

# Just Direct Financial Assistance A Strategy to Support Survivors of Human Trafficking

**Intro** [00:00:01] RTI International's Justice Practice Area presents Just Science.

**Intro** [00:00:08] Welcome to Just Science, a podcast for justice professionals and anyone interested in learning more about public health, innovative technology, current research and actionable strategies to improve the criminal justice system. In episode three of our Economic Empowerment Season, Just Science sat down with Megan Lundstrom, the inaugural director of the Polaris Project's Resilience Fund, to discuss how flexible cash assistance can support people who have experienced human trafficking, such as stipends or grants, play an important role in supporting economic empowerment for people who have experienced human trafficking. They can be used to seed a small business, participate in a job training program, or further one's education. Listen along as Megan discusses types of direct financial assistance available and the benefits of these programs for people who have experienced human trafficking. The season is funded by the Human Trafficking Policy and Research Analyses Project. Some content in this podcast may be considered sensitive and may evoke emotional responses or may not be appropriate for younger audiences. Here's your host, Lauren Vollinger.

**Lauren Vollinger** [00:01:06] Hello and welcome to Just Science. I'm your host, Lauren Vollinger. As part of the Human Trafficking Policy and Research Analysis Project, RTI is hosting the third episode of our three-part podcast series focused on strategies to support economic empowerment for those who have experienced human trafficking. On today's episode, we will discuss direct financial assistance and entrepreneurship with Megan Lundstrom. Megan, thank you for joining us today. Can you tell listeners a little bit more about yourself and what it is that you do?

**Megan Lundstrom** [00:01:35] Sure. Hi everyone. My name is Megan Lundstrom, and I am the inaugural director of the Resilience Fund at Polaris. Polaris, a national nonprofit organization whose mission is to lead a survivor centered justice and equity driven movement to end human trafficking. So, in addition to running the National Human Trafficking Hotline, Polaris' direct response efforts, includes the Resilience Fund, which is the first direct cash assistance program that is available across the US, specifically for survivors of human trafficking. So, while there's a few local and state programs, this program, the Resilience Fund, opens the door to additional basic income initiatives to gain traction at the national level. Before joining the Polaris team, I founded and ran a survivor-led direct service organization that served survivors of sex trafficking and sexual exploitation across the U.S. I've also been doing consulting work in the anti-trafficking space since 2015, which feels crazy to say, and much of that work has focused on economic justice in various forms.

**Lauren Vollinger** [00:02:40] Thank you. I know your work has made a large impact on survivors over the years, so we're so excited to be able to talk to you today. The earlier episodes of our podcast series have highlighted programs focused on building survivors' capacity with approaches to building self-efficacy, knowledge, skills and increasing access to supports and resources in their community, such as financial literacy, job readiness and training programs. There's another model of programs that works to address financial insecurity that impacts survivors' vulnerability to trafficking by directly providing individuals with the resources needed to support safety and independence and their guiding principles to inform economic empowerment programming for survivors of human trafficking. Futures Without Violence identifies three major types of this asset building program. The first is

match savings programs, and those are designed to help participants save towards a specific goal, like buying a home or a car or for your education. For every \$1 they save, the survivor receives a match of \$5, for example. The second is microloans, which offers a small zero interest loan over an extended period of time to allow survivors to pay down debt or go towards an expense like starting a business or enrolling in education programming. Lastly, is flexible funding, which is also called direct cash assistance, which is the category of the Resilience Fund, where that would fall into. So, tell us, what is direct cash assistance and why is this important for people who've experienced human trafficking? What can direct cash assistance support for someone's professional development and their long-term recovery?

**Megan Lundstrom** [00:04:13] Very simply put, direct cash assistance is just putting money directly into the hands of survivors, and they get to use that as they see fit. So recently, Polaris conducted the National Survivor study to better understand the experiences of victims and survivors of human trafficking in the U.S. One of the key findings from this study is that 43% of survivors who had exited their trafficking situations are currently living on less than \$25,000 per year and supporting families of 2 to 3 individuals on that income. What we also know from the body of research over the last several years in combination with Polaris directly engaging with thousands of victims and survivors over that same period, is that there are core systemic barriers that survivors experience in their journey to being able to economically thrive. This includes lack of social supports, access to mental health services, criminal record and debt relief, and financial and workplace inclusion. These barriers are intersecting their complex and the really nuanced meaning that there is no one solution for all survivors. What we also know is that when people do not have money, the most effective and universal way to resolve that is to ensure that they do have money. So, cash can be really transformative for survivors and help overcome intersecting barriers. Evidence from multiple evaluations of universal basic income programs have found improved physical and mental health outcomes, housing instability, employment and increased entrepreneurship. There is limited evaluation of direct cash assistance with people who have experienced trafficking specifically, but pilots of programs with people who have experienced domestic violence have seen similar positive impacts, including housing stability among survivors, and increases in not only their well-being but their children's. One study following up on a flexible funding program found that children's safety levels, their levels of stress, their moods and their behaviors were positively impacted by the availability of flexible funding in their home. So, for these reasons, the Resilience Fund was created to provide direct cash assistance for survivors to utilize in the ways that best meet their needs while they continue to work through the impact of poor systems barriers. We are evaluating the funds outcomes as well as running cohorts over the next few years.

**Lauren Vollinger** [00:06:38] That's amazing. So, I'd love to hear more. How are people using the financial assistance from the Resilience Fund?

**Megan Lundstrom** [00:06:43] Yeah, I love talking about this. So, the Resilience Fund has supported 24 people in our first cohort. Those 24 individuals have experienced trafficking and so far, we've been providing them with up to \$500 a month for a period of up to 18 months. We're about midway through our pilot of the Resilience Fund, this first cohort. And what we're seeing at present is that most recipients are using their disbursements to meet their basic needs. So that's rent, utility and phone bills, transportation, childcare, food, those types of things. We also know from the interest list, which currently sits at over 650 survivors at this point, that the number one area in which survivors report they would utilize direct cash if they were selected for a future cohort, is housing. That is followed by general

basic needs and living expenses. But we also know that survivors are interested in starting their own businesses, returning to school themselves, or they have education expenses for their children as well as debt repayment.

**Lauren Vollinger** [00:07:48] Wow. That waiting list just for your one program really underscores the need for this type of assistance. I'm so happy to hear that you're providing it. Historically, many programs have supported survivors through providing them with material support like food, shelter or housing, clothing, and some of the other things that you mentioned, or they've provided targeted financial support, meaning providing money for specific uses like rental assistance or educational scholarships. Other types of asset building programs often have specific requirements about how resources like microloans can be used or the savings goal to qualify for matching. As you described it, the Direct Cash Assistance program does not have any restriction on how the funds can be used. If the folks in your first cohort and on the waiting, list are mostly using their funds for meeting their basic needs. Why is the unrestricted and flexible nature of this funding a critical component of this approach?

**Megan Lundstrom** [00:08:43] Great question. So, a survivor centered approach to disbursing money is one that recognizes every survivor knows their circumstances best, and that's just as important as the actual cash itself. So, it's really important to protect the autonomy of the individual in how they spend that money to take care of themselves and their family, especially having experienced exploitation, financial abuse and potentially other forms of coercion. Survivors should have control over their decision making. Survivors know what they need to stay safe and how to best spend money to meet their needs. So practically speaking, restrictions on what cash assistance is used for further burdens this population that's already facing significant systemic barriers. It can also increase feelings of shame and subsequently hesitance in asking for help.

**Lauren Vollinger** [00:09:34] That's a really important point. And studies with survivors of gender-based violence like FreeFrom's Trust Survivors report found that potential financial assistance recipients feel like these types of restrictions on the use of funding are telling them that they're, quote, not good enough or, quote, not smart enough to make use of their own finances.

**Megan Lundstrom** [00:09:53] Yeah, for sure. And building on that idea, in addition to restrictions on use of funding, certain specifications on who qualifies for direct cash funding can also come with judgment. So, at the Resilience Fund, we've been thinking about how to remove bias from our selection process. To give just an anecdotal example of a conversation that came out of one of our very first advisory council sessions, we were discussing program qualifications and requirements. There was discussion around parameters that are common in direct services, such as the length of time since exiting one's trafficking situation in order to qualify for the program. One of the council members commented, why is it that the distance from our trafficking is used as an indicator of our trustworthiness or readiness to receive help. Oof just a complete gut punch. It was such a powerful statement, and these are the types of existing parameters that we're exploring and challenging in the funds design. Something we're focused on is prioritizing individuals who have experienced the most systemic barriers. As we developed the selection process for future cohorts, we have a shared value around this concept of centering the margins, which means we're looking at complex intersectional identities and experiences of survivors and designing a program with those in mind as the primary population. We know that by centering the margins, we are creating a program that will meet the needs of such a diverse community.

**Lauren Vollinger** [00:11:23] It sounds like it's critical to intentionally consider why certain qualifications and requirements for program participation are in place when developing a direct cash assistance program. What are some other considerations that you'd like service providers to think about if they want to offer this type of programming?

**Megan Lundstrom** [00:11:40] Yeah, there's so many, but I'll try to boil it down. So first and foremost, survivors need a program built around trust and flexibility. So, we first selected our first cohort of recipients through nominations from our advisory council. And the advisory council is comprised of six survivor led organizations and representatives that were identified within the lived experience community as being trusted entities and advocates. We are prioritizing a trust model as opposed to a risk model which applies to the selection process. And throughout the program, this is building our program around trusting the participants, trusting survivors, rather than trying to find the least risky participants or minimizing the risk the participants have to the program objectives. Trust has to be central to this type of program, but so does flexibility, especially in distribution of funds. There's, you know, no one size fits all approach to disbursing cash that will work for all survivors. Many survivors, particularly black, indigenous and people of color, don't have access to a bank account at all or to a bank account that is safe from those connected to their exploitation. So, there's lots of ways to do this type of transfer Venmo, PayPal, mail checks, direct deposit, cash to be effective and inclusive programs must provide options for how participants can access funds so that survivors can choose what works best for them and make new selections as their circumstances might change.

**Lauren Vollinger** [00:13:13] Trust and flexibility. It seems so simple, so baseline, but so critical to this work, and I really hope that that's something that other programs can embed in their work to. In our last podcast, we talked to several programs focused on employment support programs with emphasis on entrepreneurship or building knowledge and skills necessary to start their own businesses. Organizations such as You Are More Than Inc provide support specifically for survivors of trafficking who are starting small businesses and pair grant funding with a small business building course that educates and supports survivors over time as they develop their businesses. While entrepreneurship is not a specific aim of the Resilience Fund, have you seen growth in this area among your participants?

**Megan Lundstrom** [00:13:55] Definitely. So, one of the many things that makes this first cohort really unique and special is that this first cohort of fund recipients are all survivor leaders in the anti-trafficking space. So, some of them work for agencies and nonprofits. A few run their own programs or organizations, and almost all of them do speaking, training and consulting work both in this field and in parallel movements. During the mid program interviews this summer, one thing that came up was that direct cash assistance is providing some financial relief for survivors who are in the growth stage of their small business. So, the business is demanding a significant amount of time from them, but not yet generating enough consistent revenue for them to stabilize their personal finances. So, the fund disbursements have provided some of this personal stability and allowed them to focus their efforts on securing contracts, increasing brand awareness and so on. Others have utilized their disbursements to invest directly in their small business, things like registering their LLC, purchasing a domain, designing a website, getting business cards and marketing materials printed. And that's truly the beauty of direct cash assistance in that each recipient gets to choose how to use their disbursement, whether that's on immediate needs or investing in their future goals or both.

**Lauren Vollinger** [00:15:16] Nice. So why do you some people who have experienced human trafficking choose entrepreneurship as their avenue for employment and earning money?

**Megan Lundstrom** [00:15:25] Yeah. So, I can shift gears a little bit from talking about my work at Polaris and with the Resilience Fund and just kind of come back to my own personal experience exiting my trafficking situation. And I can speak very personally to how entrepreneurship became a path to economic stability for me. So, when I first exited, I was a single mother of two young children. I had no work history during those five years. I had no college education. I was 27 years old. So additionally, as if all of that wasn't challenging enough, I also had a lengthy criminal record due to forced criminality during my trafficking. And all of this meant that my prospects for living wage employment were just abysmal. So that's when I turned to entrepreneurship. I realized that with a title such as founder or owner or CEO, suddenly no one was questioning if I was legitimate. I wasn't going through background checks. I was able to form and run a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, develop programs, hire staff, and create a living wage for myself. The other aspect of entrepreneurship that I definitely was not conscious of at the time, but I can see now with some hindsight, is that after trafficking, I had absolutely no trust in authority figures, particularly when it came to employment and my family's well-being. So being a business owner in combination with therapy gave me a space to heal from this interpersonal trauma. I got to learn how systems work, how grievance processes can be utilized, what my rights as a worker are, and also how to create a healthier and safer environment, not just for other survivors of trafficking, but all workers.

**Lauren Vollinger** [00:17:06] Megan, thank you for sharing your expertise and your personal story with us, and thank you for all that you do to build safer environments for workers. It's been such a pleasure discussing your work with trafficking and the Resilience Fund. And I appreciate you taking the time to chat with us today.

**Megan Lundstrom** [00:17:20] Thank you so much for having me.

**Lauren Vollinger** [00:17:22] To learn more about the work that all of our guests do or the Human Trafficking Policy and Research Analysis Project, use the links in the episode description. I'm Lauren Vollinger and this has been another episode of Just Science.

**Outro** [00:17:36] This concludes our economic empowerment season. Stay tuned for the next season on case studies. The views expressed in this podcast belong to the participants and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, the Administration for Children and Families or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.