Transcript for Podcast 2

Look Around You: Identifying Young People with Disabilities who may be Trafficked

MARGARET POTKAY: We would like to advise our listeners that this podcast discusses topics that include human trafficking, sexual assault and domestic violence. Though we do not discuss graphic details, listener discretion is advised.

Greetings, and welcome to the Trafficking of Youth with Disabilities Education and Outreach Project podcast. Thank you for joining us. The purpose of this podcast is to raise awareness about the reality of trafficking of youth with disabilities. We talk about what trafficking is, risk factors for youth with disabilities, and how providers and the disability community can support survivors.

This podcast was produced and organized by the International Organization for Adolescents and the National Human Trafficking and Disabilities Working Group. I am your host, Margaret Potkay, project consultant with IOFA. So welcome to podcast two, titled, Look Around You - Identifying young people with disabilities who may be trafficked.

Today we will be speaking with experts from a variety of disciplines, working at the intersection of human trafficking and

disabilities, with the goal to help increase the number of young persons with disabilities that are identified and referred for services. Collectively our guests' experience covers anti-trafficking, trauma, disability, advocacy, and law enforcement.

They came to understand that youth with disabilities are at greater risk of trafficking, and are now working together to improve services for survivors of trafficking with disabilities. They will share their experiences, insights and suggestions on what is needed, moving forward, to ensure that youth survivors of trafficking with disabilities are supported.

Today we are interviewing two multidisciplinary experts working at the intersection of human trafficking and disabilities. I'd like to welcome to the show Susan Kahan and Melanie Cross. Our episode today will be a two-part series. So first I'm going to have Melanie Cross introduce herself and her work. Thank you for joining us today. ,

MELANIE CROSS: Hello, and again, good day. My name is Melanie Cross. I am a registered nurse and my work has been in educating health care providers about human trafficking. I came to this work when I was invited to a concert, and I knew it was something for kids. And I didn't understand or know that it was about human trafficking.

And the evening and the co-founders of this nonprofit, ZOE International, spoke about human trafficking and their work in rescuing children and children that are at risk, and I was just virtually sickened. I felt sick to know this was happening, and under our watch, and how could that even be? And my first question was, where are the nurses?

Because whatever type of trafficking you're talking about, there are no protections. Young, old, male, female. Where are the nurses? Because these are people who are going to get hurt. And so that question drove me back to graduate school, where I worked on completing a Doctor of Nursing Practice, with a thesis of educating health care providers about how to identify and care for victims of human trafficking.

Additionally, in my background, since high school I have always tuned in to work with people with special needs. And I've been a clinical coordinator for Special Olympics International, where we do health screenings out in the field for individuals with disabilities. I have worked on a number of nonprofits, including long periods of employment with people with special needs. So both of these populations are populations that I care for and work with.

MARGARET POTKAY: Wonderful. Well, thank you for your work in the field and absolutely your contribution, and thank you for having your voice here to help educate and inspire us to have a

discussion today. I'd like to start the interview by asking if you believe that youth with disabilities are at risk of, or greater risk, of being targeted by traffickers?

MELANIE CROSS: I believe that they are the greater risk of being targeted by traffickers. And this could be evidenced not only in places where I served and individuals who I have known, but also with providers. An example that comes to mind is a nurse that I worked with for almost 20 years, and she herself has a sibling with a disability. And when I told her that my work was with youth with disabilities who are at risk of, and who have been trafficked, she gasped and she said, it happens to them too?

MARGARET POTKAY: Right. It's always a surprise.

MELANIE CROSS: It's a big surprise, so we have to start with an awareness and then we can move into education. But if you would think for a moment about individuals with disabilities, if they have some sort of a communication barrier, that puts them at even greater risk. Because even people who can communicate have a very difficult time, or maybe don't even-- aren't even able to understand that they're a victim of human trafficking.

So often people with disabilities, they just can't understand it. They're very, very easily wooed. They want very much to be like everybody else, so they want a job and they want to be loved. And those two vulnerabilities, put together with a lack of

programs, and lack of infrastructure, and the lack of a society that really cares about these individuals, puts them at the greatest risk.

MARGARET POTKAY: Of course, and that is what we're trying to do today, and with this project, is to start sparking that awareness. And in your experience with that risk, could you describe some of the unique ways that traffickers might target youth with disabilities?

MELANIE CROSS: Well, one way that has really come to mind, for my doctor nursing practice, I worked at the VIP clinic, which is the Victim Intervention helpline in downtown Los Angeles, where I got to see 28,000 to 30,000 victims of violence a year. And I worked with a pediatric nurse practitioner, and we did all the forensic exams of youth who have been abused in one way or another.

So between that and between the people that I have known, virtually some of them for even 20 plus years, they have ended up-- I've known them their whole lives-- and they've ended up as a victim of human trafficking. In this area where I really see a big hole is is the internet and the way that we communicate. For example, if someone stutters and can't speak, they can go online. And even if they don't spell well, they can get out a word without that stuttering.

And so that's where I've seen people easily victimized. And at the VIP clinic, all of the kids that we met-- I wish I would have done some sort of a study on it, because I could say virtually all of them-- had some sort of an Instagram mommy, daddy, aunt, uncle, somebody, an outside adult, who was talking to them, that the people who was supposed to be caring for them, were unaware of.

MARGARET POTKAY: Right

MELANIE CROSS: So, one of the young women that I helped to recover from trafficking, I helped to-- she had to go to a locked facility because she was just, she was just so vulnerable and it's just such a huge risk. And in there, there was a psychiatrist who put it very well to her. He said, the internet is like a knife. You can use it to butter toast, or you could use it to hurt someone.

And he did a visual with that, so that she could see that and understand that. And I thought that was a beautiful explanation of what is out there.

MARGARET POTKAY: That is so well stated, and I was going to inquire and ask how did the traffickers recruit youth with disabilities? And that's a very important and essential topic today to bring up, is with the internet use today, certainly.

MELANIE CROSS: Right, and there's Facebook and then there's Instagram, you know, and there's Instagram, and even on Facebook, there's Messenger. So as fast as someone figures that out, there's another way to get around it. And I work also with the LA Regional Human Trafficking Task Force and one of the detectives that I have presented on a number of occasions together, and he is really working on the dark net.

Because the dark net, there's so much out there, and our youth just, nobody is, and no one really is paying attention to them. As you walk around you'll see that no one really is paying attention to them. And if they have a phone, and most of them do, down it's so easy for them to find somebody who will pay attention to them.

MARGARET POTKAY: So in the end it goes back to how you explained and stated, persons with disabilities, youth with disabilities, everybody, we are all the same. And we want the same things, which is to be loved, and have a livelihood. So it definitely puts anyone at risk, really.

MELANIE CROSS: And they especially, they'll do anything for a job or a significant other. It's their constant conversation. I mean, I've been [INAUDIBLE] I've been on [INAUDIBLE], I've done dances, you know, weekend athletic events, and that is what they want. Which is what we all want, but they just it more, because they don't have it.

MARGARET POTKAY: Certainly, certainly. So, would you say, so we've talked a little bit about the internet and how traffickers might use that means to recruit youth with disabilities. Do you have any other thoughts on how traffickers recruit youth with disabilities?

MELANIE CROSS: I know that usually they'll collect in different places, and so that's a really easy place to just work your way into. Like here, in my valley, there's a youth center that has got like a pool and a skate park. And there's a room where they all gather. And I myself have just ridden my bike over there and implanted myself in the center of a circle. It's super easy to do.

MARGARET POTKAY: OK, thank you. And in terms of the process. Could you talk a little bit about what it means to groom a youth in that way, right? So when a youth, or a youth with disability is identified by a trafficker, could you give me an example and talk to me a little bit about what grooming is?

MELANIE CROSS: Oh, it's pretty easy. A couple of examples of people that I know that have been groomed, one was a woman who just hung out at the mall. That's another great place to find people with disabilities. And she would go up to someone who looked vulnerable, looked like she was accessible, and she would say, oh people think you have a disability, but I know you don't. I think you can do this and this. Coercing them by giving them the false hope that they could have a job, that they could have a life,

or they could get away from whatever restraints they feel are holding them back at home.

And the second big one is, I love you. Nobody else loves you. I love you.

MARGARET POTKAY: So Melanie, that certainly sounds of coercion. I would like to ask you if there is a particular case in which you can describe this kind of incident.

MELANIE CROSS: Thinking of one case had a sister who looked and looked and looked for her. And her sister found her through an Instagram trail. And she had crossed state lines. And found her and went and picked her up, even though law enforcement was involved and they didn't know what to do, and they weren't very helpful. This young woman is out of state too, a Southern state, but we were able to find law enforcement here to have a conversation with them, and help them to understand this was a youth who was in her mid-20s, and she was conserved. So there was a way to go and pick her up. And it wasn't, it wasn't easy.

MARGARET POTKAY: Right.

MELANIE CROSS: Our Director of Regional Center, which, that's the agency that provides services for this population, she told me that she knows of youth who regularly go and traffic themselves

to earn money and then, they eventually come back. I think a lot of times it is for the money.

MARGARET POTKAY: Right. And in this process, of course, there has to be an identification of trafficking. In your experience, in terms of youth with disabilities, in your experience, are trafficked youth with disabilities being identified as trafficked? And how are they currently being identified?

MELANIE CROSS: Even when they are identified, my experience has been, that they are such poor witnesses, that the cases don't get prosecuted.

MARGARET POTKAY: So there is a challenge of actually following through, on the prosecution side as well.

MELANIE CROSS: Absolutely.

MARGARET POTKAY: And how can we improve our efforts to recognize when a youth with disabilities is being groomed or trafficked?

MELANIE CROSS: I think the best thing to do is to try and know the youth. To try and find other people, similar to you, who care about these youth, and to build small nonprofits that know these youth. And then, one of the best resources is healtrafficking.org that's one of the virtual places for professionals to gather and share real research, and what is happening, and who's doing

what, and HEAL stands for Health, Education, Advocacy and Linkage.

So there's a space for everybody in there and it is a free nonprofit and their research focused on affordable, and things that you can use and in there, HEAL trafficking have developed a protocol for health care, which could be used anywhere, because it's a template. And the template starts with knowing your resources. So know your community. You need to know who you can call. That's one of the first things you need to know.

MARGARET POTKAY: Great. And that leads me to my next question. If you suspect someone is being trafficked, what is the process or steps that providers could take?

MELANIE CROSS: If you have not built your resources and you don't have a network, then you need to call this human trafficking hotline. And they will network you with the closest agency. So that's 888-3737-888. And I think everyone should have that in their cell.

MARGARET POTKAY: Thank you, thank you so much. I really appreciate, we appreciate having you on the episode today and bringing in all this very valuable, tangible, thought-provoking information. And we really hope that we can spark a conversation about the intersection of youth with disabilities and youth trafficking.

I'd like to just to finish off the interview to ask if there is anything else we haven't discussed that you would like us to know or anything that you feel pertinent to share?

MELANIE CROSS: I just really believe that together we can. We need the education and then we really need to link arms and build a network, community, the community, where there's safe spaces for all people. And I think that together we can.

MARGARET POTKAY: I fully believe it. And absolutely we hope that this project will help spark a conversation that will help us move towards the awareness, and the work, and the education that can bring a more equitable society, and happiness for everybody. So thank you so much for joining us today and for your very valuable work in the field. Thank you, Melanie.

MELANIE CROSS: You're very welcome.

MARGARET POTKAY: So now we've had the opportunity to learn from several experts who work with youth trafficking survivors with disabilities about how traffickers target, groom, and control youth with disabilities. And how to respond to suspicions of trafficking. Now we will talk to Susan Kahan, an expert in disability advocacy, about how services can best be accessible and inclusive for youth survivors with disabilities.

Welcome to the show, Susan Kahan. Thank you for being with us today. I would love to have you introduce yourself to our listeners.

SUSAN KAHAN: Sure. My name is Susan Kahan. I work at the University of Illinois in Chicago, at the Institute on Disability and Human Development. I'm a therapist at the clinic here. Our institute is the University Center of Excellence in Developmental Disability for the State of Illinois, which means that we provide a lot of services and we have an academic center, all addressing issues related to developmental disability.

And in that context we also have our clinic, where we provide mental health support, therapeutic services, and diagnostics.

MARGARET POTKAY: Wonderful. Thank you so much for joining us on the podcast today. We very much value your experience and time. We've learned from several experts who work with youth trafficking survivors with disabilities, about how traffickers target, groom, and control, youth with disabilities. And how to respond to suspicions of trafficking. So now I'm going to ask Susan Kahan a few questions, an expert in disability advocacy, about how services can best be accessible and inclusive for youth survivors with disabilities.

So Susan, how do you find resources or referrals for a trafficked youth with disabilities?

SUSAN KAHAN: So the primary referrals that I get come through the Chicago Children's Advocacy Center. The Children's Advocacy Centers are the agencies throughout the country that coordinate investigation of child sexual abuse cases, including youth who are trafficked. Those cases that the advocacy centers coordinate services, including the forensic interviewing, the police department investigators, child protective services investigators, but they often also include mental health support and health care support for children who have been, who have experienced abuse.

And so incorporated into that group are the youth who have been trafficked. In addition to providing some services themselves, they'll refer those cases out to trauma agencies for support. And they'll also often coordinate other services that the individual might need. So when they have youth coming through with disabilities, the Advocacy Centers will look for disability-friendly agencies to provide the kinds of services that might support that person going forward.

MARGARET POTKAY: Thank you, and can you just tell me what does it mean to be a disability-inclusive and accessible organization?

SUSAN KAHAN: What we hope is that agencies have some kind of foundational experience, or knowledge, or understanding, of working with somebody with a disability. Disability can be a

physical disability, a sensory disability, like blindness or deafness, or it can be an intellectual disability, a developmental disability, including autism. Each of those are covered under the umbrella of disability.

And for a place to be disability-friendly, we hope that they have had some experience or some foundational knowledge, so that their facilities are accessible. For example, wheelchair accessible, if somebody is using a wheelchair or has other mobility issues that they have some understanding of the different kinds of, the different ways that people might learn, or might understand. So for example, somebody with autism might do best if you're trying to work with them, for example on mental health, or even on life skills, if they're presented with visual supports.

Somebody with intellectual disability who can't read, you'd want to make sure that whatever kind of support or care you're providing them, is supported either verbally or through pictures, so that the information is accessible to people, that the facilities are accessible to people. Oftentimes agencies don't necessarily have that kind of background when we call or when we reach out to them. And that's understandable. Disability is not typically taught in schools for mental health counseling, or in social work programs.

Very little about disability is taught, actually, even in the health care community. In those cases, to me, what makes somebody

disability-friendly, is their ability to be open to consultation and support from an agency like mine. Where we could provide some training, we could provide some basic support, not only for the individual, but for the staff.

For example, I do this with the Chicago Children's Advocacy Center, where every other week, I spent an hour and a half over there, just providing consultation to their investigators, their forensic interviewers, or their mental health staff, their family advocates. So that if they have questions that come up, I'm available to answer them. I can help them develop visual support, or I can help them think about the best ways to communicate with somebody who might have communication challenges.

I think that the key is being open to learning. Being open to cross-training, really, with the disability community. And every State will have places, agencies, that would be able to provide that kind of support. Oftentimes it's going to take a little, a few phone calls to find out, but I think it's out there.

MARGARET POTKAY: OK. And could you tell me how would one go about finding such inclusive organizations?

SUSAN KAHAN: In most states what you will have is-- I believe in every state you'll have-- something called a Center for Independent Living. Those are agencies that are able to provide, that provide all kinds of support for people with disabilities,

including support around accessibility, support around life skills, oftentimes they have support groups and other groups that provide training or support for individuals with disability.

But those agencies are staffed with experts in the field. And in my experience, they're very open to the idea of reaching out to community providers and providing the kind of training or support that those groups might need in order to become part of a circle of referral supports available to people with disabilities. The other place that might be a very good referral source would be a center like the Institute here at UIC.

They are called UCEDDs-- University Centers of Excellence on Development Disability. Some of them are clinic-based, some of them are academic-based, they are all at universities. But they are often a very, very good referral source for training and consultation on issues related to disability.

MARGARET POTKAY: OK, wonderful. Thank you so much for that very helpful information. And can I also ask, where can providers go for support in order to create a more disability-friendly and inclusive service environment themselves?

SUSAN KAHAN: I think the key for providers is to reach out to their local disability agencies. Like the UCEDDs or the Centers for Independent Living. And I think that that's where you're going to find some really good experts, people who, their whole job is to

support individuals with disability. And the best way to support individuals with disability is to support the community that they are part of.

And to the extent that we're working with youth who have been trafficked, the community that they're part of are the agencies that are helping them. And those agencies, in my experience, those agencies are disability-friendly to the extent that they are always open to finding whatever is best. Whatever the needs, meeting the needs of those youth.

And so it's never been a struggle for me to have the agencies who are working with youth who have been trafficked, or youth who have experienced other kinds of trauma, it's never been a hard sell to get them to accept some training. Or, conversely, for them to support me in being able to provide the best trauma informed services that I can. Really one thing I've always appreciated, at least here in Chicago, is the openness of the two communities to work together to support.

MARGARET POTKAY: Certainly we do need more collaboration. And you did mention some cross-cultural trainings. Have you been involved in them, or could you tell me a little bit about what they look like?

SUSAN KAHAN: Oh, sure. One example is the cross-training that I've done, and the cross-consultation that I've done with the

Chicago Children's Advocacy Center, for a long time I was taking referrals from them, from some of their clients who had been abused, who also had disabilities. And our clinic did not have a lot of expertise in that area, and I was able to get consultation and-- case consultation and supervision, actually-- from the mental health people at the Chicago Children's Advocacy Center.

We also have at the Advocacy Center something called the coalition against sexual abuse of children, which is a coalition of trauma agencies, community mental health providers, and disability agencies, working together to expand the capacity in the community to support children who have experienced any kind of sexual abuse, including trafficking. Through that organization I've done training on working with children with disabilities for many of the trauma providers in our community.

And it's been, it's been really a good experience. I think the key is that, like every community mental health agency, there tends to be a lot of turnover, so whatever efforts need to be made to make sure that training and consultation is made available on something of a continuing basis, is most helpful.

MARGARET POTKAY: Thank you. And one question just-- how do you ensure the referral agency is disability-friendly and inclusive? Meaning how would one ensure, or know, that their agency is disability-friendly and inclusive?

SUSAN KAHAN: Do you mean that the agency, the individual, is already--?

MARGARET POTKAY: Is being referred to, if you are referring to an agency, referring them to an agency, how do you ensure the referral agency is disability-friendly and inclusive?

SUSAN KAHAN: What would be most important is asking questions upfront, and I'd want to assess the comfort level that that agency has. Their openness to working with somebody with a disability of whatever kind. That they are accessible. If I have somebody with a mobility issue, if they are able to access translators, for example, if somebody is deaf, that they, what I'm not getting from them in the initial calls are, we don't work with people like that.

Sometimes we get exactly that response and it's very disheartening when it happens. But once I get that response. I'm not going to pursue that agency further because they're already giving me a signal that says, this is not an agency that's inclusive. I don't think you can always have an expectation that a place is already going to have the kind of experience or expertise that you're looking for.

Because what we find is that that's not common. That's not necessarily common. What we are looking for is an agency that's willing to work with us. Just work with me. Be open, be

accepting. I'll help, I'm always happy to help. If you have questions, let me answer them. I'll come over there and do a training. I'll work with your staff.

What I need to know is that you're open to that, that you're interested to that, and that you're willing to see this group of youths as much in need as any other youth. And that you're willing to work as hard to find this person the services that they need, to the same extent that you're willing to find other people the services that they need. Disability is not, people with disabilities, it's not a different species, it's not a different culture, necessarily-- there are some unique disability cultures-- but what it is are kids in need.

And we can do that. We can do that. And what I found is without a whole lot of work on anybody's part, a willingness to reach out for help, and a willingness to support agencies, we get a lot done. And that we have opened up a lot more capacity in our community mental health agencies by just simply saying to them, let us help. Let us provide you some training. Let us take your phone calls when you have questions.

But please, maintain these kids in your program. They don't all have to come here. I can't possibly see them all, that's OK. You maintain them there and I'll help.

MARGARET POTKAY: That's wonderful. Well, thank you so much for all the information and feedback and I'll just ask the last question for the interview. Could you just tell me if there's anything that we missed or anything extra that you would like to share with the audience?

SUSAN KAHAN: No, I think for me the most important message is the real importance of cross-training, cross-consultation and cross-support between the trauma world and the disability world, so that we can provide the kinds of services and support, that we can find the resources that these kids need by helping each other.

I think traditionally the two worlds have worked in silos, and it turns out that it's not hard to break down those walls. That a little support, a little training, and the offer of some kind of ongoing consultation, goes a long way.

MARGARET POTKAY: Of course. It goes a long way and certainly we hope that projects like this one can help us collaborate, intersect, understand better, how we can provide the best services. So thank you again for your time, your valued expertise and insight today. We appreciate your time very much.

SUSAN KAHAN: No problem. I appreciate your interest in the topic, I think it's so important.

MARGARET POTKAY: Thank you for listening to our podcast. If you have questions and would like to contact us, please email us at info@iofa.org. You can learn more about IOFA and contact us at our website www.iofa.org. You can learn more about the National Human Trafficking and Disabilities Working Group, NHTDWG, at iofa.org/national trafficking disabilities working group and find additional resources on the intersection of human trafficking and youth with disabilities.

If you are concerned that someone you care about is at risk of, or being trafficked, you can get help at the National Human Trafficking Hotline at 888-3737-888, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Text 233733 or live chat with an advocate at their website, https//humantraf fickinghotline.org.

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