

NO WRONG DOOR

YOUTH PROJECT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A Needs Assessment
for the Hennepin County
No Wrong Door Initiative

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Background

Safe Harbor and the Hennepin County No Wrong Door Initiative

The 2011 the Minnesota legislature passed Safe Harbor for Youth that recognized minors involved in prostitution or commercial sex as victims of sexual exploitation and not criminals. Following the legislation, the No Wrong Door Model was created in 2014 as a coordinated plan for implementation of a victim-centered public health approach. This model was based on the idea that any “door” that a sexually exploited youth opens should be a pathway to recovery and thriving. These doors could be a hospital, clinic, a social worker, police, and more.

Hennepin County launched an internal County-wide No Wrong Door Initiative to implement the vision of Safe Harbor within the Hennepin County system through the creation of County-specific protocols, practices, and tailored services. The Initiative coordinates services across all juvenile serving business lines in the County, including Child Protection, Health and Human Services, and Corrections. In 2017, sex trafficking of minors by any third-party was deemed a mandatory Child Protection report.¹ In partnership with the Minnesota Department of Human Services, Hennepin County No Wrong Door has developed a County-wide response to this new role for Child Protection. In addition, Hennepin County has created specialized Child Welfare case managers to provide voluntary services for youth who do not meet the criteria to open a Child Protection investigation, but there is suspected or known sexual exploitation.

About this Report

Goals of the Research

This report was commissioned in 2018 by the No Wrong Door Director and Juvenile unit supervisors in order to conduct a needs assessment to see what is working and where improvements may be needed. Specifically, the County wanted more information about what is happening for youth who had been identified as having been sexually exploited, but are unable to access services due to high barriers. The project goals were to understand the needs of youth who had experienced sexual exploitation, their barriers to accessing services, gaps within this service ecosystem, and factors that promote youth thriving. In order to explore gaps, we also had to understand how the current ecosystem functions.

This Executive Summary provides an overview of methods and key findings from the full report which is approximately 50 pages long plus appendices. The full report provides considerably more breadth and depth, including quotes from youth who have experience with sexual exploitation and sought County services as well as systems professionals with expertise working with young people who have been sexually exploited. The full report also contains additional deliverables for the No Wrong Door Youth Project commissioned by Hennepin County and produced by a team from the University of Minnesota’s Urban Research and Outreach-Engagement Center (UROC).

¹ Minnesota Department of Human Services also includes known or suspected sexual exploitation of minors by a caregiver or person of authority to be considered a mandated report. See Minnesota Department of Human Services (Jan, 11, 2018). “Bulletin: Corrected #17-68-09C: Sex Trafficked Children and Youth Investigative Protocol.” Available at: <http://bity.ly/dhs-trafficking-bulletin>

Methods and Data Collected

A participatory action research approach was used to develop and co-design research methods with systems stakeholders and youth who have lived experience of involvement in sexual exploitation and trafficking (hereafter referred to as “lived experience” or “the life”). Systems stakeholders were engaged as part of an Action Research team and through interviews (n=30). They included county workers, county supervisors, and staff at non-profits who work on issues of sexual exploitation within Hennepin County. They have direct knowledge of the population and the No Wrong Door ecosystem. However, the cornerstone of the needs assessment is data collected directly from young people with lived experience. Their voice and perspective on the No Wrong Door Model illuminates which “doors” are working and where more work is needed. We engaged existing youth advisory groups to help us develop the project and conducted individual and group interviews with youth (n=41) and an online survey (n=33). A central goal of the project was to hear from young people in the life, and specifically young people who are not yet successfully accessing No Wrong Door/Safe Harbor services.

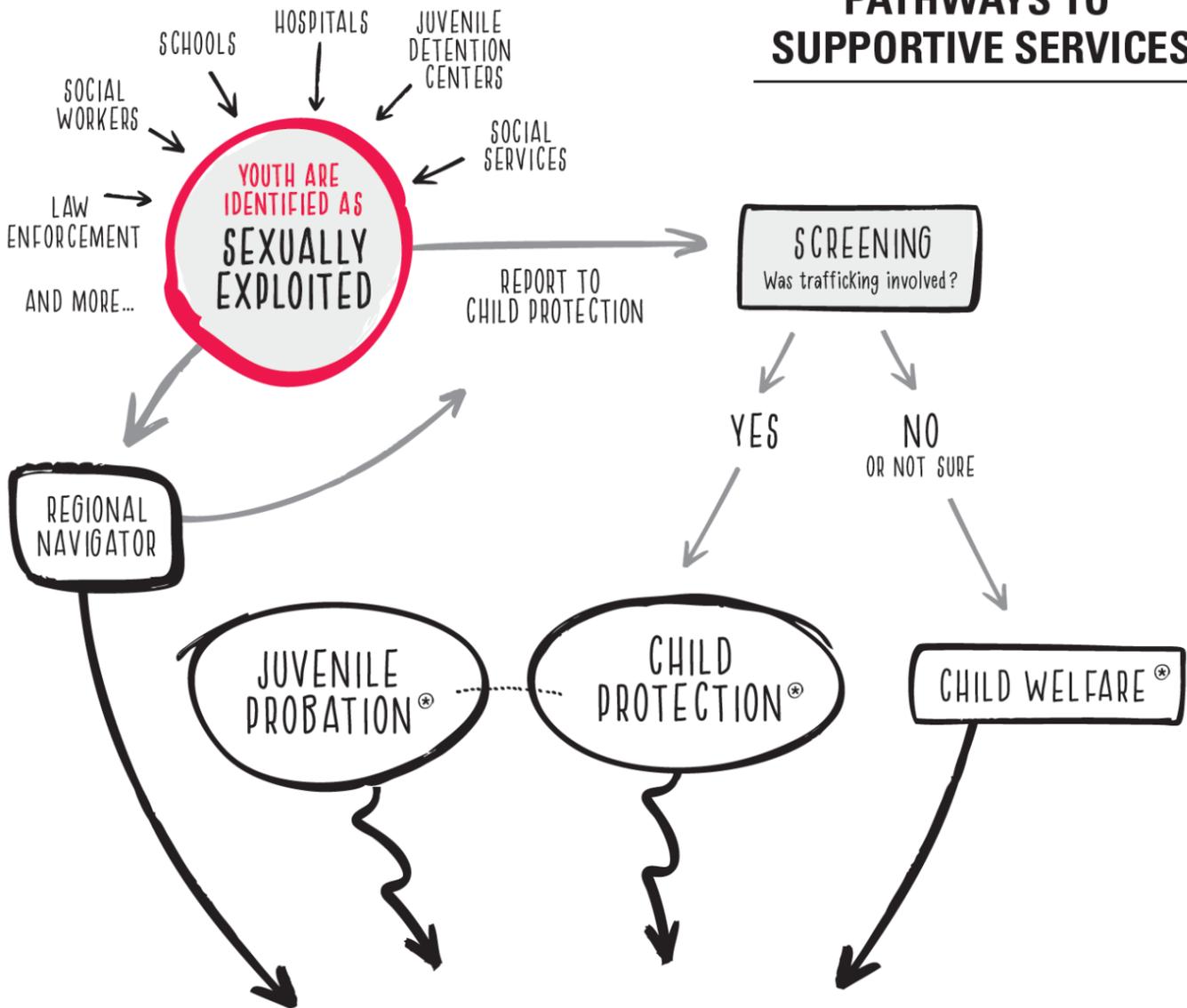
Summary of Key Findings

Hennepin County No Wrong Door Ecosystem (Identification and Service Delivery)

- Sex trafficking of minors and sexual exploitation by a caregiver or person in authority is a legislatively mandated report to Child Protection. All mandated reporters are supposed to make a report if sexual exploitation is suspected. Many victims are identified this way.
- Hennepin County screens reports. This is supposed to be the official way that Hennepin County identifies a victim of sexual exploitation or trafficking.
- Sex trafficking of a minor or sexual exploitation by a caregiver or person in authority is referred to Child Protection services. Other cases of sexual exploitation are referred to Child Welfare for voluntary services.
- County business lines work together with non-profit service providers, Safe Harbor Regional Navigator and law enforcement to identify and provide services to sexually exploited youth. Together, they respond like an **ecosystem**.
- Most people within the ecosystem are not aware of exactly how the County system functions or the extent of the ecosystem and who is involved.

The diagram below provides a visual overview of the Hennepin County No Wrong Door ecosystem and pathway to supportive services for young people identified as having been sexually exploited or at risk for sexual exploitation.

PATHWAYS TO SUPPORTIVE SERVICES



SPECTRUM OF SERVICES



 Processes
 Indicates referral pathways to county-contracted No Wrong Door services
 Mandated Services
 Voluntary Services

Surviving to Thriving (Needs, Strengths and Help-Seeking of Youth in the Life)

Youth circumstances and needs:

- Youth described many adversities that accompany lived experience of sexual exploitation, including poverty, lacking basic needs, abusive relationships and trafficking, family conflict, and more. These impact youth's ability to seek out and access services, supports and housing.
- Youth experiencing trafficking by a third party or sexual exploitation by a caregiver need BOTH pathways out and protection (sometimes urgently) AND social-emotional support.
- Being in the life is accompanied by sexual harassment, sexual violence, and dating or intimate partner violence. These needs must also be met. This is a gap in services.
- All youth in the life need access to basic needs, such as safe shelter, housing, food, clothing, hygiene care, phones, and more for youth to thrive.
- Youth expressed that mental health and substance abuse treatment are equally important as meeting basic needs. But, these services are often inaccessible.

Youth help-seeking

- Youth access a wide array of services and supports while in the life (e.g. crisis hotlines, food shelves, government assistance). Yet, they may not disclose to these providers. Most systems professionals therefore encounter youth in the life but do not realize it.
- Youth will *only* disclose being in the life and seek advice from a case worker or probation officer *if* they have a positive relationship with this person. Otherwise, they will avoid disclosing.
- Youth see police as a mixed bag. Police can potentially intervene in sexual exploitation, but they also arrest youth for other things and are sometimes disrespectful. Youth seek other alternatives for emergency help if possible.
- Help-seeking is hindered by deep distrust of Child Protection, Probation, police, and County services within communities of color and indigenous communities.
- Youth highlighted the critical role of informal supports in providing resources and care.
- Youth identified numerous assets and strengths of youth in the life, such as resilience, independence, interpersonal and community-building skills, creativity, loving, being a good friend, and ability to survive in adverse circumstances.

Service Gaps and Barriers

- Many services are predicated on disclosure of trafficking or exploitation and many youth do not disclose and thus are not receiving much needed services. Repeated disclosure can be harmful.
- The County has developed contracts for services tailored for sexually exploited youth who are involved in Juvenile Probation, Child Protection, or Child Welfare. Youth must be identified as sexually exploited and be systems-involved to access these services. This may create unintended barriers for youth who are not in these systems to access these same services.
- The Safe Harbor Regional Navigation system and other community-based non-profit and culturally specific service providers are a trusted and reliable place for young people to get help that do not carry the distrust and fear associated with County systems-involvement. But these services do not have the same access to the specialized services and shelter that can be provided through County systems-involvement.
- Youth lack awareness of the services and supports that may be available to them.
- Some youth who have experienced sexual exploitation or trafficking face high barriers to accessing services, such as severe and persistent mental illness, chemical dependency, and behavior challenges. These barriers can leave youth caught in cycles of running, being kicked out

of shelter, and engaging in survival sex or stuck in exploitative situations. Some of these youth are wards of the state without a foster care placement.

- The primary service area gaps for sexually exploited youth are safe housing (including shelter) and mental health treatment. No Wrong Door does not yet have enough of these resources to meet the need.
- Participants identified many gaps in populations accessing needed services through No Wrong Door, including youth aging out of juvenile services, youth from diverse populations, males, and LGBTQ2IA people.
- Racism and societal stigma associated with trafficking and sexual exploitation is a persistent barrier to accessing the No Wrong Door ecosystem.
- Use of blaming or pitying language from some County workers and non-profit staff dissuades youth from seeking support.

Prevention

- Currently, No Wrong Door prevention efforts seek to prevent future harms to young people who have already been exploited or trafficked by focusing on systems-involved youth who participate in Safe Harbor support groups through prevention curricula, life skills development, and life coaching/mentorship.
- Interviewees identified a need for earlier intervention to prevent sexual exploitation and trafficking among youth with red flags or risk factors for sexual exploitation or trafficking that are not yet involved with Child Protection or Juvenile Probation
- Hennepin County has a unique opportunity to embed “upstream” primary prevention efforts across all programs that work with youth, families and communities. This includes comprehensive sexual and relationship health education with youth, and efforts to address the lack of basic needs for this population.

Recommendations and Next Steps

We identified 17 recommendations based on the input of youth with lived experience and systems professionals with in-depth knowledge of county systems and the issue of commercial sexual exploitation of minors.

These recommendations are guided by addressing the service gaps, reducing barriers for youth, and promoting what youth say they need to survive and thrive. This information is also based on how youth say they navigate help-seeking. Participants said that the County should strive to adjust its service delivery model to meet youth where they are, rather than the other way around. These recommendations are directed towards County administration, County commissioners, and program supervisors who can influence staff direction, training, protocols, and county-contracts. A number of the recommendations also suggest more investments in services offered to youth through County-contracted programs or directly through County systems and staff.

Hennepin County is a large system. Some of aspects of these recommendations may already be underway within the County to varying degrees. Full knowledge of all County efforts was beyond the scope of this project. We recommend that the No Wrong Door Initiative seek to coordinate with ongoing system improvement and reform efforts within the County and vice versa.

The recommendations are guided by the following five goals:

1. Address service gaps for sexually exploited youth with severe and persistent mental illness (SPMI) and co-occurring disorders who are not currently being served by No Wrong Door/Safe Harbor services
2. Address service-area gaps for under-identified and under-served populations
3. Address missed opportunities for earlier intervention and prevention
4. Improve systems coordination and collaboration with non-profit leaders and statewide agencies
5. Reduce barriers for youth to access what they say they need to thrive

Recommendations

- #1. Invest in the creation of additional shelter beds for youth under the age of 24.
- #2. Invest in addressing the lack of foster care placements for youth.
- #3. Create a specialized unit within Hennepin County Children's Mental Health for serving sexually exploited youth.
- #4. Fund mental health practitioners as part of county-contracts within youth-serving agencies. Consider funding mental health services within youth drop-in centers and youth shelters.
- #5. Invest in developing residential and out-patient treatment facilities for youth with co-occurring disorders who have been sexually exploited.
- #6. Include state agencies and non-profit leaders in coordination within Hennepin County No Wrong Door to make sure the County's response is coordinated with Minnesota Safe Harbor and non-profits.
- #7. Ensure that county workers across multiple departments have training on sex trafficking and sexual exploitation of youth, including content on males and LGBTQ youth.
- #8. Hire and retain staff from diverse backgrounds and who have experience working with sexually exploited youth.
- #9. Develop and implement identification protocols in more County departments where sexually exploited youth access services.
- #10. Develop and implement screening for youth with developmental disabilities.
- #11. Expand opportunities for intervention and prevention at the Juvenile Supervision Center.
- #12. Strengthen the involvement of Child Welfare for families whose youth have been sexually exploited.
- #13. Provide mandatory training for all Child Protection workers on sex trafficking and sexual exploitation of youth.
- #14. Develop a specialized unit within Child Protection's case management unit for working with sex trafficked youth.
- #15. Streamline the process for approval of adult waivers for youth aging out of foster care and juvenile probation.
- #16. Develop more county-contracts for culturally-specific services.
- #17. Conduct an environmental scan of current prevention efforts.

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