



February 8, 2022

The Honorable Eddie Bernice Johnson
Chairwoman, House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology
The Honorable Frank Lucas
Ranking Member, House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology

RE: Hearing on “Data Challenges Impacting Human Trafficking Research and Development of Anti-Trafficking Technological Tools”

Dear Chairwoman Johnson, Ranking Member Lucas, and members of the House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology,

Thank you for drawing attention to the important role of research, data, and technology in advancing the fight against human trafficking through today’s hearing.

Established in 2002, Polaris’s mission is to eradicate human trafficking and restore freedom to survivors. We do this in two main ways. First, we provide immediate response to victims and survivors of human trafficking through our operation of the U.S. National Human Trafficking Hotline. The National Human Trafficking Hotline, which is funded in part by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, connects victims and survivors of sex and labor trafficking with services and support to get help and stay safe. Second, we take the knowledge and insight that we have gained over 20 years of operations to prevent human trafficking by making long-term structural change to the underlying systems that enable it to flourish. Our work is survivor centered, justice and equity driven, and technology enabled.

Through our operation of the National Human Trafficking Hotline, Polaris has built the largest dataset on human trafficking in North America. This allows us to build a data-driven, evidence-based understanding of how trafficking happens, what makes people vulnerable, who is responsible, and where there are gaps in response. We also use this data to identify timely insights so the field can respond to human trafficking better and faster as the crime itself changes. This kind of analysis is contributing to a much-needed shift toward identifying and implementing evidence-based practices.

Based on this expertise, Polaris has three recommendations related to improving data challenges that impact research and the development of anti-trafficking technology:

- Ensure that research about vulnerable communities is part of the evidence base on human trafficking.
- Ensure survivors of trafficking are part of the design team for any research about trafficking.
- Ensure anti-trafficking research and data collection are appropriately funded.

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1. Ensure that research about vulnerable communities is part of the evidence base on human trafficking.

The U.S. government’s empirical understanding of human trafficking largely comes from four data sources: law enforcement data, data from victim service providers, data from the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), and data from the National Human Trafficking Hotline, provided by Polaris. By design, these are all data sets garnered from trafficking situations that have already occurred.

Two decades into the fight against human trafficking, we are beginning to use these data to understand who is most vulnerable to trafficking situations. Research studies that look at the effects and connections between trafficking and housing insecurity or homelessness, migration status and workplace conditions, drug and alcohol abuse, child welfare systems, and more are often more systematized and more readily available than standalone data about trafficking situations. To better understand the true picture of human trafficking, data and research with vulnerable communities should be part of our comprehensive understanding of how human trafficking looks in the United States.

Efforts to encourage increased collaboration through data collection and data sharing amongst the systems and communities that are most likely to encounter human trafficking victims should be led by federal agencies, including the Department of Health and Human Services, Department of Labor, Department of Justice, and Department of Homeland Security.

2. Ensure survivors of trafficking are part of the design team for any research about trafficking.

It is widely accepted across the human trafficking field that people who have experienced exploitation firsthand are the true experts on the subject. But in practice, research aimed at better understanding human trafficking is still primarily the province of those who hold certain academic or professional credentials, rather than expertise based on lived experience. Principal investigators choose the research topics, ask the questions, and apply their own lenses to analyzing the results. Survivors are generally confined to the role of research subject, asked to share often painful memories or deeply personal aspects of their current lives.

It is essential that trafficking survivors be part of the design phase of research studies – not only relied upon to provide information or to refer participants. This is the approach Polaris is taking through the National Survivor Study. Meaningful survivor engagement is not only the right way to do research, but it also makes the results better by increasing representation, minimizing inherent biases, and producing relevant data. But committing to this standard is only the first step; carrying it out through the process of research requires unwavering dedication while remaining open to learning and recalibration throughout. It demands that we are responsive to feedback; accountable to survivors; and flexible to adjusting plans, timelines, and resources. Most importantly, it recognizes trust as the keystone of these efforts and prioritizes the time and emotional energy required to cultivate meaningful relationships across communities.

3. Ensure anti-trafficking research and data collection are appropriately funded.

Rigorous data collection, research, and analysis that also ensure confidentiality and data security for victims and survivors should be standard in the human trafficking field and should guide U.S. government response and investments. But for this type of learning to become commonplace, it must be funded; this



includes funding NGOs to strengthen data collection, analysis, and security, as well as ensuring that government agencies are investing in quality research and data collection to inform the field.

Sec. 401(a) of the TVPRA of 2017 (P.L. 115-427) includes authorization for the U.S. Department of Justice National Institute of Justice to conduct a prevalence study on human trafficking. In the past, no funding has been allocated to a prevalence study in the United States. Sufficient funding will allow NIJ to finally conduct a prevalence study on the nature of trafficking in the United States – research that is essential to inform future appropriations decisions for anti-trafficking programs.

Thank you for this opportunity to share our perspective. We would be happy to provide further information to expand upon these points.

Sincerely,

Catherine Chen
Chief Executive Officer