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## Statement to the Office on Trafficking in Persons

The *Human Trafficking Task Force* of the **Global Alliance for Behavioral Health and Social Justice** (Global Alliance) is pleased to submit the following comments to the Office on Trafficking in Persons (OTIP) for consideration in the development of a national human trafficking prevention action plan.

The Global Alliance (formerly the American Orthopsychiatric Association) is a 96-year old interdisciplinary professional association of psychologists, social workers, psychiatrists, nurses, lawyers, educators, sociologists, students and others dedicated to informing policy, practice and research concerning behavioral health, social justice, and wellbeing. As a behavioral health organization that embeds its work in principles of human rights and social justice, we are committed to the **primary** prevention of child trafficking. Our recommendations to you are based on a multi-year examination of the scholarly literature, NGO reports, and reports from international and U.S. governing bodies to understand what is known about the prevention of child trafficking. We found that although prevention is a key element of the legal framework for combatting child trafficking, implementation of prevention strategies has taken a back seat to protection and prosecution. The **primary** prevention of child trafficking has been especially neglected.

The horrific consequences of child trafficking – both physical and behavioral -- demands a prevention strategy. Research has shown that human trafficking intersects with a variety of other forms of interpersonal violence including child abuse, sexual assault, intimate partner violence, and community violence. Early experiences of violence, such as child abuse, may pave the way for later exploitation. Research also shows that positive or negative experiences in the early years fundamentally alter the architecture of a child's brain. Early adversity has long-term health (e.g., obesity, diabetes, chronic diseases, suicide) consequences, and impact behavioral risk factors (e.g., smoking, alcoholism, drug use) and life potential, such as graduation rates, academic achievement, and lost time from work. For these reasons, prevention of violence, and early intervention when violence has occurred, is critically important to a comprehensive trafficking strategy. Moreover, failure to prevent trafficking is a violation of the human rights of children by absolving individuals, institutions and communities, which have an obligation to respect, protect, and fulfill the rights of children, of their responsibility.

Preventing child trafficking will require a comprehensive approach that addresses the multiple pathways into trafficking and the root causes, including social and environmental factors, that create vulnerabilities to trafficking. To address these challenges, and in keeping with our values and approach, we support a human rights-based and public health focus on prevention of child trafficking, both among those children vulnerable to becoming trafficked and those children vulnerable to becoming traffickers. We further support efforts to affirm the dignity of human trafficking survivors through trauma-informed care and community inclusion and not just prosecution. We recognize that we cannot prosecute our way out of this problem – we must prevent child trafficking *before it occurs*.



Accordingly, we recommend the following:

**1. *Preventing child trafficking requires a population health approach aimed at building community capacity to support children and their families.***

A population health approach seeks to improve the health of the entire population and to reduce health inequities between population groups. This type of approach is important in addressing the effects of the social determinants of health on the wellbeing of children and youth. Communities shape the behavior of children and youth and influence health outcomes.

In this context, the challenge for communities is creating environments for children and youth that foster strong and secure psychological, emotional, economic, and physical attachments. A population health perspective can help to facilitate integration of knowledge across sectors with a goal of developing a shared community vision. It can also create a sense of community responsibility for children and their families by engaging community residents, leaders, and faith- and community-based organizations in providing leadership in addressing the social determinants of health. The engagement of the broader community such as private industry, health care professionals and educators, will also contribute to the sustainability of the effort.

**2. *In keeping with a public health lens, adopt the socio-ecological model as a framework for guiding prevention efforts.***

A public health lens is most promising for creating the conditions that will enable children to be healthy and less vulnerable to risk. The socio-ecological model is informative in developing prevention efforts because it shows the interplay between the individual, relationship, community, and societal levels and it helps us to understand the factors that put children at risk and that protect them from risk.

**3. *Strengthen social networks at the community level.***

Communities characterized by community engagement and inclusive social networks are more likely to be safer for children. In turn, safer neighborhoods are more likely to provide the emotional and instrumental support needed by parents and caregivers to adequately care for their children and to protect against depression and other mental health challenges. Safer neighborhoods are also associated with reduced risk of behavioral problems in children. Finally, safer neighborhoods are more likely to attract economic investment and other community resources necessary for healthy development.

We applaud the commitment of the OTIP to developing a comprehensive (e.g., primary, secondary, and tertiary) action plan for preventing child trafficking. Please let us know if we can provide assistance.

Respectfully Submitted,

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Human Trafficking Task Force  
Global Alliance for Behavioral Health and Social Justice