

# Exploring a Statewide Coalition Involved in Human Trafficking Policy Implementation

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October 2010

## Introduction

Human trafficking is a major problem in various states, including Illinois whose biggest city, Chicago, plays a great part in the phenomenon in the Midwest region. This city was identified by the FBI in 2003 as a hub of this modern slavery. It was also identified by the F.B.I. in 2005 as one of the 13 major locations of "high intensity child prostitution" in the U.S. A. (Tanagho, 2007). The Illinois Rescue and Restore Coalition was launched in June 2005, with the mission to raise awareness on the issue of human trafficking and to identify and serve victims of human trafficking in Illinois. This coalition became the spearhead of the State's efforts of implementation of the human trafficking policy. As of December 2008, the Coalition consisted of 115 member organizations including 96 non-profit organizations, 17 public agencies and two for-profit organizations. The non-profit member organizations include community health services agencies, social services organizations, ethnic associations, faith-based organizations and other non-governmental organizations across the State. The public agencies include the following major departments: the Illinois Department of Human Services, the Illinois State Police, the Illinois Department of Labor, the Illinois Department of Public Health, and the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (Chicago Bureau).

This study was designed to examine the Coalition's involvement in the Illinois State's policy responses to human trafficking. It explored first, the awareness of the member organizations of the problem of human trafficking in Illinois and the related policy responses; second, their commitment to help implement the human trafficking policy; third, their level of capacity to respond to human trafficking cases; and finally, their perceptions and recommendations about the Coalition's effectiveness.

## Methods

Member organizations' representatives in the Coalition, or their designated spokespersons regarding the area of human trafficking, were selected to participate in the study. Of the 115 member organizations, 14 could not be reached for reasons including being out of business, and not returning phone calls or replying to e-mails. Eleven from the 101 organizations contacted refused to participate in the study for issues including not having been involved in the coalition, not being aware of being members, and not having at that time anyone to be a spokesperson regarding the area of human trafficking. Ninety organizations identified their spokespersons for the study. The identified spokespersons were individually contacted by phone or e-mail, and recruited for the study. A survey and an interview were used to collect the data. The survey data were collected with a questionnaire mailed to the 90 organizations' representatives. Participants in the follow-up interview were selected from the survey respondents, on their indication in the survey responses that their agencies had experience of handling human trafficking cases, and that they were willing to take part in the interview. The survey was used to obtain information about: a) demographic and service areas of the member organizations; b) their awareness of the problem of human trafficking and the related policies; c) their involvement in the implementation of the trafficking policy, and d) their perceptions of the coalition's effectiveness. The interview was used to explore the following themes: a) types of trafficking cases organizations handled; b) policy adequacy and challenges for assistance services to trafficking victims; and c) perceptions and recommendations about the coalition's performances.

## Results

### Characteristics of the study participants

Seventy-three organizations' representatives (81.1 % response rate) participated in the survey. The categories of the 73 participating organizations in the study were as follows: 55 non-profits (75%), 16 public departments and agencies (22%), and two for-profit organizations (3%). Approximately 90 percent of the study participants were the leaders of their agencies or in positions of authority in their programs or departments including 20 participants (32%) holding the position of executive director in their

organizations, 22 (30%) in position of program directors, one sheriff, and one college dean. Eleven of the survey participants, including six women and five men, participated in the follow-up interview.

### **Awareness of the policy responses**

The survey findings show that over half of the respondents reported low awareness of both the federal and Illinois State human trafficking policies. Approximately one third of the respondents reported having no awareness of the trafficking policies, whereas less than five percent perceived having an expert level of knowledge of these policies. The major challenges to the implementation of the human trafficking policy in Illinois perceived by the survey respondents are as follows: difficulty for identifying human trafficking victims (64%), lack or limited financial support for trafficking-related activities (55%), limited political support to accompany the policy responses (53%), low community outreach (51%), limited interagency collaboration (40%), issue of commitment of member organizations to the statewide anti-trafficking coalition's work (40%). The follow-up interviews show that challenges for accessing resources related to benefits and services include: lack of housing/sheltering for trafficking victims, cumbersome access to services and benefits, lack of coordinated first response teams, and scanty information on referral and victims service resources. The survey findings show that the percentage of interagency collaboration between sister organizations inside the collaboration (45%) was almost similar to the percentage of collaboration member organizations had with other agencies outside the Coalition (43%).

### **Commitment of Member Organizations to Help Achieve the Coalition's Goals**

The survey findings show that the main motivating factors justifying organizations' coalition membership were: social justice (69%), mission of the Coalition (53%), and human trafficking as an area of agency's services (30%). In addition, the social mission of 61% of the agencies was reported as related to the area of human trafficking. The exploration of length of time in the Coalition for the period 2005-2008 reveal that the majority of the participating organizations were coalition members for over two years. The findings regarding the frequency of attendance to coalition meetings for the period 2005-2008 show that ten organizations (16%) participated in one meeting, ten others (16%) in two meetings, three (5%) in three meetings, and 18 agencies (28%) in more than three meetings of the Coalition. However, 23 member organizations (36%) attended no coalition meetings. The examination of the frequency of participation of member organizations in the events of the Illinois Rescue and Restore Campaign Outreach Day from 2005 to 2008 reveal that 18 organizations (28%) took part in one Outreach Day, whereas 13 agencies (20%) attended two of these events, nine organizations (14%) participated in three Outreach Day events. Yet, 25 member organizations (39%) were involved in none of these Outreach Day events. The interview findings reveal that very few coalition meetings were actually called, and little engagement of members was encouraged.

### **Capacity of Members to Respond to Human Trafficking Cases**

The survey findings show that 39 organizations (55%) participated in trafficking-related trainings. These organizations participated in an average of two trainings, primarily as trainees, and to a small extent as trainers or sponsors. Forty-seven agencies (75%) of the organizations in the study reported having done no work related to handling trafficking, whereas 16 organizations (25%) reported having experience of working with trafficking cases. Three broad types of trafficking-related services were provided by the 11 agencies participating in the interview: a) network and task force coordinating role; b) direct and indirect assistance services (i.e. social, legal, law enforcement and health services); and c) training and education services.

### **Perceptions about the Coalition's Effectiveness**

On a five-point scale ranging 0-4, with 0 = 'not at all' and 4 = 'successfully', survey respondents' perceptions of the Coalition's effectiveness were explored. Thirty survey respondents (57%) rated the Coalition's goal attainment as 2, whereas 14 respondents (26%) rated it as 1, 4 respondents (8%) rated it as 3, and four participants (8%) had the perception that the Coalition did not achieve anything. On a similar scale, 16 survey respondents (32%) rated the effectiveness of the Coalition's leadership as 1, whereas 17 respondents (34%) rated it as 2, and nine respondents (18%) rated it as 3. Five respondents (10%) had the perception that the Coalition's leadership was ineffective.

While seven of the 11 interview respondents described achievements or positive aspects of the Coalition, ten of them had far more to say about areas of improvement. The Coalition was viewed as having been effective in its efforts of awareness raising just in its first year of activities. The lack of visibility of the Coalition's leadership and its lack of vision were the most widely discussed issues through the interviews. Communication issues were the third most discussed weakness of the Coalition, whereas scarcity of meetings was perceived as a primary cause of member organizations' failure to be widely involved in the Coalition's activities.

The various suggestions from the interview for improving functioning of the Coalition could be classified into four major themes: 1) identification of a full-time leader for the Coalition with adequate executive power; 2) development of more effective strategies of awareness raising about human trafficking by prioritizing training of human services professionals, and giving more attention to the overlooked but yet rampant issue of domestic trafficking; finding ways to outreach to and involve organizations in regions outside Chicago; and reaching out to ethnic associations; 3) development of strategies for engaging member organizations in the Coalition's work by: creating opportunities for meetings of member organizations for networking, and interagency collaboration; and 4) member organizations should consider the Coalition as a great opportunity for outreach and networking.

## Discussion

An effective policy implementation is dependent on the commitment of member organizations to help achieve the policy goals. With more than two years of coalition membership for most of the organizations in this study, one would think that the participation in activities of the Coalition such as meeting attendance, and participation in outreach days would be substantial. Yet, as evidenced by the study findings, very few members attended the few activities of the Coalition. Reasons that could explain member's lack of engagement include the lack of information and updates related to human trafficking cases rescued, the absence of prosecution of trafficking cases, and human trafficking not being part of the mission of, or a priority for some organizations.

Considering that one of the main characteristics of a coalition of organizations is the development of interagency collaboration, a substantial level of interagency collaboration inside the Coalition was expected. Yet, as the study findings show, interagency collaboration initiatives between member organizations did not depend much on coalition membership. In addition, the closeness between the finding about member organizations whose social missions were linked to the area of human trafficking (61%) and the finding about member organizations' involvement in trainings (55%) implies that coalition membership did not play a decisive part in most agencies' involvement in the policy implementation.

The perceived low goal attainment of the coalition appears less due to issues of members' commitment or resources than to management issues in general, and especially a lack of a visible leadership in the Coalition. Considering the basic principle that any community coalition building is based on complementary coordination of resources to address a social problem (Butterfoss & Francisco, 2004), resources should not be considered a determining factor of the limited goal achievement of the coalition. The State of Illinois, the network builder for this policy implementation network, should be consistent in its coordinating role.

## Study Implications

This study has important implications not only for the Illinois Rescue and Restore Coalition, but also for other states. First, the study informs policymakers about the strengths and challenges of the coalition strategy in anti-trafficking policy responses. Second, the findings regarding the low level of awareness of the human trafficking policy responses among the study participants calls for more training for human services professionals across the Illinois State. Third, the substantial participation of member organizations in the study is a positive sign about most members' availability and interest to be actively involved in the Coalition's work. Fourth, the finding that the Coalition had little impact on the development of interagency collaboration among its members calls for opportunities for interagency cooperation and networking. Fifth, the effectiveness of any leadership for the Illinois Rescue and Restore Coalition would depend not only on member organizations' commitment to make things work, but also on a renewed political commitment. Therefore, this policy implementation network needs to take advantage not only of the diverse resources represented by its membership, but also of the federal and state governments' tangible and intangible support, to develop initiatives and opportunities for interagency cooperation toward an effective involvement in the implementation of the trafficking policies in the State. Overall, far from undermining the commendable effort of the State of Illinois through the establishment of this coalition, this study could help both the leadership and membership become better aware of the strengths and areas of improvement in this policy implementation network for the sake of victims of human trafficking.

Limitations to this study include the following: first, it cannot be claimed that responses given by study participants accurately reflect the positions of their agencies on the social policy issue explored; and second, generalization of the findings from the interview with member organizations with experiences of handling trafficking cases cannot be drawn about all the coalition members. By exploring the use of coalition strategy in the field of human trafficking, this research calls for more knowledge building about the impact of coalitions in the process of human trafficking policy implementation. The study has shown that collecting data from organizations with experiences of handling human trafficking cases can help construct better understanding of strategies and approaches to develop victim-focused programs. Research subsequent to this study can focus on comparing members of an anti-trafficking coalition with non-members; or comparing the outcomes of the human trafficking policy implementation in the State of Illinois with other states without any statewide coalitions.

Note: This research brief is based on Hounmenou's (2009) doctoral dissertation titled *"The Illinois Rescue and Restore Coalition's Awareness of and Involvement with Human Trafficking"*