants like these that focus in on certain populations and cultures are filling some of those gaps and are extremely beneficial. There are many barriers that exist within services sometimes depending on a [participant’s] identity or their abilities...The biggest area that we still lack, that is probably true wherever you go, is the housing **and mental health support and stability**. The housing, even within our...network, we have a few specific shelters and transitional living programs, I think there are **still a lot of barriers for [participants] to access those**. For a lot of the [participants] we serve it’s a million miles away, it isn’t culturally specific, it has a religious component, all of those different things that exist.”*

*“We are wanting to provide **culturally specific services**, we feel confident and capable of providing that in a group format, but **what does that look like one-on-one?** We had some conversations with one of our TA [technical assistance] consultants, but are still struggling to paint that picture of what that looks like for our program model and our services. I think that is ongoing training and consultation that we could be getting and should be asking for further.”*

*“We do have **recovery services** but do we have enough of it? Especially in the rural areas, they may have to go outside their community to obtain those services, as well as safe housing. We don’t really have **a safe housing system** that’s built here in [City] or in their community... And we don’t have enough **facilities to handle such high trauma care**. In all these human trafficking trainings they talk about therapists who do the higher level of care when it comes to trauma. It’s really hard to find a therapist in town for that, or for any kind of counseling...It’s still a really big problem to make sure they get the **appropriate mental health care and wellness**...Not to mention the issues with housing and working through different variances that may be in place because of their criminal background, for employment, which may affect their housing.”*

*“Our one anti-trafficking advocate has been transporting one client back and forth to [nearby city] because of the **high demand for therapy**. If we stayed in our area for her therapy, she would have to **wait 6 months for her first appointment**. So, we found one in [nearby city] that could see her in 2 weeks, so we signed her up for that and have been transporting her.”*

Coordinated Service Delivery Approaches

Several projects emphasize a need for more holistic, coordinated service approaches to support participants. Some are taking steps toward a “no wrong door” or “one-stop spot” approach—regardless of a person’s entry point or first contact, they will be guided to the services they need. This approach minimizes re-traumatization and the effort required to seek help. Services must be easily accessible, as people may have limited opportunity to seek help or feel discouraged if they are met with an immediate barrier, which can also deter them from seeking help in the future.⁹ These

community-specific, collaborative approaches bring together various community entities (e.g., service providers, law enforcement) to improve human trafficking responses by improving identification, increasing information sharing, reducing service barriers, maximizing resources, and working toward the common goal of supporting people who have experienced human trafficking.¹⁰ The VHT-NC projects recognize the benefits of a coordinated, collaborative response and have identified this as a long-term goal.



CELEBRATING STRENGTHS: BUILDING TOWARD COORDINATED, INTEGRATED PARTICIPANT SUPPORT

*“[Project staff member] is the one who reaches out to all the organizations outside of the Tribe to try to build a relationship with them. She is, as you said, huge in the MMIW movement and tying MMIW and trafficking together and then weaving DV and sexual assault into all of that. She’s showing the connections, that all these are connected with each other. And her goal is really to just to narrow it down to **reducing how many places a victim has to go to seek help**. So, she really wants a one-stop spot for somebody to do an intake and, ‘Hey, yeah, we can help you with that. **You’re still in the right place, we’re not going to push you away for someone else.**”*

*“When I think about partners, and this is just looking at it from a social work perspective, for so long our rural communities and our tribal partners operated in silos. And I really think it helps us to understand those co-occurring disorders, I really do. Years ago, maybe it was ok to say, ‘You know, that’s not really this type of victim, that’s for that department to service them.’ But **as we’re getting trafficking victims, there’s mental health and AODA [alcohol or drug abuse] issues**. And we can’t just say, ‘That’s an AODA problem, we’re not going to service them.’ **We have to learn how to collaborate, be a service provider for many of these dynamics for our victims.**”*

*“We expanded our repertoire as far as we have more tools in our pocket, or more contacts that we can get ahold of. If we have legal questions we can call [Partner 1], if we have questions about resources, medical benefits or whatever we can call [Partner 2], so it’s really just **how can we collaborate and all work together so that the families can benefit seamlessly and not have to go through like 30 different providers or systems to figure out who can best help them**. So, I think we’re doing a lot better, not only [this project] or not only [grant recipient] but as a community. COVID’s taught us a lot, because now we’re working a lot closer together **trying to figure out who can fill what role and do what, and where the gaps are and who can come and fill those gaps.**”*

⁹ Hammond, G. C., & McGlone, M. (2014). Entry, progression, exit, and service provision for survivors of sex trafficking: Implications for effective interventions. *Global Social Welfare*, 1(4), 157–168. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40609-014-0010-0>

¹⁰ Preble, K. M., Nichols, A., & Owens, M. (2023). Assets and logic: Proposing an evidenced-based strategic partnership model for anti-trafficking response. *Journal of Human Trafficking*, 9(2), 131–147. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23322705.2021.1899525>

Community Training

Training was central to the activities of VHT-NC projects during the first years of implementation. Project directors discussed the need to train staff and other people in the community to better identify people who may have experienced trafficking and refer them to the projects. Generating broader and more accurate community understanding of human trafficking was an essential task across the VHT-NC projects during the early stages of implementation—one that project directors believed to be critical to increasing referrals. Project directors discussed trainings that project staff had taken that were important to their respective projects, as well as trainings, such as the SOAR training, that project staff had administered for people in the community.

Project directors primarily discussed the need for training among (1) the general public, (2) law enforcement, and (3) internal project staff. In Year 2, some project directors also discussed the need for project partner training. Generally, project directors indicated that, in order for the VHT-NC projects to begin receiving referrals, community members, law enforcement, and other relevant professionals in the community needed to understand human trafficking and be aware of the existence of these newly developed VHT-NC projects.

Training Needs

Nearly all project directors discussed the need for training in the general community. In particular, project directors noted that, to adequately identify instances of human trafficking, community members needed foundational training to raise awareness and correct misconceptions of human trafficking. As one project director described, “It’s educating the population on what human trafficking is versus kidnapping—the difference between the two—so that’s an impediment. Not a physical one, but it’s part of our ability to build capacity and community awareness on the issues.” Another project director further described the importance of community training and why it was particularly critical for Native communities—although the statutes criminalizing human trafficking are relatively new, the actual problem of exploitation under force, fraud, or coercion in Native communities is not. Therefore, some members of Native communities may not associate the new language of human trafficking with a generations-old problem. Two project directors believed that, in particular, training about human trafficking and the VHT-NC project would be useful for tribal employees and leadership.



SHARING KNOWLEDGE: COMMUNITY TRAINING NEEDS RELATED TO HUMAN TRAFFICKING

*“A lot of the community needs are related to education on the topic. There are **misconceptions in the community** around this, and people have this idea that human trafficking looks a certain way and a lot of times it has to do with this idea of kidnapping or being held...and a lot of **people don’t realize that things happening in their community that they actually know of are actually considered human trafficking**. So, I think there’s a lot more human trafficking than people are even aware of. Along with the area we’re currently working with...there’s a lot of historical human trafficking that dates back to the 1800s that I don’t think people realize how much their communities have been impacted by it over a really long period of time.”*

*“We need to mandate the casino to be trained in identifying trafficking. I think **every single one of our tribal programs, our [Indian Health Services] clinic**, they need to be trained.”*

Overall, project directors noted progress in the need for general community training. In our first interviews, some projects were focused on building relationships within their communities and assessing the most critical types of training and outreach necessary; by the time the second interviews were conducted, several project directors noted that the community understanding of human trafficking had improved somewhat. Another project director felt hopeful that, after months of not being able to keep up with the demand for training in the community, the project would finally be able to deliver trainings after filling a vacant project position.

Three project directors also discussed the need for training for law enforcement, citing the need for relationship building, capacity, and COVID-19-related restrictions as barriers to conducting these trainings. Like the need for general community training, some project directors believed that law enforcement training would help with the identification of potential human trafficking cases and therefore increase referrals to their projects.

One respondent noted that their project is using other grant funding to work with the local law enforcement agency to improve its training systems and increase trafficking investigations. One project director reiterated the need for law enforcement training in their second interview, noting that the high turnover rate in law enforcement makes it difficult to ensure that officers are adequately trained about human trafficking identification and response.

Finally, some project directors talked about the need for training for their own project staff. Specifically, respondents discussed the need for the training on (1) what it looks like to provide culturally specific services in one-on-one settings, (2) technology safety planning (e.g., how to assist a client to see if their phone is being tracked), and (3) how to connect what they have learned from prior training to actual practice so they can better identify and serve participants who have experienced trafficking.



LEARNING THROUGH REFLECTION: STAFF TURNOVER HIGHLIGHTS NEED FOR ONGOING TRAINING

*“We had a situation where a victim had come through our system with red flags, but the officer didn’t necessarily see the red flags...We have a lot of high turnover in many of our [law enforcement] departments...Maybe 30% of your staff might be new staff, so **quite a high turnover. So, it really shines light on the fact that we do need the training in those areas.**”*

Training Provided

In response to discussions about the need for training, project directors described trainings they had provided to either the community (either the general public or targeted groups that could be helpful in identifying or referring potential

participants) or to specific project partners. As noted, incentivizing participation and incorporating training opportunities into other activities has been a successful strategy for some projects to further their reach and impact.



CELEBRATING STRENGTHS: IMPROVING COMMUNITY PROVIDERS' UNDERSTANDING OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING

*"I think that having the resource mapping has made a lot of people more interested in working with us because we are offering them something. We have all of these resources on this interactive map, but **we have to show you how to use it, and oh, by the way, we are also going to talk about trafficking.** I think that has been a big resource. Connecting to some of the...**groups who work on things like substance use issues** and...[to] be at their conferences and trainings and **talk about how this issue is impacting the clients they serve who may also be Native. How do we identify this,** and really looking at what are some of the questions they are asking? We have been able to work with them, we've been working with a lot of our **public housing authorities**, all of those groups to provide training and create some sort of community collaborative around this topic."*

Some of the trainings that were provided to community members and project partners included existing SOAR curricula (including SOAR for Indigenous Communities) and newly developed and tailored training activities (e.g., training tailored to the casino context). Another approach was to add human trafficking content to existing trainings on related issues (e.g., sexual assault, domestic violence, MMIP). Two project directors said they are using a train-the-trainer approach to equip project advocates or partners to train others and multiply the effects of their efforts.

Sustained efforts on training and community and partner education appear to allow VHT-NC projects to move on from focusing on the basics of human trafficking occurrence and identification to more nuanced approaches to the issue. One project director described how their project was shifting the focus of trainings from raising awareness to best practices in human trafficking response, including the incorporation of a trauma-informed approach. Another described the impact of their project's educational efforts.



CELEBRATING STRENGTHS: BROADENING THE REACH OF TRAINING ACTIVITIES

*"The **train-the-trainer**, which was super important before we could even move forward with the outreach and awareness internally with the communities... Just **providing the training to where [partners] are comfortable with, maybe somebody came in for sexual assault but we have to have a deeper conversation.** They might have come in for sexual assault but was there some other red flags? And helping them identify so that we can start training and providing care plans for them."*



CELEBRATING STRENGTHS: BROADENING THE REACH OF TRAINING ACTIVITIES

*"[Project staff member] is 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 there."*

Looking Forward

Although enrollment numbers are encouraging, they only tell a small part of the story. As demonstrated throughout this report, a tremendous amount of work goes into creating and sustaining a program that can respond to Native peoples who have experienced human trafficking in a respectful, supportive, and culturally responsive way. These projects have built important foundations and infrastructure that will allow them to keep growing and progressing toward goals. The evaluation team

will continue to analyze completed data collection (e.g., case manager interviews) and conduct in-person interviews with a variety of respondents (i.e., project leadership, direct services staff, key partners, and project participants) during summer 2023. These activities will provide deeper understanding of the projects' context, implementation, and outcomes, which will be shared in future reports and other dissemination products.

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 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).