

# ACTION GUIDE

## Trafficking Prevention for At-Risk Youth: A Youth Drop-in Center Option

Youth drop-in centers offer a critical service and point of contact for youth at-risk of human trafficking. They can offer a safe and comfortable space physically and emotionally, in addition to providing essential amenities such as showers or a hot meal. As a part of its Safety Net Expansion Initiative, part of the Strategic Initiative on Sex Trafficking, Polaris commissioned research to understand which characteristics and offerings help a drop-in center to succeed. The results of this research shared here can be used by existing and aspiring drop-in center leaders to improve and sustain their services to at-risk youth.



### Youth-Involvement in Design

- Involve youth in the design of a program or drop-in center. Young people have first-hand, or “lived” experience with youth-serving systems, how they work, and how they don’t work. This means they are well equipped to co-develop solutions that work best for meeting their needs.
- Including youth in the design of a center or program also helps them to build leadership and confidence skills.



### Location and Hours

- The ideal location for a youth drop-in center is an area that is safe, busy, and easily accessible by public transportation (where public transit is available).
- Alternate arrangements for transportation, such as reimbursement for rideshares or other private rides, should be made available if public transportation is not safe or not available.
- A 24/7 drop in center is ideal. As vulnerability and need can be higher at night, it’s important that youth have a place to go when they’re most vulnerable.



### Physical Structure and Facilities

- The facility should generally offer a warm and welcoming environment with spaces for youth to relax, including private spaces where youth can receive services such as counseling, legal assistance, or medical consultations.
- Access to essential hygiene facilities such as showers and laundry machines should be provided.
- A dining and food storage area should also be provided. A full kitchen is not always necessary, but a space to store, heat, and consume meals is essential.



## Services and Programs

- Any service or program offered in a drop-in center is most beneficial when it is routine. While sometimes interruptions are unavoidable, continuity in offerings is most helpful for youth.
- A holistic approach to service provision is important. Examples of the types of services most beneficial to youth can be legal assistance, counseling, comprehensive case management, information on housing aid, education, peer support, and vocational training.
- If service provision is not provided by the drop-in center itself, peer guidance networks with former at-risk youth who have navigated the available support systems can be beneficial.



## Staffing

- Staff should be diverse and represent the populations the center serves. For example, if the service population is Black LGBTQ+ youth, the center should be staffed by Black LGBTQ+ individuals. This creates stronger trust between youth and the staff.
- Staff, including volunteers, should have intense training on trauma-informed care and service provision, regardless of professional background or history.



## Service Audience

- When possible, centers should service either youth or adults, but not both. Additional segmentations in service audiences can be made, such as ages 12-14 and 14-17, as youth of different ages have different needs.
- Drop-in centers should also specialize their care to a certain gender identities, where possible, to further tailor their care and service options.



## Public Awareness

- Awareness raising for drop-in centers should balance physical safety with the need for advertisement. The physical location of the center should not be publicized widely.
- Partnership or engagement with other youth-focused community organizations or schools is one way to increase awareness of a drop-in center while minimizing safety risks.