

INTRODUCTORY TRAINING FOR AIRPORT EMPLOYEES ON HOW TO RECOGNIZE AND RESPOND TO HUMAN TRAFFICKING



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OVERVIEW

At Businesses Ending Slavery & Trafficking (BEST), we acknowledge that human trafficking is a difficult and complex issue. You may already have some knowledge and questions about human trafficking, and you may have been affected by it directly or indirectly. For everyone, it can be an emotionally taxing issue that raises difficult questions. The purpose of this brief Training for Airport Employees is to empower you and to give you the tools to identify individuals who are being exploited and respond appropriately, whether that is in your airport workplace or elsewhere in your life.

This training is designed to introduce employees in every part of the aviation industry across North America to behavioural indicators of human trafficking. It contains specific information and guidance to prepare you to recognize and counter human trafficking at work. As you navigate through this content, please take the time to notice your thoughts and feelings, and take care of yourself.



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DEFINING HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Human trafficking is a crime that involves the use of force, fraud, or coercion to obtain labour or a commercial sex act. All commercial sex involving a minor is defined legally as human trafficking, regardless of whether force, fraud, or coercion is evident. The International Labour Organization estimates that 27.6 million people are exploited in forced labour around the world currently.¹

Human trafficking is also referred to as “trafficking in persons” and is defined by the United Nations in its *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons* as:

“(a) the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation.

Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs;



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(b) The consent of a victim of trafficking in persons to the intended exploitation set forth in subparagraph (a) of this article shall be irrelevant where any of the means set forth in subparagraph (a) have been used;

(c) The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of a child for the purpose of exploitation shall be considered “trafficking in persons” even if this does not involve any of the means set forth in subparagraph (a) of this article;

(d) “Child” shall mean any person under eighteen years of age.”²

There are two particularly important things for airport employees to note about the definition of human trafficking or trafficking in persons. First, transporting people for the purpose of exploitation is included, but human trafficking might not involve transportation. Second, the crime of human trafficking is different from the crime of human smuggling. While human smuggling violates a nation’s laws through the consensual movement of people across a border, human trafficking is a crime of exploitation in which a person’s human rights are violated by a trafficker.



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Human trafficking crimes are committed on a large scale globally, and also locally between people who know each other well. Whatever the context, human trafficking is a greed-driven crime in which traffickers profit from the exploitation of others. This causes immense harm to its victims. That is why it is so important for everyone who works in airports and all other publicly accessible businesses to be equipped to help stop it.



HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN AIRPORTS

Although human trafficking does not always involve movement, (for example, in labour trafficking a person can be coerced to work in their own hometown), traffickers often transport their victims. The International Organization on Migration reports that “almost 80% of journeys undertaken by victims trafficked internationally cross through official border points, such as airports and land border control points.”³

There are at least three reasons why transportation is common in human trafficking crimes:

- 1) People become more vulnerable and therefore are controlled more easily when they are in unfamiliar places;**
- 2) Traffickers move their victims to avoid detection;**
- 3) Traffickers transport victims to places where they will increase their profits through their exploitative actions.**



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Traffickers often use air travel to move their victims quickly from one place to another. To illustrate, in a 2018 survey of human trafficking survivors in the U.S., 38% of respondents said they travelled by plane at some point during their exploitation.⁴ This makes the aviation industry crucial to the fight against human trafficking, since airport employees can play a key role in recognizing and responding to potential situations of exploitation.



MYTHS AND FACTS ABOUT HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Human trafficking is a complex crime that is often misunderstood, sometimes because it has been misrepresented in popular media. Commonly held myths about human trafficking can prevent people from recognizing actual indicators when they see them. It is important to dispel myths like the following, in order to understand the crime more accurately.

Human trafficking doesn't happen to people here. Human trafficking exists in every community. Victims can be anyone from around the world or right next door: adults and children, citizens and non-citizens alike. Human trafficking can be found in local businesses and transportation hubs where trafficking victims are forced to move, work, and sleep every day.



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I don't know anyone that's trafficked. Since trafficking is often a “hidden” crime, someone you know might be suffering exploitation and needing help. Data from the U.S. National Human Trafficking Hotline between 2020-2022 evidenced that 42% of sex trafficking victims in the U.S. were trafficked by a member of their own families and 39% were recruited via an intimate partner or a marriage proposition.⁵

Human trafficking is always or usually a violent crime. The most pervasive myth about human trafficking is that it often involves kidnapping or physically forcing someone into exploitation. In reality, most traffickers use psychological means such as tricking, lying to, manipulating, or threatening victims into providing commercial sex or exploitative labour.⁶

[To learn more about myths regarding human trafficking see [Polaris Myths Page](#)]



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INDICATORS OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Victims of human trafficking are often overlooked because people do not know the behavioural signs of force, fraud, or coercion. When employees in the aviation industry are aware of the signs, they are taking part in creating a safer space for the travelling public and themselves.

It is important to know that personal characteristics, (e.g. race, national origin, gender, sexual orientation, age, ability, etc.), are not indicators of human trafficking. Force, fraud, and coercion are the actions traffickers use to compel victims into exploitation.

Correspondingly, indicators of human trafficking are behaviours related to those actions and their consequences for victims, such as signs of control, distress, injury, and confusion.

CONTROL: Often there is a high level of control—one party controlling a person or group of people by threatening them, isolating them, holding their travel documentation, or speaking for them. A controller, i.e. a trafficker, may trick someone by making promises that they do not plan to keep. You may notice an unusual power dynamic or ongoing surveillance by the controller, including control of their housing arrangement or movement.



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DISTRESS or INJURY: Victims may show signs of distress or fear. They might have a visible injury, such as bruising or a cut. They may not be allowed to make eye contact or communicate with you. You might notice they exhibit discomfort with their companions, appear malnourished or unusually fatigued. They may exhibit signs of trauma by becoming hostile, fleeing, or freezing up. When they answer questions, their responses may sound rehearsed.

CONFUSION: A victim may appear confused because they have been tricked or not received the pay they were promised. Sometimes a victim agrees to travel to a new location based on false promises. A victim may be unsure of where they are or where they are going. They may not know their travel companions, nor know who they will meet upon arrival.

SEX BUYING: Buying sex from a minor or from a person who is coerced into the sex trade is human trafficking. Indicators may include arranging to buy sex with a person, talking or joking about sex buying, or accessing websites to buy sex.



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BEHAVIOURAL INDICATORS SPECIFIC TO AIR TRAVEL⁷

- ▶ A passenger who does not know the person who purchased their ticket, how the ticket was purchased, who is picking them up, and/or who is travelling with them.
- ▶ Someone travelling on a one-way, last-minute, stand-by, or same-day booking paid by someone else in cash.
- ▶ Someone travelling with little or no money or personal items, e.g. no carry-on bag.
- ▶ A passenger who seems unaware of what items are in their carry-on or checked baggage.
- ▶ Someone not letting someone else consume food.
- ▶ A traveller who indicates little or no knowledge of their destination or who is meeting them.
- ▶ Someone wearing clothing inappropriate for the weather, or clothing used to conceal signs of abuse like wounds or bruises.
- ▶ Someone speaking for someone else.



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As you keep these indicators in mind, please remember that the presence of one indicator does not confirm human trafficking. Instead, there will typically be multiple indicators in a human trafficking situation. Evaluate any behavioural indicators you observe in relation to each other and the context of the situation.



HOW TO RESPOND TO POTENTIAL SIGNS OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING

As airport employees, you are on the frontlines of a transportation system that is used frequently by human traffickers and their victims. With a clear understanding of human trafficking, you can potentially be the one who assists someone to escape a life of exploitation.

If you notice indicators of human trafficking and the potential victim is alone or you can safely separate them from a controller, ask them calmly and gently, “Are you OK?” “Are you experiencing harm?” “Do you want me to call for help?”

If the person responds “yes” when you ask about calling for help, you can also ask “Do you want me to call the police?”



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If a potential trafficking victim wants you to contact local authorities, call 911. If a victim does not want you to call local authorities, give them the number of the National Human Trafficking Hotline of the country you are in:

- **Canada National Human Trafficking Hotline: 1-833-900-1010**
- **U.S. National Human Trafficking Hotline: 1-888-373-7888**
- **Mexico National Human Trafficking Hotline: 800-5533-000**

As airport employees, it is not your role to try to save someone against their will. Your responsibility is to make information and assistance available so that trafficked people can exit exploitation when and how they feel safe to do so. It is important to report any interaction you observe that you think might indicate human trafficking to your supervisor, and follow your airport's response protocol.

To repeat a key point stated above, it is vitally important not to confuse personal characteristics such as nationality, race, gender, or sexual orientation with indicators of human trafficking. Instead, look for behaviours that demonstrate or suggest control, abuse, and coercion. If you are not sure whether a particular situation is trafficking or not and want to talk through it with someone (assuming that it is not an emergency), and also for general questions related to human trafficking, you can call your country's National Human Trafficking Hotline.



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RECOMMENDATIONS & OPPORTUNITIES

Online Training

All employees in airports and other public-facing workplaces should know how to counter human trafficking, and this introductory Training for Airport Employees is a good start. To learn more, Businesses Ending Slavery and Trafficking (BEST) offers [Flights to Freedom](#), a 30-minute online course that is FREE for individuals. Flights to Freedom enables any airport employee to deepen their understanding of human trafficking and learn directly from human trafficking survivors as well as people who work at airports—making it practical, relatable, engaging, and memorable.

BEST offers airport leaders and other aviation sector employers who want their staff to be better equipped to counter human trafficking options that include live trainings, course customization, completion reports, Q&A sessions, train-the-trainer services, and more.



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Encourage Company-Wide Actions

Your employer can commit to combatting human trafficking in many ways. For instance, every employer should develop a multiprong strategy to prevent, deter, and interrupt human trafficking on its premises. In addition, employers can require training to be completed by all public-facing employees to recognize and respond to human trafficking. The more staff who are trained, the more likely that people who may be in danger are identified.

Employers can also display victim-addressed signs offering help in restrooms and other areas of the workplace. BEST can provide links to downloadable files for two such signs, headlined by the statements “You Are Not Alone” and “There Is A Way Out”. The images and messages on these signs were developed by survivors, and guide potential victims to seek support.



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ENDNOTES

- ¹International Labour Organization, Walk Free, and International Organization for Migration (2022), *Global Estimates of Modern Slavery: Forced Labour and Forced Marriage*. https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/%40ed_norm/%40ipec/documents/publication/wcms_854795.pdf
- ²United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2000), *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons*. <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/human-trafficking/protocol.html>
- ³International Organization for Migration (2018), *Most Victims Trafficked Internationally Cross Official Border Points*. <https://www.iom.int/news/iom-most-victims-trafficked-internationally-cross-official-border-points>
- ⁴Polaris (2018), *On-Ramps, Intersections, and Exit Routes: A Roadmap for Systems and Industries to Prevent and Disrupt Human Trafficking*. <https://polarisproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/A-Roadmap-for-Systems-and-Industries-to-Prevent-and-Disrupt-Human-Trafficking-Transportation-Industry.pdf>
- ⁵Polaris (2023), *Love and Trafficking*. <https://polarisproject.org/love-and-trafficking/>
- ⁶Polaris (2026), *Myths, Facts, and Statistics*. <https://polarisproject.org/myths-facts-and-statistics/>
- ⁷Aviation-specific indicators were selected and adapted from page 8 of U.S. Department of Transportation (2025), *Transportation Leaders Against Human Trafficking: Aviation Sector Counter-Trafficking Toolkit*, https://www.transportation.gov/sites/dot.gov/files/2025-04/DOT_TLAHT_Toolkit_Aviation_508c_English.pdf; and page 30 of Polaris (2018), *On-Ramps, Intersections, and Exit Routes: A Roadmap for Systems and Industries to Prevent and Disrupt Human Trafficking*. <https://polarisproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/A-Roadmap-for-Systems-and-Industries-to-Prevent-and-Disrupt-Human-Trafficking-Transportation-Industry.pdf>



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