



# **TRAFFICKING SURVIVORS RELIEF ACT (TSRA) TOOLKIT**

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## I. A Crucial Step Towards Healing: Criminal Record Relief for Trafficking Survivors

### Understanding Policy

Public policy serves as a critical roadmap for achieving societal goals. These policies, formulated through legislative and public participation processes, directly influence the quality of our air and water, the safety of our roads, and the effectiveness of our education systems. From environmental regulations that ensure clean air to social programs that provide a safety net, well-crafted public policy shapes the very fabric of our lives and livelihoods.

Effective public policy hinges on three key elements: A clear policy statement; successful implementation; and ongoing evaluation. The policy statement, outlining the who, what, when, where, and why, breathes life into the issue and solution. Following its creation comes the critical phase of securing its adoption. Advocacy groups and lobbyists play a crucial role here, working tirelessly to build public and legislative support. Once adopted, the policy's effectiveness is contingent on its implementation. This involves government agencies, the rule and regulatory processes, private entities working within established procedures, and the allocation of necessary resources. Finally, ongoing evaluation using relevant metrics and stakeholder feedback ensures the policy remains effective and responsive to changing needs.

Understanding how policy is created is the first step to advocating for changes that impact you and your community.

#### a. State Criminal Record Relief

Many trafficking survivors face the additional burden of a criminal record stemming from their exploitation. As [this report by Polaris](#) highlights, 90% of survivors with a criminal record report that it was somewhat or completely related to their trafficking experience. Fortunately, most states offer **criminal record relief mechanisms**, such as vacatur, expungement, or sealing, which can help survivors clear their records and move forward.

These mechanisms vary by state, with some offering more streamlined processes specifically designed for trafficking survivors. Ideally, the best relief options do not require lengthy proof of victimization or public admission of guilt, and they protect survivor confidentiality. Importantly, some records may not be directly related to trafficking. Survivors may have pre-existing records that contributed to their vulnerability or post-trafficking records stemming from trauma.

In such cases, exploring a [combination of available state record relief laws](#) (last updated March 2024) is recommended. Additionally, advocating for improved state laws that better address the needs of trafficking survivors is crucial for long-term progress. For the most up-to-date information on [state-specific relief mechanisms](#), consider visiting the resource page provided by [LawHelp.org](#).

By providing survivors with a path to clear their records, we can help them rebuild their lives and escape the shadow of their past exploitation.

## b. Federal Criminal Record Relief

Currently, there is no federal criminal record relief. This is an important issue and distinction since some survivors are federally criminalized as a direct result of their trafficking. This means that the actions that they were forced, defrauded, or coerced into were a violation of *federal* law and they were arrested and/or convicted for that conduct. Since there is currently no federal criminal record relief, the only way a person can get their federal records cleared is through a [presidential pardon](#).

Since this issue is ripe for a legislative solution, the ***Trafficking Survivors Relief Act of 2024*** was introduced earlier this year in both the U.S. House (H.R.7137) and Senate (S.4214). If enacted, this federal legislation would provide the first ever mechanism for criminalized survivors of human trafficking to clear their federal criminal records.

## II. **Articulating the Issue: Strategic Storytelling for Survivor Advocacy**

Effective survivor advocacy often leverages the power of personal narrative. Although sharing one's experience can be empowering, it can also be emotionally challenging. This approach prioritizes survivor well-being while maximizing the impact of the story.

### Prioritizing Self-Care and Boundaries

**Survivor-Centered Advocacy:** Survivors are encouraged to focus on the potential of their story to create positive change. This can include influencing policy or legislation, or promoting public awareness and empathy. Recognizing that sharing a story can be both empowering and re-traumatizing, this approach emphasizes prioritizing the survivor's mental and emotional health.

**Building Support Systems:** Survivor narratives are powerful because they represent lived experience and expertise. However, advocates are more than their experiences. We encourage survivors to seek support from other survivors or advocacy professionals for mentorship, feedback, and emotional support.

**Establishing Boundaries:** Survivors should feel empowered to define the level of detail they are comfortable sharing. This approach encourages establishing clear boundaries with listeners to ensure a safe and controlled narrative presentation.

### Crafting a Compelling Narrative

**Audience-Specific Messaging:** Tailor your story's content and delivery to resonate with the specific interests and understanding of the target audience.

**Impact-Driven Storytelling:** Focus on your story's potential to create positive change in policy, legislation, or public perception.

## Empowerment Through Sharing

**Survivor Expertise:** A survivor's lived experience is a valuable source of knowledge and holds significant power within advocacy efforts and beyond.

**Defining Identity:** Position your story as a powerful aspect of your identity, but not the sole defining factor.

This approach fosters a thoughtful and sensitive framework for survivor advocacy. It prioritizes well-being while recognizing the power of storytelling as a tool for positive social change.

## Using Data

Using data points to support your own lived experience can enhance a compelling narrative and help to explain that the challenges you have experienced are representative of those faced by a large number of survivors. After the National Survivor Study data was released, several survivors noted that the data helped to bring additional weight to issues they had been speaking about for years.

Data can also allow you to share challenges without going into more detail than you want to about your own experiences, and it allows the experiences you do share to bring context to the data. Storytelling paired with data-driven evidence may also help you appeal to different audiences and stakeholders.

For example, here are some key data points about criminal records that may be useful:

- Of the 457 survivors who completed the National Survivor Study survey, 42% reported having a criminal record
- Many of these survivors have criminal records as a direct result of their exploitation
- Most respondents with criminal records (90%) reported that all or some of their arrests were related to their exploitation
- Of the 174 respondents who reported having a criminal record, many reported criminal records prevented them from:
  - Getting or keeping a job - 69%
  - Getting training, education, or a professional license - 63%
  - Getting good housing - 59%
  - Maintaining custody of their children (of those with children) - 35%

Although survivors can pursue criminal records relief in some states, this option is not available in every state and is often expensive and inaccessible. Notably, **77% of respondents with a criminal record reported needing assistance removing or clearing their criminal records at some time after their exit from their trafficking situation.**

### III. Engaging Elected Officials

#### Political Landscape

Polaris is a nonpartisan organization, meaning that we are not politically biased, nor do we show favor to any political group. That being said, it's still important to understand the makeup of legislative and executive branches at any given time to know what policy priorities, in addition to funding, may be introduced or passed.

Each state's political landscape is unique. "All politics is local," and understanding politics and policy in your neighborhood, city, county, and state will help better prepare you for understanding federal politics.

At the federal level, we are currently in the 118th Congressional, Second Session (or second year) which runs from 2023 through 2024. A new two-year congressional session starts January 3rd of each odd-numbered year following an election. Therefore, January 3rd, 2025, will be the start of the 119th Congress (2025 - 2027).

- [The House of Representatives](#) is made up of 435 elected officials divided among 50 states based on their population. There are six non-voting members representing the District of Columbia and the five territories (Puerto Rico, the US Virgin Islands, Guam, American Samoa, and the Northern Mariana Islands). Currently, the [majority in the House is Republican, and there are four open seats](#).
- [The Senate](#) is made up of 100 elected officials, two from each state. Currently, the [majority in the Senate is Democratic, including four independents](#).

In order to pass legislation, the same bill must be passed through both chambers (the House and Senate) by majority vote, and then it goes to the President for signature into law. If the President vetoes the bill — or refuses to sign it into law — it then goes back to the House and Senate, who can override the President, but only with a two-thirds vote in both chambers. Some presidents like to exercise their veto powers more than others (see [Presidential Vetoes](#)), and sometimes they are overridden by Congress. It's all about a balance of power, which the current system strives to provide.

#### Who Are Your Elected Officials

[Here](#) you can find your Members of Congress, elected by your state to represent federal policy priorities in Washington, D.C. **You can search by your address or by your city/state.** Representatives serve in the U.S. House and are elected to two-year terms, and Senators serve in the U.S. Senate and are elected to six-year terms. There are currently no term limits for Members of Congress, so many members stay in office for a very long time. When you search (see Miami as an example [here](#)), you will see your Representatives/Senators along the right

side with a contact link. When you click the contact link, it will take you to a page that shows where all their offices are located.

**All Members of Congress have local in-state offices where you can schedule in-person meetings.**

a. Engagement with Electeds

*The Trafficking Survivors Relief Act (TSRA) of 2024* (H.R.7137 / S.4214) is a bipartisan effort, but it still needs more support from your Congress members. YOU can help garner support by contacting your elected officials and telling them why this bill is so important.

**In-person meetings:** This is the most effective and persuasive way to get your Members of Congress to hear your opinions. You can call or email their offices to schedule an appointment with them in your home state. Find their contact information [here](#).

**Phone calls:** Another great way to voice your support for the TSRA is by calling your Members' offices and asking them to pass the bill. Find their phone numbers [here](#).  
**[Example call script]**

**Letter writing:** Send an email to your Representatives and Senators! You can find their email addresses [here](#), or fill out [Polaris's Take Action form](#) to send an email to your Members of Congress. The form automatically identifies your Members and provides you with a pre-written letter that you can edit before sending.

#### **IV. Social Media: A Powerful Advocacy Tool**

Social media platforms offer a powerful tool for amplifying your voice and raising awareness about important issues such as the TSRA. These platforms can also connect you with like-minded individuals and organizations working towards similar goals.

##### Responsible Social Media Use

**Organizational Policies:** Be mindful of your organization's social media policies when posting on their behalf.

**Personal Safety:** Exercise caution when sharing personal information online to ensure your safety.

##### Amplifying Your Message

**Polaris Resources:** Polaris offers valuable resources to support your advocacy efforts. These include [pre-developed talking points and social media toolkits](#) with sample posts. Utilize these resources to streamline your message creation.

**Hashtags:** Employ relevant hashtags like #SupportTSRA and #CriminalRecordRelief to increase your post's visibility and connect with others interested in the cause.

**Twitterstorms:** Participate in coordinated social media campaigns, like Twitterstorms – posting a campaign message at the same date and time. These concentrated efforts can generate significant buzz and draw attention to pressing issues.

By utilizing these resources, you can effectively leverage social media to amplify your voice and contribute to positive social change. If you have any further questions, you are welcome to reach out to us at [policy@polarisproject.org](mailto:policy@polarisproject.org).



## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### Research/Reports

[National Survivor Study](#), Polaris (2023)

[Prioritizing Survivor-Centered State Policies: Improving Criminal Record Relief](#), Polaris (2023)

### Advocacy/Lobbying Resources

[Lobbying Guidelines for Public Charities](#), Independent Sector (2016)

[State Law Resources: Non Profit Lobbying](#), Alliance for Justice

[Survivor Storytelling](#), National Survivor Network (2023)