

Appendix D: Public Comments



Freedom Network USA

October 25, 2019

Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation
Administration for Children and Families
Department of Health and Human Services
OPREinfocollection@acf.hhs.gov

Submitted via email

RE: Evaluation of the National Human Trafficking Hotline [84 Federal Register 45155]

Dear OPRE:

On behalf of Freedom Network USA (FNUSA), I am writing in response to the Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS) request for public comment on the Evaluation of the National Human Trafficking Hotline (NHTH).

FNUSA, established in 2001, is a coalition of 68 non-governmental organizations and individuals that provide services to, and advocate for the rights of, trafficking survivors in the United States. Our members include survivors, former prosecutors, civil, criminal, and immigration attorneys, and social service providers who have assisted thousands of trafficking survivors. Together, our members provide services to over 2,000 trafficking survivors each year.¹

FNUSA applauds HHS' goal, to "examine the experiences of individuals who seek assistance from the NHTH after their interactions with the NHTH."² We believe that a robust evaluation of the NHTH is a critically important step in improving the US response to human trafficking.

As an initial matter, it is important to acknowledge that the NHTH is currently operated with a dual purpose. The first is to connect survivors with services and support. The second is to serve as a law enforcement tip line. This combination of purposes is unique among hotlines. Most hotlines have only one purpose. The National Domestic Violence Hotline, RAINN's Sexual Assault Helpline, and the National Runaway Safeline, for example, focus only on providing the services and support requested by callers. They do not seek tips about domestic violence,

¹ Freedom Network USA 2018 Member Report, available at <https://freedomnetworkusa.org/app/uploads/2018/04/FRN-Member-Report-Digital-FINAL.pdf>.

² 84 Federal Register 45156.

sexual assault, or runaway youth to provide to law enforcement. They do not train their advocates to gather actionable intelligence for law enforcement. They do not advertise their number on law enforcement posters or asking members of the public to report possible victimization. They do not work to disrupt crime. They focus only on developing information and staff that are dedicated to meeting the needs of survivors. Their resources are dedicated solely to meeting the needs of survivors. Their call lines are not overburdened with calls from members of the general public.

FNUSA has received reports of concerning challenges with the NHTH. Providers have reported that they continue to receive referrals from client populations that they do not serve, even after contacting the NHTH multiple times over months to update the information in the referral database. Survivors have reported that they were contacted by law enforcement about their exploitation, even though they did not give permission to the NHTH to share their information with law enforcement. Other providers report that they never receive referrals from the NHTH, even though they have attempted to be included in their referral directory.

It is critical that an analysis of the NHTH address this unique incorporation of a law enforcement tip line into a victim hotline, and the impact on the quantity and quality of services and support provided to survivors who are calling the hotline in search of services and support.

This dual purpose might impact how resources are allocated, including:

- Diverting resources to building partnerships with law enforcement or vetting law enforcement partners instead of service providers;
- Diverting resources to data analysis for the purpose of supporting law enforcement actions instead of victim services; and
- Diverting resources away from building strong collaborations with state and local hotlines.

It may also impact how hotline advocates react to callers including:

- Responding less patiently or supportively to those who do not immediately identify as victims; and
- Trying to get more information about the crime, instead of focusing solely on the service needs of the caller, which may increase victim's discomfort or distrust of services; and
- Pressuring victims (even inadvertently) into agreeing to share their information with law enforcement, rather than empowering the survivor by following their lead.

Finally, it may impact the experience of survivors including:

- Feeling pressured to share information about their trafficking experience, leaving victims feeling frustrated or fearful; and
- Feeling uncomfortable and therefore deciding against seeking further assistance, leaving survivors in unsafe situations for longer periods of time; and
- Law enforcement responding in such a way that puts the survivor (or others) at risk of psychological, physical, or legal harm including deportation.

This dual purpose will also impact results of the survey. It is important to identify what type of caller (e.g. potential survivor, potential witness reporting a possible trafficking crime, caller asking for general information, or other caller) is responding to the survey, and whether the level of satisfaction with the NHTH differs among these groups. It is possible that one group, for example general information caller, is extremely pleased with the NHTH while another group, for example survivors, is highly disappointed. It is also likely that potential survivors will be the least likely group to respond to the survey, both because people in a state of crisis are unlikely to respond to a survey and because of the logistical differences (where survivors are being provided with a direct call transfer to a service provider they will be provided a call back number for the survey instead of being transferred directly to the survey).

We thank you for your work to support human trafficking survivors through evidence-based services and programs. For further information, please contact me at jean@freedomnetworkusa.org.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Jean Bruggeman". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Jean Bruggeman
Executive Director
Freedom Network USA