



Recognizing Trafficking in the Aftermath of Natural Disasters: A Guide For service Providers

OVERVIEW

When communities start to rebuild after a disaster, there is a high demand for workers. But sometimes, there aren't enough rules being followed or people checking to make sure workers are treated fairly. This creates opportunities for some employers to take advantage of people who are looking for work. Some workers may face unfair treatment, like low pay or unsafe conditions. Others may be trapped in labor trafficking, where they are forced to work through threats, lies, or control.

Service providers may be some of the only people these worker's trust. Recognizing the signs of labor trafficking and exploitation is important for keeping people safe. Help is available to better understand potential trafficking or exploitation and connect workers to support.

LABOR EXPLOITATION VS. LABOR TRAFFICKING

Labor exploitation and labor trafficking can look similar. **You don't have to figure it out alone.** Even experienced service providers may find it hard to tell the difference. Your role isn't to investigate, but to notice signs and connect people to help.

- **Labor Exploitation** involves unfair or abusive working conditions (e.g., wage theft, unsafe environments, long hours without breaks), but **the worker may still have some ability to leave or negotiate.**
- **Labor Trafficking** is a **crime** involving **force, fraud, or coercion** used to exploit someone for labor or services. Workers often **cannot leave freely** and may experience threats, deception, or abuse.

Labor Exploitation	Labor Trafficking
Not paid minimum wage or denied overtime	Threatened with deportation or violence
Unsafe or unsanitary work conditions	Passport or ID taken away
Not allowed breaks or time off	Living at the job site under surveillance or control
Employer ignores labor laws or contracts	Recruiter/employer lied about wages or job conditions
Fear of retaliation for speaking up	Physical, emotional, or psychological abuse

WHAT LABOR TRAFFICKING CAN LOOK LIKE AFTER A DISASTER

After a disaster, there is often a rush to rebuild. Contractors may come from outside the area, and many workers are hired quickly. Rules may not be followed closely, and some workers are given false promises. These are some of the most frequent concerns:

- **"Storm chaser" contractors** who travel to disaster zones to quickly profit from cleanup and rebuilding. They may hire workers with no screening, provide vague or deceptive job offers, and avoid formal contracts.
- **Workers sleeping on-site or in unsafe conditions**, without access to clean water, food, or bathrooms.
- **Workers unable to leave job sites** or showing signs of fear or control by their employer.
- **Lack of protective gear** or being made to handle hazardous materials without training.
- **Debt or fees** for tools, housing, or transportation used as a form of control.
- **Unclear or missing employer identity**, making it hard to know who is responsible for conditions or pay.

WHO IS MOST VULNERABLE

Some workers are more likely to be targeted for labor exploitation or trafficking during disaster recovery, especially when resources are limited and jobs are needed quickly. Those most at risk include:

- **Migrant workers**, especially those without legal permission to work in the U.S.
- **Day laborers and temporary workers**
- **People with limited English proficiency**
- **Undocumented individuals**
- **Youth and unaccompanied minors**
- **Workers recruited through informal networks or word-of-mouth**
- **People who have recently lost homes or jobs because of disasters.**

COMMON OCCUPATIONS TARGETED FOR LABOR ABUSE

Some types of work are more likely to involve labor exploitation or trafficking during disaster recovery. These jobs are often physically demanding, hired quickly, and lack proper supervision or enforcement:

- **Construction**
- **Domestic Work** (ex. cleaning homes)
- **Waste cleanup and sanitation**
- **Landscaping and tree clearing**
- **Warehouse or supply distribution**
- **Food service or catering at work site**

REAL-LIFE EXAMPLES OF LABOR TRAFFICKING

Construction: After Hurricane Katrina, Signal International recruited close to 500 Indian workers to repair oil rigs in the Gulf Coast, promising them green cards. Instead, workers were charged up to \$20,000 in recruitment fees, forced to live in overcrowded, guarded camps, and had over \$1,000 deducted monthly from their wages for substandard housing. They faced constant surveillance and threats of deportation.

Domestic Work: In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, Audubon Communities Management and its affiliate, Audubon-Algiers LLC, recruited approximately 50 undocumented Latino men to perform tasks such as painting, cleaning, wiring, and laying carpets to repair storm-damaged apartments at the Audubon Pointe complex in New Orleans. The workers were promised wages of at least \$500 per week and housing at the complex. Upon

arrival, the workers were housed in substandard conditions, with some living in storm-damaged apartments lacking finished walls, broken windows, and infestations. They were often underpaid or not paid at all for weeks, and when they complained, they faced threats of eviction and deportation.

Hotels: Following Hurricane Katrina in 2005, Decatur Hotels, a New Orleans-based hotel chain, recruited approximately 290 guest workers from Bolivia, Peru, and the Dominican Republic under the H-2B visa program to fill positions in housekeeping, maintenance, and front desk roles. These workers paid between \$3,000 and \$5,000 each in recruitment, visa, and travel fees, with promises of 40-hour workweeks, adequate housing, and transportation. However, upon arrival, they encountered substandard living conditions, reduced work hours, and inadequate pay. Some workers received as little as \$18 for two weeks of work.

WHAT SERVICE PROVIDERS CAN DO

You don't need to be an expert in labor trafficking to make a difference. If you see red flags or something that feels off, here are simple, safe ways to respond:

1. Prioritize Safety

- Speak to the worker in private, if it's safe to do so.
- Avoid putting them at risk by confronting the employer directly.

2. Listen Without Judgment

- Let the person share as much or as little as they want.
- Use calm, supportive language and avoid pressing for details.

3. Ask About Immediate Needs

- Do they need food, shelter, medical help, or a safe place to rest?
- These basic supports can build trust and open the door to further help.

4. Don't Investigate — Refer

- Your role is to notice, not confirm.
- Reach out to trained professionals who can assess the situation safely.

RESOURCES

- **National Human Trafficking Hotline:** 1-888-373-7888 or text "BEFREE" (233733)
- **Coalition to Abolish Slavery and Trafficking (CAST):** 888-539-2373
- **Bet Tzedek Legal Services:** 323-939-0506

ABOUT SJI

The Sunita Jain Anti-Trafficking Initiative ("SJI") is an evidence-based, community-informed think tank that intentionally fills gaps in human trafficking through an intersectional framework that fosters systemic change and progressive policy innovations.



For More Information

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