HUMAN TRAFFICKING 101

TOOLKIT

A Field Guide for Recognizing, Responding to, and Reporting Human Trafficking

WARRIORS PROJECT ● HOPE NOT CHAINS

Developed by Bill "Tiny" Lawson

How to Use This Toolkit

"We see the runaway and call them a bad kid. We see the girl arrested for prostitution and call her an offender before asking why. We see symptoms of trauma, exploitation, survival behavior, or serious mental illness and respond with shame, labels, charges, and incarceration."

— Bill "Tiny" Lawson

That sentence is the reason this toolkit exists. Most of the people positioned to recognize a trafficking victim — a patrol officer, a hotel front-desk clerk, an ER intake nurse, a youth pastor, a school resource officer, a case worker — were never actually trained to see it. They were trained to see a runaway, a prostitution charge, a difficult kid, a no-show at church. This toolkit exists to close that gap.

This material draws on hands-on anti-trafficking rescue work, reentry and corrections experience, and years of building recovery infrastructure for people the system had already written off — work that has included Warriors Project's motorcycle ministry outreach, direct rescue operations, and policy engagement including a regional roundtable on the opioid and trafficking crisis and legislative work on Ohio's Good Samaritan law.

Who this is for

- Law enforcement and corrections staff
- Churches, ministries, and faith-based outreach teams
- School staff, counselors, and youth workers
- Hospitality and healthcare front-line staff (hotels, ERs, urgent care)
- Community groups, recovery programs, and volunteer outreach teams

How the modules work

Each module stands on its own — you can run this as a single 2-4 hour session covering all eight, or pull individual modules for a shorter briefing, staff meeting, or sermon series. Every module follows the same shape: an objective, the core ideas, a practical tool you can use immediately, and a discussion prompt to work through as a group.

The eight modules

- 1. The Misclassified Victim — the core mindset shift
- 2. Trafficking 101 — what it legally is, and is not
- 3. The Pipeline — how trauma becomes a system record
- 4. Field Identification — indicators and a quick-check tool
- 5. Response & De-escalation — what to do in the moment
- 6. Resource Navigation — where to send or take someone, and how
- 7. Bridge Building — connecting systems that don't talk to each other
- 8. Putting It Into Practice — discussion and local application

Module 1 — The Misclassified Victim

Objective

Understand how trauma gets labeled as crime, and why the first response someone receives often decides everything that follows.

Key Concepts

- Trauma-driven behavior is frequently indistinguishable, on the surface, from criminal behavior.
- First system contact — the first arrest, the first hotel call, the first ER visit — is a fork in the road, and it is usually handled by someone with zero trafficking-specific training.
- Labels stick. Once someone is processed as an "offender" instead of recognized as a victim, every system that touches them afterward inherits that label.
- Identity formation under labeling: a person told often enough that they are trouble will organize their life around that story, because it is the only one anyone offered them.

Real-World Example

A runaway is picked up on a shoplifting charge. No one asks why a fifteen-year-old shoplifted, where she has been sleeping, or who dropped her off two blocks away. She is processed, released, and now has a record. The missed intervention point wasn't a lack of resources — it was a lack of the right question, asked at the first point of contact.

Practical Tool — "Pause & Assess"

Before you charge, refer, or dismiss someone, run three questions:

- What happened to this person, before I judge what they're doing now?
- Who benefits from the behavior I'm seeing — them, or someone controlling them?
- What changes about my response if I'm wrong about my first read?

Discussion Prompt

"What if this person needed help, not punishment? What would I have had to do differently in the first five minutes?"

Module 2 — Trafficking 101: What It Actually Is

Objective

Build an accurate, legally grounded understanding of trafficking so it can be told apart from situations that look similar but are legally and practically different.

Key Concepts

- Under the federal Trafficking Victims Protection Act, trafficking means compelling someone into labor or a commercial sex act through force, fraud, or coercion.
- For a minor in a commercial sex act, force, fraud, or coercion do not need to be shown at all — a minor cannot legally consent to commercial sex, period, regardless of whether a third party is controlling them.
- Trafficking is not smuggling. Smuggling is about crossing a border with consent; trafficking is about ongoing exploitation and control, regardless of how someone arrived. A person can be smuggled and never trafficked, or trafficked without ever crossing a border.
- Trafficking is not the same as prostitution. An adult engaged in commercial sex who is not being controlled through force, fraud, or coercion is in a different legal and human situation than someone being trafficked. Collapsing the two into one category is exactly how real victims end up arrested instead of identified.
- Traffickers target vulnerability, not character. Housing instability, prior abuse, addiction, immigration fears, family rejection (especially of LGBTQ+ youth), foster care history, poverty, language barriers, disability, and isolation are the factors traffickers deliberately look for — not signs of who someone "is."

Real-World Example

A runaway youth is approached. What looks like a caring relationship (food, a place to stay, attention) becomes controlling within weeks. By the time law enforcement encounters her, she may present as loyal to, or protective of, the person exploiting her.

Practical Tool

Use the Field Identification checklist in Module 4 any time a situation involves control, debt, or a companion who won't let someone speak for themselves.

Discussion Prompt

"What signs would we normally miss — and why do we miss them?"

Module 3 — The Pipeline: Trauma to Survival to System

Objective

Understand the pathway that turns childhood harm into a criminal record, so it can be recognized while it's happening — not just explained afterward.

Key Concepts

- The common sequence: early abuse or neglect, followed by running or being pushed out, followed by survival behavior — addiction as self-medication, theft, or commercial sex as the fastest route to a meal or a bed for the night.
- Survival behavior is what gets charged. The abuse that caused it almost never appears in the police report.
- Every additional system contact — arrest, incarceration, a failed placement — tends to deepen entrenchment rather than interrupt it, unless someone actively changes the pattern.

Practical Tool — Pattern Recognition Map

For any person in front of you, work through three columns before deciding how to respond:

- What happened to them?
- What are they doing to survive it?
- What is the system currently charging or labeling them for?

When the third column doesn't reflect the first two, you are very likely looking at a misclassified victim.

Module 4 — Field Identification

Objective

Recognize behavioral, physical, and situational indicators in real time — a traffic stop, an ER waiting room, a hotel front desk, a school hallway, a church pew.

No single indicator proves trafficking, and no one should be confronted based on a checklist alone. Indicators are a reason to look closer and engage safely — not a verdict.

Indicator Checklist

Behavioral	Physical	Situational
• Fearful, submissive, or tense; avoids eye contact when a companion is present • Scripted or rehearsed answers; defers to someone else to answer for them • Inconsistent story about age, hometown, or relationship to their companion • Sudden changes in dress, vocabulary, or behavior (especially in a minor) • Checks a companion's face before answering questions	• Signs of physical abuse, malnourishment, or fatigue inconsistent with explanation given • Branding-style tattoo (a name, crown, or barcode placed by someone else), especially alongside other indicators • Clothing inappropriate for weather or setting • Untreated medical or dental issues	• Does not hold their own ID, cash, or phone • Someone else speaks for them, or won't leave them alone with a responder • Can't say what city they're in or how they got there • Lives at a work site, or an unusual number of people live at one address • Owes a debt to an employer or "sponsor" that never seems to shrink • Dropped off and picked up on a controlled schedule, with no unsupervised time

Practical Tool — The 60-Second Field Check

When there's no time for a full assessment, ask (or observe) three things. Two or more "no" answers is reason enough to contact a trained responder.

- Can this person come and go on their own?
- Do they hold their own ID and money?
- Can they answer basic questions about themselves without checking with someone else first?

Module 5 — Response & De-escalation

Objective

Shift the encounter from enforcement to engagement, without increasing danger to the victim or yourself.

Key Concepts

- Trauma-informed communication: calm, unhurried, non-accusatory.
- Trust has to be built fast, often in a two- or three-minute window.
- Avoiding re-traumatization means not making someone repeat their story to five different people, and not treating them as a suspect while you figure out if they're a victim.

Practical Tool — The 3-Step Response Model

- Slow down. Contact a trained responder and follow established safety procedures, rather than announcing suspicion out loud.
- Build rapport. Ask about them, not about "trafficking." Use their name. Don't open with accusatory language or lead with the word "victim."
- Offer a pathway. Give one real, specific next option - a hotline card, a name, a ride, a bed - rather than a lecture. Let them decide. A person who says no today may call that number next week, but only if the interaction didn't feel like another interrogation.

Critical Safety Notes

- Never confront a suspected trafficker directly in the moment — this endangers the victim and can end the only chance at safe intervention.
- Never interview a suspected victim in front of the person who may be controlling them.

Module 6 — Resource Navigation

Objective

Know exactly where to send or take someone — before you need to know it.

Key Concepts

- Map local partnerships in advance: shelters, task forces, recovery programs, housing pathways. Don't try to find this information for the first time in the moment you need it.
- A responder who hands over a phone number has done almost nothing. A responder who personally connects a person to a real human, in the moment, has changed the outcome.

Practical Tool — The Warm Handoff

Don't just refer — connect directly. If possible, make the call yourself, in front of the person, and hand them the phone once someone answers. A name and a live voice succeed where a business card in a pocket usually doesn't.

Critical Contact Card

IF SOMEONE IS IN IMMEDIATE DANGER, CALL 911	
National Human Trafficking Hotline	1-888-373-7888 (TTY: 711)
Text	233733 — available 24/7 in 200+ languages, confidential
Online chat / more info	humantraffickinghotline.org
Local shelter / task force contact	_____
Local detective / SRO contact	_____
Local recovery / housing placement	_____

Fill in the last three rows with your own local contacts before you run this training — a generic hotline number is a start, not a plan.

Module 7 — Bridge Building

Objective

Connect systems that don't talk to each other: law enforcement, faith communities, recovery programs, hospitals, and schools.

Key Concepts

- The disconnect between the street and the system is usually the real failure point — not a lack of resources on either side.
- Trust gaps between law enforcement and community/faith organizations are often inherited from history, not from anything happening today. Closing them takes deliberate, repeated contact, not a single meeting.
- Communication barriers compound: a hospital doesn't know what a shelter can offer, a shelter doesn't know what a detective needs for a case, a church doesn't know either exists.

Real-World Example

Relationships that start as adversarial — a task force and a ministry operating in the same territory with no trust between them — can become genuine partnerships once each side sees the other consistently show up and follow through. This kind of bridge-building, including direct engagement with local and state officials on trafficking and recovery policy, is often the highest-leverage work any one person or organization can do.

Practical Tool — The One-Relationship Exercise

Identify the single system your organization has the weakest relationship with right now — law enforcement, a hospital, the school district, a rival ministry. Name one specific action you will take to open that door this month. Not a plan for someday: one action, one month.

Module 8 — Putting It Into Practice

Objective

Make the training real, and build a plan for what happens after today.

Every effective training ends with real stories, told by the people who lived or witnessed them — not composite examples printed in a manual. Use this page to bring in your own local story, or invite a survivor-leader or someone from your local anti-trafficking task force to speak directly to the group.

If your group doesn't yet have a local story or a local relationship to draw on, that is itself useful information — it may mean Module 7 (Bridge Building) is the next real step, before running this module again.

Group Discussion Questions

- Think of a time you responded to someone in crisis. Looking back through this toolkit, would you handle it differently today?
- What is one system your organization has never had a real conversation with?
- Who in this room already knows how to make the first call in Module 6? If no one does, who will find out this week?
- What would it look like for your organization to be the "warm handoff" for someone else's referral, not just the one making it?

After This Training

- Fill in the Critical Contact Card in Module 6 with your real local contacts.
- Assign one person to complete the One-Relationship Exercise from Module 7 within 30 days.
- Schedule a follow-up session in 60-90 days to review what actually happened, not just what was discussed.

About This Toolkit

This toolkit was developed by Bill "Tiny" Lawson, founder of Warriors Project and Transition to Success LLC. Bill is a U.S. Marine Corps veteran and HAWK missile technician, a former corrections officer, and an anti-trafficking advocate whose work has included hands-on rescue operations, a regional roundtable on the opioid and trafficking crisis, and engagement on Ohio's Good Samaritan law.

Warriors Project is a recovery and reentry ministry built on the belief that the people the world writes off are so often exactly the ones capable of saving somebody else. Hope Not Chains carries that same mission into anti-trafficking education specifically - awareness, prevention education, and toolkits like this one.

This is a living document. Update the Critical Contact Card with your own local resources, adapt the modules to your setting, and bring your own real stories into Module 8. If you'd like Warriors Project or Hope Not Chains to help train your team directly, reach out: hopenotchains.website