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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Working toward a better future for exploited youth

Youth who are sexually exploited, trafficked or at risk of being exploited will have hope for a better future with improved access to education, health care, child protection, emergency shelter and housing. They also will benefit from an improved partnership between victim and survivor service providers and law enforcement.

During Human Trafficking Awareness Month in January, the Hennepin County Safe Harbor Protocol Team is sharing a set of new protocols to provide culturally inclusive and trauma-informed support. The protocols include practices, procedures, and policies to increase cross-collaboration and reduce barriers in the system that serves youth who have been exploited or who are at-risk.

"This is an opportunity for systems and communities to work together in an informed manner to help keep young people safe and thriving throughout Hennepin County," said CeMarr Peterson, The Link's Safe Harbor division director. "We recognize that barriers exist within systems and programs that are ultimately rooted in white supremacy and racism, and that there are gaps in awareness about the sexual exploitation of youth and minors. This is a push to ensure young people know they have a right to freely access basic needs, advocacy and holistic, culturally specific services, no matter the access point."

Listening to youth voices

During a two-year process, the team grounded the work of developing the protocols by amplifying the voices of youth survivors and engaging cultural communities that are overrepresented among the victims and survivors of sex trafficking in Hennepin County, particularly Black, Native American and LGBTQ+ residents.

Youth experiencing poverty, homelessness or childhood sexual abuse, particularly those who identify as Black, Indigenous and LGBTQ+, are among the most targeted populations for exploitation because of the racism, homophobia and transphobia and oppression that they face.

The work group also included more than 25 agencies representing victim and survivor service providers, emergency shelter and housing providers, and system partners

including Minneapolis Public Schools Minneapolis Police Department and FBI Field Office, the BCA Human Trafficking Taskforce, Hennepin County Attorney's Office, No Wrong Door Initiative, Hennepin County Child Protection and Hennepin Health and Masonic Children's and Children's Hospitals.

Creating a structure to ensure access

The Link facilitated the Hennepin County Safe Harbor Protocol Team, with support from a grant through the Minnesota Coalition for Sexual Assault (MNCASA).

"It was incredible to see these partners, the community and young people come together to create a better way to support youth who have been exploited or trafficked," said Beth Holger, CEO of The Link. "I am so hopeful that this will bring about much needed change in how these young people are supported. These are strong and amazing young people who need our community's support now more than ever. I cannot thank every member of this team, the community members and most importantly the youth who provided critical insights into the protocols."

The partners within the Hennepin County Safe Harbor Protocol Team have committed to implement the new protocols within their organizations, systems and communities.

"Our aim has been to develop a unified response to fight against the sexual trafficking of minors," said Diana Chaman Salas, Hennepin County's No Wrong Door director. "Ultimately, we want to remove barriers for the youth we seek to serve and empower. This protocol is a clear example of what can be achieved across systems when we work collaboratively, with a common and clear mission, and most importantly, when we honor the voices of those with lived experiences."

[Read the Hennepin County Safe Harbor Protocols.](#)

The Link works with youth and young families to overcome the impacts of poverty and social injustice.

www.thelinkmn.org

No Wrong Door coordinates multidisciplinary outreach and assistance for sexually exploited youth among Hennepin County departments.

[No Wrong Door – Hennepin County](#)