**2019-B-04**

Adopt the policy paper entitled Human Trafficking in the United States.

**Human Trafficking in the United States**

**Executive Summary of Policies Contained in this Paper**

Summaries will lack rationale and background information, and may lose nuance of policy.

You are highly encouraged to read the entire paper.

* AAPA (American Academy of Physician Assistants) condemns human trafficking in all its forms and everywhere it is practiced.
* AAPA urges PAs to be alert in identifying and caring for victims of human trafficking. PAs should ensure that they are well-informed about the medical, psychological and spiritual needs of trafficked persons as well as the resources for victims available in their communities.
* AAPA encourages PAs to use their knowledge and expertise proactively to help prevent the crime of human trafficking from occurring in their local communities and abroad.
* AAPA encourages educational programs to train students to recognize trafficking prior to entering full-time practice.
* AAPA encourages PAs to fully comply with all local, state, and federal statutes as mandatory reporters and to use their positions as medical professionals to stop human trafficking.

**Introduction**

After a brief explanation about human trafficking in healthcare, this policy paper will seek to show how PAs can be integral in the concerted effort to stop human trafficking in the U.S. by presenting relevant data, definitions, and guidelines for moving forward.

In 2000, the U.S. Congress passed the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 (TVPA) which defined forms of trafficking as follows:

• Sex trafficking: the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, obtaining, patronizing, or soliciting of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act, in which the 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)

• 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. (1)

According to the CDC, Human Trafficking is a preventable health problem that has far-reaching public health consequences associated with sexual violence, intimate partner violence, child abuse and neglect. (2) Though the exact numbers of those affected by human trafficking is difficult to determine, advocacy organizations such as Polaris, which operates the National Human Trafficking Hotline, estimates that the number of victims reaches into the hundreds of thousands. (3) In 2017, Polaris identified 7,255 victims of sex trafficking, 1,979 victims of labor trafficking, 542 victims of both sex and labor trafficking, and 838 victims in which the form of trafficking was not specified. (3) An estimated 87.7% of victims will see a provider in a hospital during their captivity. (4) About 63-68% of these encounters occur in an emergency department, and 21.4% occur in urgent care clinics. (4) The likelihood of victims encountering a PA is stark as 8.9% of PAs work in emergency departments and 6.1% in urgent care centers. (4) Surveys of trafficking victims support these estimates and reveal that most were seen by a healthcare provider during the time they were being exploited. (3) The populations vulnerable to becoming trafficked victims that are also likely to encounter healthcare providers includes, but is not limited to, individuals who have been abused as children, children in foster care, victims of violence, LGBQT individuals, undocumented immigrants, and those with a history of substance abuse. (5) Healthcare providers need to remain aware of vulnerable populations in order to identify victims and increase the level of care to this patient population.

**Public Health Issue**

As with many public health issues, trafficking is preventable and it is contingent on a multi-disciplinary approach that will heavily involve the healthcare provider. The CDC has a program called “Using Evidence-based Strategies in Your Violence Prevention Efforts” to help implement steps for public health networks to provide safety and prevention practices. The CDC wants communities to be aware that encouraging healthy behaviors in relationships, fostering safe homes and neighborhoods, reducing demands for commercial sex, and eliminating business profits from related transactions are all integral to preventing trafficking. (6) The National Human Trafficking Hotline is a toll-free anti-trafficking hotline available to answer calls from victims and anyone reporting suspected cases of trafficking from anywhere within the United States. (3) The hotline is an integral tool in providing advice for concerned citizens, services for victims, and bringing perpetrators to law enforcement’s attention. (3) PAs can utilize this free hotline if they encounter suspected cases of trafficking at work or in their communities. The national hotline and the online National Human Trafficking and Referral Directory provide the general public and medical professionals with referrals for case management, shelters, legal services, mental health services in the victim’s local community. (3) It is critical for the medical community to use these resources and to increase collaboration with all relevant local agencies including immigration agencies, law enforcement, and health departments.

**Training Current Medical Personnel**

Though human trafficking is a public health issue, many healthcare workers are under-trained and unaware of how to recognize and help victims. A study of San Francisco Bay area emergency departments (EDs) showed that among 258 ED personnel, 29% thought human trafficking was a problem in their ED population, however, only 13% of the study participants felt confident or very confident that they could identify a victim of human trafficking, and fewer than 3% had ever been trained to recognize victims. (7) To our knowledge, there is no specific study addressing PAs and their knowledge or training in identifying trafficking victims. Fortunately, as awareness has increased, resources have been developed to fill in these knowledge gaps and provide training for medical professionals. The Health and Human Services (HHS) Office on Trafficking in Persons, an office of the Administration for Children & Families, has developed a training program called SOAR. (8) SOAR seeks to apply a public health approach to equip professionals to identify, treat, and respond appropriately to human trafficking. The Office on Trafficking in Persons also provides detailed U.S. state and territory profiles detailing the gender and types of locations in which victims were located. (8) Healthcare workers can utilize these tools to best understand their individual state or territory’s unique trafficking characteristics and to more readily identify victims in their distinct communities. (5) Additionally, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security implemented The Blue Campaign which has assessment tools and protocols to best manage care for trafficked victims. (9) Increased awareness and increased reporting of human trafficking may also increase the demand for healthcare workers trained in forensic exams. (5) PAs can help meet these needs by becoming trained in forensic sexual assault examinations which can be an essential service for victims, especially in rural areas where there may be less resources. Some states have dedicated funding to train medical providers on human trafficking and other states need to follow suit to provide training as well as assistance to victims. There are many training tools available for medical professionals and PAs should advocate that their workplace provides essential training.

**Health Consequences to Recognize**

Victims of trafficking require comprehensive psychosocial and health care services to address many of the subsequent issues that result from involuntary servitude, particularly in women and girls. Physical health issues to be addressed are sequelae of STIs, physical injuries, chronic untreated medical conditions, pregnancy and related complications, malnutrition, exhaustion, HIV/AIDS, skin conditions, GI disorders, periodontal disease, and TB. (5)Some psychological conditions that survivors face include anxiety, PTSD, suicidality, substance abuse, depression, self-harm, insomnia, hypervigilance, rage control problems, and dissociative disorders. (5) In their policy statement, the American Academy of Pediatrics urges healthcare providers to be aware that major mental health issues can precede human trafficking and actually contribute to the victim’s vulnerability. (5) These underlying mental health problems can be used as a ploy by the trafficker to discredit the victim. (5) The United National Global Initiative to Fight Trafficking in Persons (UN.GIFT) created a handbook to guide healthcare workers in comprehensive care of trafficked victims. (10) There is limited data on the frequency and variability of victims’ health concerns but the CDC urges healthcare providers to be familiar with other more researched related public health issues that increase the risk for trafficking including child maltreatment, intimate partner violence, runaway/homeless youth, substance misuse, and poverty. (11) Though victims may be more easily identified in the emergency department or in urgent care, PAs working in primary care, OB/GYN, psychiatry, and pediatrics can play an important role in continued care for survivors. Training for all PAs, not just those in emergency medicine, is key for the survivor’s recovery, mental health, and safety. PAs in every specialty should work with their state and local organizations as well as their clinic or hospital social workers to provide comprehensive care for survivors as they take steps towards physical and mental healing.

**Training Future Health Care Workers**

As awareness of human trafficking increases on the federal level, medical education programs must follow suit and should equip future medical professionals to recognize and treat victims. Doctors, nurse practitioners, and PAs who completed training admit to being more comfortable and ready to report suspected cases of trafficking as well as give adequate care for victims. Training on human trafficking should be incorporated into PA program curriculum so that all PA students and graduates are able to identify patients who are at risk and are equipped with the resources to support and treat victims. PAs have the opportunity to take the initiative in training students which will have a lasting impact on this under-recognized public health and safety issue. Incorporating training on human trafficking identification and treatment in all PA programs will equip PAs to be at the forefront in the fight to end human trafficking in the U.S. Though we do not have specific estimate on the cost of incorporating this training into PA educational curriculum, many of the training resources and most of the statistical data are publically available therefore, the financial impact should be minimal. Like other evolutions in medicine, the cost to providing up-to-date training to students should be considered a necessity in PA program curriculums.

**Advocate for Policy Changes**

The AMA, in their Policy Forum, propose that the U.S. Healthcare system is poised to be at the forefront of data collection and research that is evidence based and grounded ethically in nonmaleficence, justice, and autonomy for all patients. (11) These principles that guide our healthcare system could be the missing piece in this public health issue that is impacting minorities and females at a disparate rate with physical and emotional abuse, inhuman living conditions, poor sanitation, inadequate nutrition and delay in seeking healthcare. As human trafficking is viewed as not merely a legal concern but also a health concern, the research community can work collaboratively with federal, state, and local agencies to end human trafficking.

**Conclusion**

PAs are uniquely placed in their employment settings where human trafficking victims are encountered and have a responsibility to unite and stand against human trafficking. PAs can be a vital part of the future to end this human right violation. We encourage all PAs to be educated, advocate, and participate in ending human trafficking by using their skill-set to identify and care for victims and bring perpetrators to appropriate authorities.

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