FOREWORD

These guidelines were created by Eseosa Eguamwense, Melissa Smith, and Zarina* during their time working for the United Way Center to Combat Human Trafficking through the Survivors LEAD Program, an initiative of Survivor Alliance that aims to increase survivor leadership in the anti-human trafficking field.

*This name has been changed to protect the privacy and identity of the author.

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INTRODUCTION FROM THE AUTHORS

The purpose of this document is to establish guidelines for executing storytelling consultations involving survivors of human trafficking in an ethical and effective manner. Our goal in creating these guidelines was to eliminate any form of exploitation that can often result from telling survivor stories in the anti-trafficking field.

Storytelling is a powerful tool that allows survivors to feel liberated, raise awareness, contribute to collective movement building, and educate the public about human trafficking. Among many other reasons, retelling their experience can be a way for survivors to heal, influence, teach, humanize, inspire, and mobilize.

Survivors’ stories are crucial for the anti-trafficking movement, and every piece of information from the survivors’ account is a narrative on its own. It is important, therefore, that anyone asking for a survivor’s story first establishes an ethical relationship between the story of the individual and the narrative that the organization wants to pursue so that facts are not misrepresented.

Storytelling should be carefully approached, bearing in mind that recounting past experiences can trigger re-traumatization, exhaustion, and/or anxiety attacks, as well as mental, emotional, and physical breakdowns. As a result, people working with survivors must take steps to provide an environment that is safe, trusting, and encouraging with the aim of empowering participants at all levels.

These guidelines are not all encompassing but aim to provide a foundation for people learning about ethical storytelling in the anti-human trafficking space. We hope you find this resource to be a useful starting point and that you continue learning about the topic on your own as well.

- Eseosa, Mel, & Zarina
BEGINNING THE STORYTELLING PROCESS

The following information is crucial for both survivors and allies to consider before starting the storytelling process:

1) **Determine the narrative you want to follow:**

As an organization working to end human trafficking, it is important to elevate narratives that do not promote victimization or stigmatization. It is critical that survivors are not portrayed as helpless or lacking ability, nor should you take from the seriousness of the issues at hand.

It is important to remember that your audience’s understanding of human trafficking has likely been largely influenced by sensationalized stories and images propagated by the media. Many of these stories can often be inaccurate, so it is important to combat myths and misconceptions about the issue through accurate storytelling.

**Portray the stories of survivors as they tell them, recognizing their expertise. Narratives should always aim to promote proper education and awareness of human trafficking.**
2) **Understand the power dynamics in storytelling:**

Most survivors are called upon to tell their stories by people in power – their bosses, advocacy groups, parents, or guardians – with promises of financial aid, promises to alleviate difficult situations, and so on. These dynamics often do not give survivors the power to make their own choices and can even make them vulnerable to re-exploitation. When thinking of power, consider who has the power to write, publish, take photos, give names, and conduct research.

**Find ways to include survivors in all aspects of the storytelling process and follow their lead when determining narrative direction.**
3) **Apply a trauma-informed approach to engaging the survivor:**

Storytelling often involves sharing details of a traumatic event which has the potential to re-traumatize the storyteller. The survivor’s wellbeing must be the primary focus of any storytelling endeavor and a trauma-informed approach should be applied before, during, and after the process. Some trauma-informed principles include understanding, recognizing, and responding to the effects of trauma, as well as respecting survivors’ physical and emotional well-being and safety.

Taking the above into consideration, below are a few checks that both allies and survivors must reflect upon before initiating the storytelling process:

- What is the purpose/goal of the story from the organizational perspective?
- Why does the survivor want to tell their story?
- What is the relevance of the story?
- What narratives will the story promote?
- Through what medium will the story be shared?
- Who is the primary audience of the story?
- Who will benefit from hearing the story?
- How will the survivor benefit after telling their story?
The following lists standard practices to adopt before, during, and after conducting a storytelling engagement in a way that eliminates exploitation and prioritizes the survivor’s wellbeing.

**BEFORE THE INTERVIEW:**
Prepare for the interview by reviewing the goal of the story and the role the survivor will play in the storytelling process.

1) Obtain consent in clear and understandable terms. Consent must not be obtained in a circumstance where the survivor feels coerced or obligated to tell their story.

2) Be transparent about your intentions, plans, and goals for the story. The storytelling process should not be transactional, but with purpose.

3) Explain if there are any conditions where it might be too late to withdraw the consent to tell or publish the story.

4) Verify whether the survivor would like to share the story anonymously or any include personal information and/or identifying details (names, photos, locations, etc.). Should the survivor choose to remain anonymous or withhold any of these details, respect their decision and ensure personal information will be confidentially protected. Pseudonyms and nonidentifying photos may be used to protect survivors’ identities. Video or audio recordings should be altered or obscured for anonymous participants.

5) Ensure that the story is told by the person who owns the story.

6) Avoid using sensationalized images that stereotype the survivor or their journey. Following the survivor’s guidance, avoid using images to represent their trafficking experience and instead focus on finding images that reflect their current situation.

7) Set realistic expectations from the start by informing the survivor of the duration of the interview, sharing questions that will be asked ahead of time, and providing a draft outline of the piece in which their story will be used.
When developing questions to ask survivors, ensure you use language that does not

1) suggest the survivor is at blame for their experiences,

2) reinforce inaccurate perceptions or stereotypes, and

3) intentionally provoke an emotional response.

Instead, focus on developing open-ended questions that allow survivors to explain their story to the extent with which they are comfortable.

Share your questions with the survivor you plan to interview ahead of time and remind the survivor that you are open to revising or removing some of them if requested.
DURING THE INTERVIEW:
Human trafficking can be a complex topic to understand because of its intersectional relationship with other forms of violence, like domestic and gender-based violence, slavery, and sexual exploitation, which are all topics that can be very difficult to talk about. If you are not sure how to address a particular aspect of the interview, ask first.

1) Remind the survivor of their options during the storytelling process and let them decide what is right for them.

2) Be mindful and respect boundaries. Remind the survivor that it is okay if they do not want to answer every question.

3) Ensure the space is as intimate as possible to avoid distractions if discussing in person. If meeting virtually, verify the survivor’s preferred method to connect.

4) Conduct yourself in a manner that demonstrates your interest in what the survivor is telling you. Listen attentively and actively.

5) While it is fine to occasionally refer to planned questions, do not read off cards or a script throughout the conversation. Maintain eye contact to show openness and authenticity.

6) Avoid generalizing, with the understanding that every survivor has had a unique experience and could be at a different point in their healing process than you expected.

7) Do not assume that something has already taken place, such as reporting to law enforcement, or that the survivor may feel a certain way about their experience.

8) Offer support where needed, especially if the survivor is emotionally impacted during the process of telling their story.

9) Some survivors may be hesitant to discuss certain aspects of their experience, while others may be more willing to share openly. Allow the survivor to explain their story in their own words without pressuring them for additional details.

10) Avoid using phrases that could trigger re-traumatization. Explore further resources about ethical storytelling to learn what these phrases may be and follow the advice of survivors when making decisions about language.
AFTER THE INTERVIEW:
Regardless of whether the interview was successful or not, ensure that you do not make it transactional. Follow up after the interview in a way that respects the survivor and shows gratitude for their time and expertise.

1) Show appreciation by thanking the survivor for taking the time to share their story and expertise. Use phrases like “Thank you for sharing this with me. I can only imagine how difficult that must have been for you,” or “I’m sorry this happened to you but appreciate your openness to share with me.”

2) Remind the survivor of the terms you have reached and let them know again that their information is safe with you. If there are factors that may impact the survivor’s ability to withdraw their story, remind them of these things.

3) Follow up to let the survivor know when their story will be publicly shared. Allow them to review the finished product ahead of publication or dissemination.

4) Provide a link to or copy of the finished product once it is published.
Stories convey messages about culture, societal conditions, personal history, and the values that unite people. Our stories form narratives that overtime can become knowledge that people share in their communities and create human connections. For these reasons and many more, it is important that allies and organizations like United Way remain committed to uplifting the stories of survivors to strengthen the fight against human trafficking.

If you are interested in learning more about ethical storytelling best practices, please refer to the following resources:

- **Survivor Alliance** is uniting and empowering survivors of human trafficking around the world to become leaders of the movement. Their website features many resources for both survivors and allies.

- **Ethical Storytelling** is an organization that aims to gather a community of nonprofit practitioners and storytellers to learn how to integrate a new standard of storytelling. The organization provides many resources including guides, templates, webinars, and more.

- **Freedom Collaborative** is a platform for and by the global anti-trafficking community to connect partners, provide information, and share knowledge. Their resource library includes things like guidelines for ethical image use and webinars about ethical storytelling in anti-trafficking programming.

- **Witness** is an organization that helps people use video and technology to protect and defend human rights. Their website features a number of guides, training videos, and curricula on topics such as obtaining informed consent and interviewing survivors of sexual and gender-based violence.

- **The Markkula Center for Applied Ethics** at Santa Clara University produced an Ethical Storytelling Guide for nonprofits which highlights best practices and shares several additional resources to help readers learn more.
ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Eseo Eguamwense** is a survivor of human trafficking who worked as a Community Impact Advisor at United Way’s Center to Combat Human Trafficking from September through December 2021. She joined United Way through her involvement with one of the Center’s partners, Survivor Alliance, and participation in their Survivors LEAD Program. She has worked in various capacities in the communications, media, and performance arts fields. Eseosa is based in Nigeria.

**Melissa Smith** is a human trafficking survivor who has been a member of Survivor Alliance since October of 2019. After her escape, she worked with the authorities to prosecute her trafficker and became the first person to clear her criminal record under New Jersey’s Human Trafficking Prevention, Protection, and Treatment Act. She is committed to pursuing a world without exploitation and trafficking, putting an end to the stigmas that prevent survivors from getting the help they need by expanding the availability of trauma-informed lawyers, doctors, and therapists. Melissa is a mother of 5 and a live-in caretaker. In her free time, she likes to read, hike, and garden.

**Zarina** is a human trafficking survivor who was born and raised in Nairobi, Kenya. She has been a member of Survivor Alliance since late 2020 and has worked with various organizations in Kenya to help healthcare workers trace and prevent cases of tuberculosis and AIDS. Zarina has also spent many years working with Azadi Kenya, a solely survivor-led anti-trafficking NGO which focuses on survivor leadership, protection policies, and ethical storytelling. Zarina hopes to use the skills that she develops through the Survivors LEAD Program to learn more about awareness-raising in the anti-trafficking space and connect herself with a larger community of survivors to exchange support. She looks forward to using the knowledge she acquires to become a leader in the anti-trafficking movement within her own community.

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ABOUT UNITED WAY

United Way fights for the health, education, and financial stability of every person in every community. With global reach and local impact, we’re making life better for 48 million people annually. United Way is the world’s largest privately funded nonprofit, working in 95% of U.S. communities and 40 countries and territories.

We are uniquely positioned to bring together leading organizations to drive a more powerful, unified strategy to combat human trafficking globally. Leveraging our vast global network, United Way can help identify and support what’s most needed, while mobilizing individuals, businesses, governments, and nonprofit organizations around effective solutions.

ABOUT THE CENTER TO COMBAT HUMAN TRAFFICKING

The United Way Center to Combat Human Trafficking was founded in 2015 as a global center to accelerate action. We are working to create effective community-based solutions, galvanize collaboration across sectors, and build public and political will to support, fund and scale strategies across the world that find, stop, and prevent human trafficking. We are innovating where needed, uplifting good work already being done, and utilizing the United Way network to scale the anti-trafficking movement. Learn more about the Center’s work by visiting unitedway.org/endtrafficking.