



**Safe Harbour: NY Fast Facts:  
Engaging in Conversations with Potential Survivors**

If you suspect a youth has been trafficked or exploited, these tips can help you start a conversation:<sup>1</sup>

- Understand that the youth may disclose information that is graphic, violent, and/or sexual in nature. If you are unable to hear this information without projecting shock or disgust do not start the conversation. Instead, find another staff who is better able to speak to the youth;
- When possible, allow the survivor to choose which staff person they speak with;
- Make sure the youth's basic needs are met (food, clothing, medical care, allowing the person to sleep, etc.);
- Speak to the youth alone, in a private space, where you will not be overheard or interrupted. Be sure the space is non-threatening and comfortable for the youth;
- Make available tissues, regular breaks, and a place where the youth can regain his or her composure if the conversation causes distress (if a youth is distressed stop the conversation immediately and help the youth to deescalate);
- If there is any doubt whether the youth understands you secure the services of an interpreter. Do not use family members or friends of the client as an interpreter;
- Inform the youth that you are asking questions to offer help so the purpose of the conversation is clear;
- Do not immediately identify the client as a "victim". Survivors often do not recognize that they are victims of a crime;
- Don't press for details if they are not offered. The conversation should not be an interrogation;
- Ask open-ended questions;
- Reassure client that there are no right or wrong answers, and that the conversation can be paused and resumed at his or her discretion;
- Don't challenge a youth's responses. Instead, convey that you believe what you are being told;
- Don't ask repetitive questions;
- Never discuss sensitive subjects with the potential survivor within sight of a potential trafficker. If the survivor arrives with a person (including a friend, family member, or interpreter) who exhibits controlling behavior, this person may be a trafficker;
- Use simple, non-technical language;
- Use terms and language that the survivor uses, unless they may be considered offensive.
- Close the conversation in a way that assures the client that he or she has done well and that they can continue to discuss the subject with you in the future, if desired. It may be very difficult in the initial conversation to obtain enough information to determine conclusively if the person is in fact a survivor of trafficking. Additional engagement may be necessary.
- Keep in mind the role trauma can play in a survivor's life. Always use a trauma-informed approach when working with potential survivors of trafficking.

**NOTE: Do not ask potential survivors about their experience(s) unless the questions relate directly to your service provision or providing a referral. Allow professionals trained in forensic interviewing, such as those at your local Child Advocacy Center, to interview children for the details of their experience.**

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<sup>1</sup> Macy, Rebecca and Laurie Graham (2012). Identifying Domestic and International Sex-Trafficking Victims During Human Service Provision. *Trauma Violence Abuse*, 13-59.