ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSIONS

# Exploring Financial Supports for Survivors of Human Trafficking

Victim Services Toronto x Reclaim

Summary Report | Hosted by **Victim Services Toronto** | December 2024

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

Human trafficking (HT) survivors in Canada face significant barriers to achieving financial stability. The fraudulent and coerced debt that survivors often find themselves with, exacerbate these challenges, worsening survivors' ability to access basic necessities and opportunities such as housing, education and employment. This significantly hinders survivors' ability to rebuild their lives which impacts individuals and beyond including an unnecessary drain on Canada's economy.

Victim Service Toronto (VST)'s Reclaim program supports Canadian survivors of human trafficking by advocating to remove coercive debt from their names and records, empowering them to rebuild their financial lives. In December 2024, VST hosted two virtual roundtables that brought together more than 40 stakeholders representing varied sectors who are implicated in the issue of coercive and fraudulent debts for survivors of human trafficking including financial institutions, credit bureaus, government agencies, victim services, and other survivor-serving organizations as well as a survivor of human trafficking and Reclaim client. The roundtables provided a space for frank discussions and collaboration through sharing about best practices, challenges and beginning to explore cooperative opportunities to catalyze positive impact through Reclaim.

The following report is a summary of both of these roundtables.

Thank You

**We extend a big thank you to representatives from each of the following organizations for their participation and generosity in these roundtable discussions.**

BMO

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

CAPITAL ONE CANADA

CAVAC QUEBEC

CIBC

CLIENT SURVIVOR

CPA CANADA

DESJARDINS

EQUIFAX

INTERVAL HOUSE

MAXWELL CONSULTING

ONTARIO MINISTRY OF CHILDREN COMMUNITY AND SOCIAL SERVICES

ONTARIO MINISTRY OF FINANCE

ONTARIO MINISTRY OF PUBLIC AND BUSINESS SERVICE DELIVERY

ONTARIO MINISTRY OF THE ATTORNEY GENERAL

RBC

TD

TELUS

THE CANADIAN CENTRE TO END HUMAN TRAFFICKING

TRANSUNION

# SUMMARY REPORT:

## Key Themes

### 1. Financial System Barriers

- **Trauma-Informed Support Gaps:** Survivors often encounter financial systems that feel overwhelming and/or retraumatizing. Training financial institution staff in trauma-informed practices is essential to create supportive environments.
- **Services Aren't Survivor-Informed:** Survivors may experience trauma-related fear throughout interactions with financial institutions i.e., when visiting financial institutions in-person or in receiving ongoing calls from creditors. This pattern presents significant barriers including to identity verification and access to services.
- **Behavioral Finance Patterns:** Exploitation frequently shapes survivors' financial behaviors. One outcome is addressing immediate financial needs in the absence of long-term planning. Supporting survivors in reframing financial decision-making is vital for fostering financial independence.

> *"As much as removing debt is necessary—so is financial empowerment and helping a survivor build a new life."* —SURVIVOR OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING

- **Limited Awareness and Accessibility:** Banking products and services for survivors are rare or inconsistent across regions and institutions. More standardized, survivor specific products and services – informed by individuals with lived experience - are needed to improve relevance, awareness and access.
- **Regulatory Hurdles:** Survivors face unique challenges accessing banking products and services. Barriers such as inflexible identification requirements and the inability of frontline bank staff to share reasons for service denials exacerbate financial exclusion.

### 2. Current Best Practices

- **Credit-Building Tools:** Low-limit credit cards and similar tools help survivors access essentials, rebuild credit and regain financial confidence. However, these resources are not widely available.
- **Predictability in Debt Resolution:** Standardized processes for identifying, investigating and eliminating coerced debt, including clear timelines, reduces re-traumatization and fosters financial stability.
- **Financial Literacy Skill Building:** Existing financial literacy training for survivors of human trafficking (e.g., The Canadian Centre to End Human Trafficking with Prosper Canada partnership) is effective in helping survivors to rebuild their credit and foster financial empowerment. Additional educational programs are required.

> *"I'd like to see the development of specialized tools that financial institutions and other organizations could use to support true financial recovery from the inside out. For example, a trauma-informed services delivery approach and best practice principles, a suite of specialized products and ongoing financial advice on rebuilding for the future."* —PARTICIPANT, ANTI-HUMAN TRAFFICKING EXPERT

## 3. Opportunities

- **Engaging Survivors in Discussions:** Facilitate discussions, peer learning and intentional collaboration, always incorporating survivor voices, to drive impact and positive change at the individual, organizational and systems levels.
- **Upskill, Cross-Train, Stakeholders:** Provide practical, trauma-informed training to all individuals across disparate sectors who are implicated in the intersectionality between financial coercion, debt and human trafficking.
- **Create Customized Services and Products for Survivors of Human Trafficking:** Customize existing services and products specifically for survivors of human trafficking including financial literacy educational programs.

> *"What appears to be clear here is the need for a cross-sector approach to work towards solutions."* —PARTICIPANT, CANADIAN BANKERS ASSOCIATION

- **Addressing Bankruptcy Options:** Educate survivors and their advocates on the short and long-term implications of bankruptcy, particularly considering new legislation such as Ontario's Bill 41 and anticipated Quebec legislation.
- **Strengthening Multi-Sector National Collaboration:** All roundtable participants emphasized the value of multi-stakeholder collaborations to improve financial support for survivors of human trafficking. Opportunities for peer-to-peer sharing and multi-sector collaboration is necessary to address this complex issue.

## Next Steps:

**Victim Services Toronto will focus on the following three priorities to build on these inaugural roundtable discussions:**

1. Evolving and expanding the Reclaim program to integrate relevant opportunities.
2. Addressing opportunities through the development of new products and services through new and enhanced partnerships.
3. Facilitating more opportunities for multi-sector collaboration and sharing, ensuring participation of survivor advisors.

*We look forward to working with you.*

## About Reclaim:

Acquired by Victim Services Toronto (VST) in 2022, Reclaim supports Canadian survivors of human trafficking by removing coercive debt from their names and records. VST rebuilt Reclaim from the ground up to streamline processes for working with creditors and clients. Our partnerships with the Canadian Bankers Association, Equifax, Transunion creditors, and political leaders mean coercive debt is less of a burden for those exiting human trafficking. Our client-centred process ensures victims of human trafficking aren't revictimized by continually retelling their stories to strangers.

x Reclaim

## About Victim Services Toronto:

Victim Services Toronto is a registered charity that provides trauma-informed support and advocacy in the moment for any person in Toronto who has experienced crime or sudden tragedy. We also work to prevent violence through community engagement.

Our Vision is to create a thriving community where people are safe, supported and empowered.

Long after police file reports, crime victims can struggle with physical, emotional, social, legal, and financial impacts for months or years.

Victim Services Toronto is evolving the system to center crime victims to ensure they get the help they need.

We take a people-centered approach by showing up, listening, and preventing violence to transform victims into survivors.

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Victim Services Toronto

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