

UM School of Social Work Gains \$2.5 Million Grant to Address Human Trafficking of Maryland's Youth

The University of Maryland School of Social Work (SSW) has been awarded a three-year, \$2.5 million grant from the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office for Victims of Crime to improve statewide coordination and multi-disciplinary collaboration in responding to human trafficking involving children and youth. This grant, known as the Maryland Human Trafficking Initiative for Children and Youth, builds on the Child Sex Trafficking Victims Initiative (CSTVI) that was started under a five-year Children's Bureau grant awarded to the SSW in 2014 and the establishment of the SAFE Center which has had significant involvement and support of the SSW.

The Maryland Human Trafficking Initiative for Children and Youth is led by the Ruth Young Center for Families and Children (RYC) at the SSW, in partnership with the Maryland Human Trafficking Task Force, Governor's Office on Crime Control and Prevention, Maryland Departments of Human Resources and Juvenile Services, and U.S. Attorney's Office. Project partners include the University of Maryland's SAFE Center, Maryland Administrative Office of the Courts (i.e. Maryland's Supreme Court), Healthy Teen Network, TurnAround, Inc., and the Baltimore Child Abuse Center.

"This initiative is a unique university-state-local nonprofit partnership which focuses on creating a strategic multi-disciplinary approach to improve outcomes for child and youth victims of human trafficking in Maryland using a trauma-informed approach. It builds on a strong state infrastructure and is aligned with Task Force recommendations to enact critical changes to Maryland's overall response to this vulnerable population," says Nadine Finigan-Carr, PhD, Research Assistant Professor at the RYC and Principal Investigator of both the Maryland Human Trafficking Initiative for Children and Youth and CSTVI.

Youth trafficked in Maryland through commercial sex or forced labor face enormous barriers in exiting exploitative situations and have few resources to assist them afterwards. Victims are often misidentified or not identified, encounter professionals with limited knowledge and understanding of human trafficking, and are unable to access specialized services. The Maryland Human Trafficking Initiative for Children and Youth goals are designed to address this by improving coordination between state agencies, law enforcement, and service providers.

First, the Maryland Human Trafficking Initiative for Children and Youth will create multidisciplinary teams (MDTs) throughout the state beginning with Baltimore City, Montgomery, and Prince George's Counties. Each MDT will include members from local child

welfare and juvenile justice offices, human trafficking investigators from law enforcement, victim services advocates and local prosecutors. The MDTs will utilize models which prioritize victim-centered and trauma-informed care to immediately respond to every case of child trafficking in their jurisdiction. The MDT's facilitation of collaborative information-sharing and case coordination will help to increase safety for victims, enhance engagement in treatment, and access to specialized care, which ultimately impacts short and longer term outcomes for well-being.

Secondly, this initiative will develop a unified statewide training strategy for professionals from child welfare, juvenile justice, court systems, and law enforcement to improve victim identification and learn knowledge and best practices for handling child trafficking cases. Finally, this grant proposal includes the establishment of additional specialized services to be achieved by funding the expansion of service providers to areas in Maryland with many child trafficking cases.

“This award represents an opportunity for us to continue to build upon our incredible partnerships statewide and implement evidence based strategies to improve the wellbeing of child and youth victims of human trafficking. Each of the initiative's goals and activities will help to improve coordination between the multiple systems trafficked youth must navigate and ensure victims are connected to services that provide real opportunities to heal,” said Amelia Rubenstein, LCSW-C, Clinical Research Specialist of CSTVI. “The School of Social Work is proud to have taken the lead in securing funds for this work,” says Dean Richard Barth “Only one other state (MN) was able to meet the high standards and local match required by the Department of Justice. We look forward to continuing the excellent collaboration with critical partners that we began many years ago and continues to bear benefits for our state.”