



2026 Human Trafficking Academy
November 16 – November 20, 2026

Restoring Dignity and Securing Justice: Unpacking the Trafficking Survivors Relief Act

MODULE 1

Monday, November 16, 2026

Setting the Scene: Understanding the Path to Criminalization

Human trafficking victims are often misunderstood, misidentified, and criminalized for offenses committed under coercion or exploitation, thus highlighting the need for a closer examination of the social, cultural, and institutional factors that shape victim identification, including stigma, trauma, language barriers, fear, and challenges with disclosure. Through survivor experiences, case studies, statistics, and trauma-informed perspectives, participants will examine how victim responses may be misinterpreted as dishonesty, noncooperation, or criminal intent, increasing the risk of justice system involvement. The sessions will also consider the distinct experiences of sex and labor trafficking victims, underlining opportunities strategies that promote informed, compassionate, and victim-centered responses to prevent further criminalization.

Session 1

Across Borders and Systems: Sex Trafficking, Labor Trafficking, and Criminalization

This session, presented by Suleman Masood, Esq., examines sex trafficking, labor trafficking, and victim criminalization through an international and cross-cultural lens, connecting global experiences to the U.S. criminal justice system. Participants will explore how language barriers, immigration concerns, economic vulnerability, debt, isolation, and fear of authorities can prevent victims from recognizing exploitation, disclosing abuse, or seeking help. Through an international case study, the session assesses how victims may face arrest or prosecution for conduct connected to their exploitation while traffickers, exploitative employers, or buyers evade accountability. Strategies that distinguish victims from offenders, reduce further criminalization, and promote culturally responsive, survivor-centered approaches to justice will be observed.

Session 2

Beyond the Headlines: Trafficking, Stigma, and Self-Identification

This session studies how stigma, misconceptions, and cultural stereotypes about human trafficking can influence victim identification, credibility assessments, and decision-making within the criminal justice system. Drawing on lived experience, Sameer Jain will look at why victims may not recognize their exploitation or disclose their experiences, and how trauma, shame, guilt, and social conditioning can affect credibility assessments, evidence gathering, and participation in legal proceedings. The session will consider how assumptions about victims' behavior, circumstances, or responses to exploitation can lead to misidentification and impede access to legal protections and support.

Participants will contemplate the legal implications of trafficking victimization, including circumstances in which victims may be investigated, prosecuted, or convicted for conduct connected to their exploitation. The discussion will address how judges, prosecutors, defense counsel, and law enforcement can recognize indicators of trafficking, evaluate evidence without relying on stereotypes, and consider the role of exploitation in criminal culpability and case outcomes. The session showcases the need to balance legal accountability, victim protection, and due process to help ensure that victims are not misidentified or treated as offenders without proper consideration of their circumstances.

Session 3	<i>Trauma and Survival: When Victim Responses Are Misunderstood</i> In this psychologically informed session, Sharon Hawkins Leyden, MSW, LCSW, explores how trauma can affect memory, emotional regulation, decision-making, communication, and disclosure among human trafficking victims. Participants will discover how survival responses may be misinterpreted by law enforcement, attorneys, healthcare professionals, social service providers, and the courts, potentially contributing to victim criminalization, inaccurate mental health assessments, and inappropriate treatment. The session also considers how these misunderstandings can affect victim credibility, witness testimony, and legal decision-making. Through a case study, the session examines the intersection of trauma, survival responses, and the legal system, including the implications for victim identification, investigative practices, and courtroom proceedings. Emphasis is placed on recognizing trauma-related behaviors, understanding their relevance to legal assessments, and applying trauma-informed approaches that support more informed decision-making, reduce retraumatization, and promote fairer outcomes.
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MODULE 2 Tuesday, November 17, 2026 Identification and Investigation: From First Contact to Protection	
Effective identification and investigation are essential to recognizing, protecting, and supporting human trafficking victims. This module explores professional practices, investigative strategies, and collaborative systems that strengthen responses to potential trafficking cases, from initial contact to victim protection. It explores barriers to identification, trauma-informed communication, evidence gathering beyond victim testimony, and the role of multidisciplinary collaboration across law enforcement, healthcare, education, transportation, and social services. Emphasis is placed on survivor-centered approaches, ethical interviewing, professional accountability, and evidence-based practices that prioritize victim safety, dignity, and access to support while preventing further criminalization.	
Session 1	<i>The First Encounter: Identification Without Criminalization</i> Presented by Laura Magnone, J.D., this session surveys how trafficking indicators may emerge during initial encounters with law enforcement, healthcare providers, schools, transportation personnel, and social service professionals. Participants will discover how trauma, coercion, language barriers, and fear can affect disclosure and cooperation, and how assumptions about behavior or credibility can result in victims being misidentified as offenders. The session will highlight the legal implications of these encounters, including how initial observations, questioning, and documentation can shape probable cause determinations, arrest decisions, charging decisions, and subsequent criminal proceedings. Through practical approaches and a case study, participants will learn to recognize trafficking indicators, ask appropriate questions, document relevant information, and make informed referrals while protecting individual rights and investigative integrity. The session will emphasize the importance of distinguishing evidence of exploitation from suspected criminal conduct, and upholding due process while reducing the risk of retraumatization and further criminalization.
Session 2	<i>Building Human Trafficking Cases: Evidence Beyond Victim Testimony</i> In this session, Joseph Remy, Esq. examines evidence-driven strategies for building human trafficking cases that extend beyond victim testimony. Human trafficking investigations and prosecutions often face significant challenges, including survivor trauma, recantation, reluctance to participate in criminal proceedings, and difficulties establishing coercion, exploitation, and criminal intent. Participants will explore how digital communications, social media, financial transactions, employment and travel records, forensic evidence, surveillance, and third-party witnesses can establish key elements of trafficking offenses and corroborate survivor accounts. Drawing on U.S. federal law, relevant case law, and selected international legal frameworks, the session

	addresses evidentiary challenges, including authentication, hearsay, expert testimony, and admissibility. Using practical examples and a case-based exercise, participants will learn to identify investigative leads, strengthen evidence, and develop legally sustainable cases while prioritizing trauma-informed practices, witness safety, survivor-centered approaches, and the fairness and integrity of criminal proceedings.
Session 3	<i>Multidisciplinary Collaboration: When Systems Work Together</i> This session, addressed by Laura J. Lederer, J.D., focuses on how multidisciplinary collaboration can strengthen human trafficking investigations, legal proceedings, and survivor support. Using a case study, participants will follow a potential trafficking victim from initial identification through investigation, access to services, legal assistance, and case preparation. The session will look at the distinct roles and responsibilities of law enforcement, prosecutors, defense counsel, victim advocates, healthcare professionals, and other partners, with attention to evidence sharing, confidentiality, informed consent, and professional boundaries. Participants will consider how gaps in communication, unclear roles, or inappropriate information sharing can affect victim safety, investigative integrity, and legal outcomes. The session will underline practical strategies for coordinating across systems while respecting privacy, individual rights, and due process. Emphasis will be placed on balancing effective case development and accountability with survivor autonomy, reducing repeated trauma, and ensuring that collaboration supports both fair legal proceedings and access to appropriate services.
Session 4	<i>Strengthening the Response to Human Trafficking: The Role of Compass Connections</i> Delivered by Tiffany Taylor, this session sheds light on Compass Connections' role in operating the human trafficking hotline and its contribution to identifying potential trafficking cases, facilitating referrals, and supporting coordinated responses across the justice system. Participants will explore procedures for receiving, assessing, documenting, and responding to trafficking reports, including safety considerations, confidentiality, and coordination with law enforcement, prosecutors, and victim service providers. The session will also assess how hotline data and reporting trends can inform investigations, reveal service gaps, and support resource planning while recognizing the limitations of reported information. Through practical examples, participants will learn how effective referral pathways and collaboration among legal professionals, government agencies, and community organizations can strengthen victim identification, support access to legal services, and promote informed, survivor-centered responses while respecting individual rights and safety.

MODULE 3

Wednesday, November 18, 2026

Criminalization, Prosecution, and the Courts

Human trafficking cases present complex challenges for criminal justice systems, particularly when victims are prosecuted for offenses connected to their exploitation. This module analyzes how law enforcement practices, charging decisions, prosecutorial discretion, and courtroom procedures contribute to victim criminalization and shape justice outcomes. It explores the responsibility of the justice system to hold traffickers and buyers accountable while distinguishing victims from perpetrators. The module also explores how courtroom environments and legal proceedings can affect survivor participation, safety, and well-being. Consideration is placed on reducing retraumatization, protecting survivors' safety and well-being, and strengthening fair prosecution practices that recognize victimization and uphold survivors' rights, dignity, and access to justice.

Session 1	<i>Criminalization in Our Country: When Victims Become Defendants</i> Presented by Caroline Pizano, Esq., this session examines the criminalization of human trafficking victims who are arrested, prosecuted, convicted, and incarcerated for offenses committed as a result of their exploitation. Traffickers may use force, coercion, manipulation, and control to compel victims to
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	engage in criminal activities, including prostitution-related offenses, drug-related crimes, theft, fraud, identity-related offenses, and the recruitment of others. These cases raise critical legal questions regarding the role of coercion in prosecutorial decision-making and the responsibility of justice system professionals to recognize trafficking and exploitation when evaluating criminal conduct. Participants will gain a deeper understanding of how coercion, trauma, fear, and survival influence victims' involvement in criminal activity and how cases can proceed through state and federal justice systems without exploitation being identified or adequately considered. The session will also explore disparities related to race, gender, age, poverty, juvenile justice involvement, and access to effective legal counsel. Emphasis is placed on the long-term consequences of incarceration and criminal records, the legal and systemic barriers survivors face when rebuilding their lives, and the need for approaches that promote accountability for traffickers.
Session 2	<i>Who Is Being Held Accountable? Federal Prosecution</i> Led by Martina E. Vandenberg, J.D., this session analyzes how human trafficking cases are prosecuted under federal law in the United States, focusing on the legal framework, jurisdiction, charging authority, investigative resources, and potential penalties. Participants will explore key federal statutes, evidentiary requirements, prosecutorial discretion, sentencing considerations, and the roles of federal agencies and prosecutors in building cases. The discussion will also address how decisions about charging, evidence collection, victim participation, and interagency coordination can influence case outcomes and offender accountability. The session will further examine the legal consequences of trafficking victimization and the federal legal remedies available to survivors, including the Trafficking Survivors Relief Act (TSRA) and its relevance to addressing criminal records arising from trafficking victimization. Participants will consider how federal law can advance offender accountability while helping survivors overcome legal barriers associated with their exploitation.
Session 3	<i>The Survivor Experience Inside the Courtroom</i> In this session, Judge Robert Lung explains how courtroom practices and legal proceedings can intimidate, silence, or retraumatize trafficking survivors appearing as witnesses, defendants, or individuals seeking legal relief. Participants will explore how judges, prosecutors, defense counsel, and other legal professionals can uphold due process, evidentiary standards, and the integrity of judicial proceedings while protecting survivors' dignity, safety, privacy, and meaningful participation. The session will underscore practical, trauma-informed approaches to courtroom preparation, questioning, testimony, language access, confidentiality, and informed consent. It will also inspect how trafficking survivors may become entangled in the justice system, face criminal charges, or carry state and federal convictions. Emphasis will be placed on balancing legal accountability with victim protection, recognizing that fair and effective justice requires both.

MODULE 4

Thursday, November 19, 2026

The Trafficking Survivors Relief Act: From Criminalization to Restoration

For many trafficking survivors, criminal records resulting from their exploitation create lasting barriers to recovery, stability, and reintegration. This module provides an overview of the federal Trafficking Survivors Relief Act, state post-conviction relief, and Florida's Human Trafficking Victim Expunction law. It will also explore the scope and limitations of these remedies, the distinctions between vacatur, expungement, and record sealing, and the legal, financial, procedural, and emotional barriers to accessing relief. Survivor-centered approaches and collaboration among legal professionals, advocates, and community organizations to expand access to relief and address the lasting consequences of criminalization will also be considered.

Session 1	<i>Understanding the Trafficking Survivors Relief Act</i> Led by Hollie Nadel, this session evaluates the federal Trafficking Survivors Relief Act (TSRA), its legislative purpose, and its role in addressing the criminalization of human trafficking survivors.
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	Participants will explore the Act’s key provisions, eligibility requirements, and procedures for obtaining relief from qualifying federal arrests and convictions connected to trafficking and exploitation. Through a legal lens, Hollie will prompt participants to consider how trafficking-related criminal records affect the rights and opportunities of survivors, and how post-conviction relief can help address lasting consequences. The session will also briefly examine state criminal laws and prosecution practices, including the challenges survivors may face when seeking relief for state-level arrests or convictions that fall outside the scope of a federal remedy. The session will also examine legal and practical barriers to obtaining relief, including evidentiary burdens, documentation requirements, procedural challenges, and eligibility limitations. Participants will gain understanding on the roles of courts, attorneys, and legal advocates in interpreting and applying the Act, evaluating claims, and facilitating access to relief. The discussion will highlight how effective legal remedies can reduce the continued criminalization of survivors, promote fairness, and advance justice and restoration.
Session 2	<i>From Law to Practice: Comparing Federal, State, and Florida Relief</i> Delivered by Yasmin Z. Vafa, Esq., this session will appraise the legal remedies available to human trafficking survivors seeking relief from criminal records arising from their exploitation, with a focus on the federal Trafficking Survivors Relief Act and Florida Statute § 943.0583, Human Trafficking Victim Expunction. Participants will compare federal and state frameworks, including eligibility, covered offenses, evidentiary standards, procedural requirements, judicial discretion, and the distinctions between vacatur, expunction, expungement, and record sealing. The session will also address the practical steps for pursuing relief, including petition preparation, gathering records, establishing the connection between trafficking and criminal conduct, and navigating legal representation and court proceedings. Through a multijurisdictional case study, participants will consider legal and procedural barriers to relief, including evidentiary challenges, costs, delays, and the risk of retraumatization.
Session 3	<i>The Aftermath: Legal Relief Is Only the Beginning</i> In this session, survivor consultant, public speaker, advocate, and author, Gina Cavallo explains the long-term consequences of trafficking-related convictions and the legal and practical barriers survivors face when rebuilding their lives. Participants will explore how criminal records can affect housing, employment, education, professional licensing, financial stability, immigration, healthcare, and family reunification, as well as the lasting emotional effects of stigma, shame, and exclusion. The session analyzes legal relief mechanisms available to survivors, including record vacatur, expungement, and other remedies that may reduce the overall consequences of criminal convictions. Participants will consider the limitations of these legal remedies, the challenges survivors encounter when navigating relief and reentry systems, and the importance of survivor leadership in shaping laws, policies, and programs that promote meaningful restoration and access to justice.

MODULE 5

Friday, November 20, 2026

Prevention, Policy, Leadership, and the Future

Effective human trafficking prevention requires informed policy, accountable leadership, and meaningful survivor participation. This module assesses how legislation, education, and community initiatives can reduce vulnerabilities, support early intervention, and improve access to justice. It underlines the role of survivor leadership in shaping policies and practices, emphasizing meaningful inclusion and recognition of lived experience expertise. The session concludes by identifying practical strategies for strengthening multidisciplinary collaboration, reducing victim criminalization, and advancing sustainable systems change across professional and community settings.

Session 1	<i>Prevention Through Education, Policy, and Community Engagement</i> In this thought-provoking session, The Honorable Cristian Eduardo inspects how legislation, public policy, education, and community engagement can prevent human trafficking before exploitation occurs.
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	Participants will explore prevention strategies across schools, healthcare systems, businesses, transportation networks, faith communities, labor sectors, government agencies, and online environments, with attention to the legal and systemic vulnerabilities that contribute to sex and labor trafficking. The session answers the question as to how legislative frameworks, regulatory measures, workplace protections, public awareness initiatives, and interagency collaboration can strengthen prevention and early intervention. Participants will also consider the legal responsibilities of relevant stakeholders, challenges in policy implementation, and gaps in accountability that may undermine prevention efforts. The discussion will address how existing laws and regulations can be strengthened to improve victim identification, promote compliance, and hold responsible parties accountable. Participants will come to understand how survivor-informed, culturally responsive approaches can help ensure that prevention policies translate into meaningful protections and more effective community-based interventions.
Session 2	<i>The Power and Responsibility of Survivor Leadership</i> This session, addressed by Megan Lundstrom, will reflect on how lived experience experts strengthen anti-trafficking programs, policies, investigations, prosecutions, and professional training. Drawing on findings from Polaris’s National State of the Field Study, the discussion will examine the distinction between survivor expertise, professional influence, and formal decision-making authority. Participants will consider the legal and ethical considerations of survivor engagement, including informed consent, confidentiality, fair compensation, professional boundaries, and the prevention of tokenization, exploitation, and unpaid labor. Moving beyond individual engagement practices, the session will explore how institutional structures and governance practices can either reinforce power imbalances or advance meaningful survivor leadership. Through practical examples, participants will explore strategies for integrating survivor expertise into policy development, legal advocacy, and institutional decision-making while strengthening accountability, promoting equitable partnerships, and ensuring survivors have meaningful opportunities to influence the systems and decisions that affect them.
Session 3	<i>From Awareness to Accountability: What Will You Do Next?</i> Presented by Judge Fernando Camacho, this session will examine the evolutionary response to trafficking, exploring how courts, legal systems, legislatures, and other institutions have worked to address systemic barriers, reduce the criminalization of trafficking survivors, and advance justice and restoration. Building on the knowledge and perspectives gained throughout the Academy, participants will consider the interconnected roles of judges, prosecutors, defense counsel, law enforcement, investigators, healthcare professionals, social service providers, advocates, legislators, and survivor leaders in strengthening systems and creating meaningful, lasting change. Moving beyond awareness and understanding, this session will challenge participants to reflect on their personal and professional responsibilities in preventing trafficking, improving identification and protection, promoting accountability, and supporting survivor restoration. Participants will be encouraged to identify one specific, achievable action they can take within their profession, organization, or community, while considering the partnerships, resources, and accountability measures needed to sustain progress beyond the Academy. The session will conclude with a call to action: What will I do differently because of what I learned, and how will my actions contribute to lasting systemic change?