

EVH - BONUS - Human Trafficking and Veteran Homelessness

[00:00:00]

Katie Papke: The first thing I always say is, "Look beyond your first impression." A Veteran presenting with signs of intimate partner violence, substance abuse, homelessness, or any kind of work-related conditions, could be an individual experiencing human trafficking. Be supportive and non-judgmental. We have these preconceived notions. You wanna create a safe, welcoming environment, whether that's within a public place or within the VA, to increase the likelihood that they will return, that they will come back. You're planting seeds of hope.

Shawn Liu: Welcome to Ending Veteran Homelessness, your firsthand look into our nation's efforts to ensure that every Veteran has a safe and stable place to call home. From the Department of Veterans Affairs, Homeless Programs Office, I'm your host, Shawn Liu.

If you're a Veteran who's Homeless or at risk of homelessness, reach out.

Call the National Call Center for Homeless Veterans at [00:01:00] 877-424-3838. Trained counselors are standing by to help. 24 hours a day, seven days a week. That number again is 877-424-3838.

Hey everyone! We have another bonus episode for you today. You see, today, January 11th is National Human Trafficking Awareness Day when we raise awareness about human trafficking and educate the public on how to identify and prevent this crime. And to be clear, people who have been trafficked are considered victims of a crime under international law.

Human trafficking is also a public health concern that impacts people of all races, ages, genders, nationalities, and sexualities. Specific individuals may be more vulnerable to exploitation due to the impact of different socioeconomic circumstances but also things like physical health factors and mental health factors. Veterans too may be at an even greater risk of being trafficked than the general [00:02:00] population due to an associated higher prevalence of known risk factors such as homelessness, substance use, suicidality, potential history of witnessing violence, intimate partner violence, sexual assault, and having a lack of other positive social determinants of health.

And of course, while healthcare institutions can play a vital role in identifying, intervening, and providing treatment and resources for Veterans, actually identifying and providing care for a trafficked individual may be challenging for a variety of reasons.

Healthcare providers may have pernicious misconceptions about what human trafficking is, where it occurs, and who precisely is impacted. The victims may be reluctant to share their experiences due to fear of not being believed or being thought of as the actual perpetrators of the crimes, instead of as the victims. And both victims and healthcare providers may not have any idea of the most effective ways to support those who are being trafficked.

But let's take a moment and step back for a second. What [00:03:00] actually is human trafficking? And for our purposes, what are the ways in which human trafficking can impact Veterans experiencing homelessness and housing instability?

Those are really great questions. So to help us learn more about how human trafficking impacts homeless and at-risk Veterans, I can think of no one better to talk to than our next two guests.

First we have Amy Ashcraft, a Licensed Clinical Social worker from the Central Arkansas Veterans Healthcare System, located in Little Rock, Arkansas. She's also the co-lead of the National Human Trafficking Prevention and Education Committee here in VA and has worked in the Intimate Partner Violence Assistance Program, both at the local and national levels for the last 10 years.

And today she's joined by Katie Papke, her co-lead for the VA National Human Trafficking Prevention and Education Committee. Ms. Papke is also a Licensed Master Social Worker, she's also a Certified Advanced Alcohol and Drug Counselor, and a Clinically certified Human Trafficking Victim Service Provider. And of course, her day job is with us in the homeless programs [00:04:00] back at the Battle Creek, Michigan VA Medical Center.

Amy, Katie, welcome to the show.

Katie Papke: Thanks, Shawn.

Shawn Liu: Yeah, really glad to have you for this bonus episode. And we're timing this appropriately because, today, when this is coming out, January 11th, National Human Trafficking Awareness Day. Really, really important day. And

I know you two have been amazing champions here at VA raising awareness about human trafficking, increasing education and knowledge of what human trafficking is, what are the risk factors, and most importantly, how do we help Veterans who are coming through our systems, whether it be through primary care appointments, the emergency departments, or other settings, and making sure that we can identify and get those Veterans connected to help.

But before we get into the nitty gritty of the topic, let's get to know you both a little better.

Katie, starting with you. What is your role, both locally and your day job, but also as one of the co-leads with Amy with the VA National Human Trafficking Prevention and Education Committee.

Katie Papke: Thanks, Shawn, and thanks again for having [00:05:00] us. Yeah, so locally I, as Shawn mentioned, work for the Battle Creek Michigan VA supportive housing program, HUD-VASH. I've had this role since 2009. I was actually the first HUD-VASH social worker hired at the Battle Creek VA Medical Center, covering the Grand Rapids, Michigan area. And I stayed in that role for a year in advance to the program coordinator, and team lead in 2010.

And in that homeless background is really where I first identified that human trafficking was happening. Five specific Veterans were impacted just in Grand Rapids, Michigan alone.

Now, I had already had the lens of human trafficking. I had been working in human trafficking prevention education awareness since 2013. And around that time is really when other professionals started understanding human trafficking as well.

In June, 2020, [00:06:00] I went to the National social work program and I said, "Hey, I'm from Homeless. What do you guys know about human trafficking?" And I just got blank stares like, what? What is human trafficking and how does it have anything to do with the Veterans? We have started really from a grassroots movement. Today, we coordinate and try to disseminate education awareness materials and appreciate the opportunity to come on today. Amy?

Amy Ashcraft: I've been with the VA since 2012. The majority of my career actually was with the Intimate Partner Violence Assistance Program. When Katie first came, I was already on special assignment and when she first came I was kinda like, "Really human trafficking with Veterans? Why would this be? And then when I started really thinking and looking into it is I was like, "You

know, she's got a point here." And it's become my passion. Even to the point I'm actually a doctoral candidate right now, and that's really what my dissertation's on: understanding perceptions of human trafficking.

And with the Human Trafficking Committee, we are bringing the education to those [00:07:00] people so they do know how to protect themselves.

Shawn Liu: I actually served on the human trafficking... we called it a tiger team back in the day. Um, but I actually served on with you and it was a really big honor. And I ended up learning a lot too, because, same reaction. Human trafficking? Huh? Like, what do you mean?

But it turns out it's actually a really big deal and important topic.

But before we get into why it's a really big deal and important topic, let's level set. And Katie, I wanna come back to you for this one. What is human trafficking? Just from a really simple standpoint, what does that term mean? What is it referring to? And then, are there different kind of ways in which human trafficking may show up whether or not it's Veterans? Just in kind of like the public at large in America.

Katie Papke: So first off, I would like to say there are some myths and preconceived notions when we think about a human trafficking victim. But an individual experiencing human trafficking looks just like you or me. It really is a public health concern that we mentioned before because it does impact everyone. And that is why human trafficking is referenced as hidden [00:08:00] in plain sight - in our backyard, right before us, right in the places that we visit, or maybe within our friends and communities.

Human trafficking is really defined as sexual exploitation and labor trafficking, which is induced by force fraud or coercion. I do wanna mention though, if a child under the age of 18 is impacted, it is considered child abuse. We might have preconceived notions of what a human trafficking victim looks like, but it is seen all over - at local nail salons, construction sites, restaurants, truck stops, and in their own homes.

Traffickers are not always strangers. They're intimate partners, family members, friends, and sometimes even parents. The difference between a sex trafficker victim and a sex worker is all about consent. So many people think, oh, they're just choosing to prostitute themselves or engage in these commercial sex acts. Well, that's not necessarily true. If they have someone exploiting them, telling

them what to do, taking their money, [00:09:00] that is when it crosses the line to sex trafficking.

And unfortunately, homelessness and drug culture is highly interwoven into trafficking. But

Amy, do you wanna talk more about labor trafficking and exploitation?

Amy Ashcraft: A lot of people when they think of human trafficking, they think, you know, primarily about sex trafficking, right? It's what we see in the media. It's what we hear in the news. But labor trafficking is actually expected to be even higher experiences of it because there is also that overlay of people who are being labor trafficked, who are also sex trafficked.

To even get down even more to the nitty gritty is there actually is a difference between labor exploitation and then labor trafficking. So labor exploitation is when an individual's being exploited for labor, such as working extra long hours without being paid. We've all probably felt that way at some point in our lives that, you know, we've worked all this extra and you know, we don't get anything extra. But there is a difference when force, fraud, or coercion comes into play because that's when it becomes labor trafficking. And where Katie was [00:10:00] mentioning the fact that children under the age of 18, it's automatically considered child abuse with sex trafficking, well, that's not the case when it comes to labor trafficking. Because depending on the state that you work in, you can start working around the ages of 15 or 16. Some states have laws about how long you can work, whereas some don't. So there really is that fine line.

Labor trafficking is actually more pervasive than sex trafficking. And it's so easily hidden that it's often forgotten. I mean, how many of us go get our nails done or call and hire a company to put a new roof on our house? I live in Arkansas, so we have a lot of farmland here. What's the difference between a migrant worker as opposed to somebody who's being trafficked? A lot of people don't look into that.

There's actually an estimated 40 million people that are trafficked each year and it's estimated that almost half of those victims are labor trafficking. And in addition to health risks and human rights concerns, labor trafficking can also harm other businesses that run their establishments legally.

But, is all exploitation labor trafficking? No, [00:11:00] unfortunately, like I said before, due to the way some of our labor laws are written, a person can be

exploited for labor or work but not be trafficked. And I do have a good example. So let's say Sarah, okay, is working as a housekeeper at a local hotel. She often works late, if another person calls in, just to kind of help finish cleaning up the rooms and to pick up the extra work. She does not ask for overtime because she feels it's the expectation of the employer for her to complete these duties when she was hired. So although the employer could be exploiting her for not giving her extra money, that's not considered labor trafficking.

But let's change up Sarah's situation a little bit. So her and her partner separate, and she has no place to stay with her children. So, her supervisor says, "Hey, why don't you come in? You can stay in one of these empty hotel rooms while you're looking for a place to live. But her supervisor starts holding out rent from her paycheck, even though they never negotiated a price for rent. And then this leaves her with little or no money to buy food or to save up for a down payment for an apartment. Now Sarah feels that she is forced to [00:12:00] stay in this situation. This is when it turns into a labor trafficking situation.

So a lot of the red flags that we can look at include multiple job related injuries with no signs of using safety equipment, work with little to no pay or so, maybe some exposure to some dangerous employment conditions. Warning signs include victims that may live in groups in the same place where they work and live in frequently. They may include agricultural or industrial buildings unsuitable to live. They may report working excessively, long hours, no labor contracts, or depending on their employer for transportation.

Victims are often exposed to dangerous and inhumane conditions and can present with occupational injuries and dermatitis, especially when not having that proper safety equipment such as protective equipment, warm clothing, goggles, whatever needs to be with that work.

And other warning signs include the most frequently treated injuries, such as deep cuts, bad burns, skin injuries, and the effects of prolonged exposure to extreme temperatures or industrial or agricultural [00:13:00] chemicals. Like when we get our nails done, I mean, think about having to smell those chemicals all day long.

So we do ask that if staff or somebody else ever observe these conditions to pause and ask additional questions and observe their behavior once further are asked.

Shawn Liu: So, as I'm listening in, and especially as like a former staff person who's actually met with Veterans, Katie, you hit it right in the head, like hiding in plain sight. Like... This is somewhat distressing. I feel somewhat distressed, kind of listening.

And largely because it feels as though there is a spectrum between exploitation versus trafficking. And I imagine with sex relationships, the line may be a little bit more clear, but probably spectrum-y enough in that for providers out there, it's oftentimes maybe easy to explain away certain conditions or injuries.

And likewise for victims to explain it away because, you can imagine, the shame and stigma that might get associated jumping from [00:14:00] I'm being treated poorly to, I'm being exploited, to I am actually being trafficked. So this is, yes, this is a very important topic to of get right and to better understand.

Track 1: And

Shawn Liu: I also feel like, and correct me if I'm wrong, this feels like an important topic to really understand and have concrete examples to distinguish the nuance and the differences in which things can show up. Because whether it's us as clinical providers who are licensed in our state to actually provide healthcare or just members of the public who may be seeing this in their friends or family members, understanding those differences and nuances can be the difference between life-saving interventions or continued victimization and continued trafficking.

Katie Papke: Very well said.

Shawn Liu: Oof! Okay. Um, okay. I'm gonna, I'm gonna try to stop stumbling over my words just because I'm a little bit, you know, like stunned and grappling I'm, I'm really glad we're bringing you on for this bonus episode.

Katie, as I kind of get oriented and we kind of maybe zoom in a little bit to the impact on Veterans, can you talk a little bit about what we've been [00:15:00] seeing so far, especially from both of your vantage point, from the committee, the impact on Veterans as well as also the staff who serve the Veterans. What are we seeing here in VA when it comes to human trafficking?

Katie Papke: In 2020, the National Social Work Program launched what we call a Human Trafficking Tiger Team. And this is a short-lived team. We lasted for about a year and a half and our goal was to investigate the prevalence of human trafficking in the Veteran community.

So that included not only Veterans, their families, and caregivers, but also VA staff. We completed multiple trainings. As a matter of fact, we are up to 81 as of this date for VA staff. That included both pre-test and post-test knowledge needs assessments. We looked at multiple data sets within different hotline calls that are specific to Veteran data collection. And we found out that 36% of staff encountered a Veteran who was experiencing human trafficking. In addition, 38% of staff after taking our training [00:16:00] identified a missed opportunity to further assess if a Veteran was being trafficked.

Many times after our trainings, a staffmember from the VA would reach out to us about how they personally know someone who is currently experiencing human trafficking. They had suspicions about their Veterans. They had confirmed information about their Veterans experiencing human trafficking, or they also wanted consultation for a family member or a friend. So we knew that our work was being effective. And our goal is to continue to educate VA staff on how to identify, intervene, and support Veterans, their families, and caregivers.

Shawn Liu: So, Katie, I just want to acknowledge, 36%, 38%, those are high percentages. That's, that's a lot of Veterans being trafficked and potentially missed opportunities to get Veterans connected to care. That is staggering. Also, would just wanna acknowledge for the folks, we used a term a couple times called Tiger Team.

That's just fancy speak. That's just jargon for a focused group of specialists, who are brought [00:17:00] together to work on a specific goal or a problem. So in this case, a Human Trafficking Tiger Team is a lot of different experts getting together to work on human trafficking.

Amy, Katie teed this up kind of nicely, and you touched on some of the risk factors already, but if you can just share a little bit more on some of the things that whether the folks listening in are Veterans themselves and might be experiencing this themselves, or if they're family members or friends, or providers or just members of the public, what are some of the other risk factors that we need to be vigilant about that may signal, oh, this is an opportunity to follow up and get this better and connected to help.

Amy Ashcraft: I wanna bring up too, you were talking about the astronomical numbers and we're looking at the data, is the research tells us that over 80% of victims of human trafficking actually seek out and see their healthcare provider. And over 60, wanna say it's like 66% were actually inside the emergency department while they were being trafficked. But yet they weren't identified.

Those numbers are astronomical as well. So by knowing these risk factors, knowing what to look for, and how [00:18:00] to identify, that's the first thing.

So when we're talking about risk factors, like I mentioned before, with labor trafficking, we wanna look for things like burns, cuts, severe things that are related possibly to like a labor problem. But when we're looking at sex trafficking, we want to look at multiple pregnancies or abortions, STIs or sexually transmitted infections, or injuries. So think about like with, child abuse. One of the things that we look for is pattern injuries in multiple stages of healing. And we see that a lot with sex and labor trafficking as well, because that's...

Shawn Liu: before you go on...

Amy Ashcraft: ...telling us...

Shawn Liu: Patterned injury, pattern injuries, can you tell us a little bit more about what that is?

Amy Ashcraft: Yeah, so we're gonna look for multiple injuries maybe on the arms, maybe face, neck. Places where its not typical that somebody could injure themselves in that area. So we try to look for that. And we'll look for multiple stages of healing as well, because that's telling us this person is experiencing some form of trauma to their body at different points of time. So, you know, all of us kinda know what bruises look like when they start to heal. They might be [00:19:00] real dark and then get till yellowish. So if you have those different stages.

So Veterans also may be at a greater risk due to the high prevalence of homelessness, which is why we're here today. When Veterans lose their housing or employment, they're at great risk to be exploited for sex or for labor trafficking.

Human trafficking does not just happen in foreign countries or to foreign nationals. Red flags to watch for someone that will not leave them alone or demand to be in the same room during their visit. Very similar to intimate partner violence, where they won't leave them. They also may not have a form of ID because their trafficker may have taken this into their own custody. Like I talked about before, with labor trafficking, they can have multiple job related, injuries with no signs of using any kind of safety equipment. So if a staff member does observe these conditions, pause and ask additional questions, their behavior once further questions are asked.

The biggest thing to remember is, a lot of us think that when we see somebody who's being trafficked, that it's a criminal act and we should pick up the phone right away and call the police. But that's not [00:20:00] what we're telling people. That should be only if somebody is in immediate danger. We want to do is to offer people support. Offer them the resources. But we just want people to know that just picking up the phone and saying we're gonna call the police is not recommended. If anything, it might scare people away to not seeking help.

Shawn Liu: That's a really good point and very counterintuitive in a way. Like, I imagine like, "Oh, no, crime is happening. Call 911, get VA police over." And what you're raising really gets to a subject that happens a lot in homelessness, which is about rapport building, building trust, creating psychological safety. And you're right like that immediately, just picking up the phone, calling the cops, that could, I guess, get them underground even more, like push them away even more and put them more entrenched with their pimp or their trafficker.

Amy Ashcraft: Like just with intimate partner violence, you could also increase their danger. Because if you call the police and their trafficker sees that the police come or find out, who's to say that they're not going to hurt them or kill them?

So we don't want to increase the danger for [00:21:00] them.

We wanna be able to build rapport, but also keep them safe.

Shawn Liu: Yeah. Really, really good points. Katie, I wanna come back over to you. Drilling down a little bit further, Amy mentioned that, conditions or circumstances like loss of employment, housing instability and homelessness can increase a person's risk of falling victim to trafficking. And I want to kind of maybe like bring us into the main topic of our intersectional work on this episode, which is how does housing instability and homelessness intersect and impact human trafficking?

Katie Papke: So when you think about an individual, whether it's a Veteran or not, experiences housing instability or homelessness, they're vulnerable. In human trafficking, it really is an interconnected system of oppression and inequality through gender- and sexual orientation-based violence, poverty, and racism. So, we think about the Veterans who come to our homeless services how much they might meet this criteria. Sometimes individuals in a housing crisis, they reach out to all types of people and resources and become desperate

to find their resources to [00:22:00] either keep them housed or get them housed rapidly.

And at these pinnacle times, potential for human trafficking can occur. So what does that look like in a housing situation? This could look like a trafficker exploiting that fear of sleeping on the street by offering them safe shelter to recruit them into trafficking. Some of the most common individuals exploited in this situation are runaway homeless youth and disabled adults. And we have, unfortunately, lots of disabled adults among our Veteran population.

Some traffickers have been known to rent housing properties then force 'em to do work in order to pay their rent. And that was actually, as I mentioned from the HUD-VASH program, there was two Veterans on my caseload that were in that situation prior to me, starting within this work. They did not know that they were being trafficked. And that is really common. Most individuals do not identify as trafficking victims. They don't even understand it. And it's usually because they don't know about the crime themselves. Sometimes it's just unfathomable to think about.

The other thing is they don't know that there's [00:23:00] words associated to what is happening to them. So VA staff and the community having, again, that lens towards trafficking can say, "Actually, you have been exploited and your landlord is acting like a trafficker. What do you know about human trafficking?"

That is a perfect way to start the conversation. So going back to this forcing them to do work in order to pay their rent. When the individual refuses, that's when force, fraud, or threats can occur. The individual then feels stuck, just like how Amy mentioned in her example with Sarah. And some traffickers, target homeless shelters and services as recruitment grounds, offering false promises for a better life. I've seen them there. I've seen them there.

Because individuals are desperate in these homeless services, they're willing to do these things. And people ask, "Why can't these victims just leave? Why can't you leave?" And that is part of the coercion. That is the most trickiest part of manipulation, because the trafficker will instill the fear of being homeless again [00:24:00] to coerce the victim, to stay under their control. And unfortunately, homeless Veterans are extremely vulnerable to human trafficking, and that is why it is so imperative they reach out to the VA services in our community partners where we can provide those warm handoffs to avoid being trafficked.

And for the VA homeless staff that are working with them, having that supportive housing counselor, having our outreach workers within homeless is how we mitigate potential for being trafficked and exploited by those type of landlords.

Shawn Liu: So what I'm hearing you say is this idea that the risk factors for being trafficked increase when there is this mix of vulnerability, desperation, circumstances that make it easier to be coerced or forced into things. And then on the flip side, part of the ways that we can support Veterans is actually increasing access to those resources that stabilize housing crises, stabilize finances, help Veterans feel [00:25:00] less desperate and thus less prone to being coerced, to being forced into things, to being threatened to do things.

It reminds me a little bit of like how we approach suicide prevention, right? Where if you have housing instability and your suicide risk goes up, so what do you do? You actually stabilize their housing situation and that can help reduce suicide risk. It all seems kinda like hashtag it's all connected.

So this has been a really fantastic primer in terms of what human trafficking is, what the risk factors are, how Veterans experiencing homelessness and housing instability can be at higher risk.

All well and good.

What are we doing about it? What is, what is VA's response? How are we supporting Veterans? And Katie, I wanna stay with you to kick this next section off that we shift gears into more like action-oriented discussions. What are we doing about it?

Katie Papke: The VA is really in their grassroots movement to address human trafficking. There have been national trainings for staff and different awareness campaigns, especially around the identification of exploitation and prevention. But we recently launched a new [00:26:00] endeavor and Amy's gonna talk more about that.

Amy Ashcraft: Thanks to Katie and I think back, I just, I'd have to just, you know, give her big points here because if it wasn't for her to bring this to the VA in the first place, I don't know if we would be where we are today.

We were able to launch a two-year pilot program at six VA facilities across the nation to strategically implement efforts to address human trafficking as it impacts Veterans their families and caregivers. So what we hope to achieve at

the end of this pilot program is to compile data to acknowledge that human trafficking is affecting the Veteran community.

Overall the VA has the resources to connect Veterans to services to avoid being trafficked. So through widespread awareness and educational campaigns like this, VA staff can open their eyes to what might be happening in our own backyard. And providing support to our Veteran victims and survivors.

Shawn Liu: Yeah. Really, really, really important stuff.

Okay. I wanna shift gears a couple more times. I want us to talk about more concrete calls to actions for individuals. First starting [00:27:00] off with Veterans. If there are Veterans out there who are listening in and are like, "Oh my gosh, this is me. What do I do?"

What do they do? And I wanna acknowledge, Katie and Amy, you've been providing tailored guidance for sex trafficking and for labor trafficking. So I want to honor that difference. And Katie come back to you for Veterans, who might be thinking, "Oh, oh my gosh. Maybe I'm being sex trafficked."

What do we recommend that they do next?

Katie Papke: We recommend that what they do next is first contact the VA or the National Human Trafficking Hotline, and we'll talk a little bit about that in just a second. Talk to them about your suspicion. Talk to them about any kind of healthcare needs you might have. You know, this can turn into a major crisis. And you might not be motivated to leave your situation. But help is available.

Amy Ashcraft: We do recognize that they may not be ready or motivated to leave their situation out of fear, or out of not having another option at the time. And as much as we can try and support them, we know there's always gonna be a little something they might need a little bit more help with.

But [00:28:00] that's what we're here for. So we want to remember to provide a supportive and non-judgmental environment, which begins by building that rapport and the trust. When the Veteran is ready to ask for help, they will go to a place where they feel comfortable and we hope that will be here at the VA. That should be a place who knows Veterans and is able to provide Veteran-specific and Veteran-centric interventions and support. So in addition, we offer the National Human Trafficking Hotline, which provides free confidential help 24 hours a day, seven days a week. So for those of you listening, write this

down. 1-888-373-7888. Again, that's 888-373-7888. Or you can text the word help, HELP to 233733.

Shawn Liu: All right. That's fantastic. We're gonna put that into the description as well. So, if you, I mean, obviously you can hit rewind and relisten again, but we're also gonna have it printed out in the description.

Fantastic stuff. One more call to [00:29:00] action. That was for Veterans, for the general public. What can they do to help?

Katie Papke: So January is Human Trafficking Prevention Month. it's dedicated for everyone all over the world to raise awareness about human trafficking. National human trafficking Awareness Day is today January 11th.

And wanna get involved? Well, you can't see us, but we're wearing blue! And we encourage you to wear blue. We encourage you to be aware, be ready, and take action. You may very likely encounter someone who is being trafficked.

So how can you help? The first thing I always say is, look beyond your first impression. A Veteran presenting with signs of intimate partner violence, substance abuse, homelessness, or any kind of work-related conditions, could be an individual experiencing human trafficking. Be supportive and non-judgmental. We have these preconceived notions. You wanna create a safe, welcoming environment, whether that's within a public place or within the VA, to increase the likelihood that they will return, [00:30:00] that they will come back. You're planting seeds of hope.

But make sure you critically assess the environmental factors surrounding a patient's presentation when the Veteran might come in for services or when you see them in the public, including why are they here? Who are they accompanied by? Is it safe to talk to them? What information is provided or withheld during that time? Do not attempt to confront a human trafficker. You have to think about your safety and the safety of victim.

There are hotline calls through the Department of Homeland Security as well as the FBI, as well as the National Human Trafficking Hotline, or getting your local VA or police involved. That is when you would. You would not confront the individual trafficker yourself.

But I do encourage you to become familiar with your state's human trafficking laws. Every single state has a human trafficking law. And learn the local community resources that serve human trafficking victims and survivors.

Understand you cannot rescue them. Our goal might be to rescue, but we can't. But [00:31:00] instead, you wanna be prepared to provide resources for future reference. Amy, you have anything to add on that?

Amy Ashcraft: No, I think you said it all perfectly. And I think the biggest thing is a lot of wanna be rescuers. And I think that's really good for us to remember that because somebody hasn't decided today that they wanna leave their trafficking situation doesn't mean that we haven't been an impact to them. So knowing those resources, knowing what your state can do, and sharing them makes you a part of that person's survival.

Shawn Liu: Outstanding.

Okay. Before we let you both... This has been fantastic by the way. I'm feeling at least a little bit more empowered, maybe less panicked.

Before we let you go, want to end on a tradition on this show. We're gonna end with why.

Now, I myself, am not a Veteran. I come from a weird, quirky, Veteran family. And you know, Katie, like you probably experienced this a little bit when you've done, work with HUD-VASH and some of our homeless programs. When we go out every now and again, there's a Veteran who's like, "Who are you? What branch did you serve in? You're like, are you, are you here for me?" And so it, it's important to convey to them that I'm not just here collecting a [00:32:00] paycheck, that I'm here for them. I'm here for the mission.

So Katie, I want to kick off our wind down of the show, what's your why for this work? You're a hyper competent person. You could be doing a lot of different things, but not only are you working for homeless Veterans, but you're also advocating for those victims of human trafficking.

What's your why for this work?

Katie Papke: I am very passionate about working with homeless Veterans and even more seeing the impact of human trafficking on personal and professional level. I understand, you know, working at homeless since 2009, that's a long time. My why is that individual Veteran who we help them with their housing, whether it's a male or female or trans, they come in and they say, "Thank you. If it weren't for you, I would be dead on the street." And I have received that same accolade for those Veterans who have been experiencing human trafficking as well. I genuinely want to help.

Amy?

Amy Ashcraft: You know, when Katie first came to us a few years ago about starting something and looking into human trafficking, I didn't think that this [00:33:00] was something that we had to do at the VA. But then I started putting that two and two together, and I realized the high risk our Veterans experience and that in fact, I tend to believe this is in my opinion, of course, they may be at a higher risk than even the general population because of all their experiences. I've also worked in the arena of interpersonal violence and has become a passion of mine throughout my career. I've been passionate about working with social work and criminal justice, which is where my PhD is gonna be in.

But I always look at, so what is my why? It's more of a because of why not? Our Veterans deserve better. All people deserve better. They don't deserve to be treated poorly or forced to do things just to live and to get by. All people deserve better. And by bringing awareness and education to others, brings us one step closer to ending human trafficking.

Shawn Liu: Amy Ashcraft and Katie Papke are the co-leads for the National Human Trafficking Prevention Education Committee here in the US Department of Veterans Affairs. Amy, Katie, thank you so much for the gifts of your time.

Amy Ashcraft: Thank you. We're...

Katie Papke: [00:34:00] Thank you.

Amy Ashcraft: ...very excited to be here.

Shawn Liu: If you wanna know more about the services that VA provides to Veterans experiencing homelessness and housing instability, visit us online at www.va.gov/Homeless.

And if you're a Veteran who's homeless or at risk of homelessness, reach out. Call the National Call Center for Homeless Veterans at 877-424-3838. Trained counselors are standing by to help 24 hours a day, seven days a week. That number again is 877-424-3838.

If you're enjoying this podcast, share it with a friend who may be interested too. We rely on your word of mouth and it would really help us out.

That's all for now. We hope that you found this time to be valuable and that you feel empowered in our collective work to ensure that every Veteran has a safe and stable place to call home.

Take care.

[00:35:00]