

(Not) Just Jobs: Survivor Empowerment through Skill-building and Career Growth

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 two of our Economic Empowerment Season, Just Science sat down with Lenore Schaffer of Restore NYC, Tiffany McGee of Survivor Ventures and Laura Hackney of AnnieCannons, who are experts in the anti-trafficking field to discuss their economic empowerment work. Economic empowerment programs include skill building, job training and career development for people who have experienced human trafficking. These programs seek to overcome barriers many survivors experience in the workforce and set them on a path for long term economic mobility. Listen as Tiffany, Lenore and Laura talk about their programs, common barriers survivors encounter and practical solutions for supporting survivor's economic empowerment journey. 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, Shani Bacy.

Shani Bacy [00:01:11] Hello and welcome to Just Science. I'm your host, Shani Bacy. As part of the Human Trafficking Policy and Research Analysis Project, RTI is hosting a three-part series focused on strategies to support economic empowerment for people who have experienced human trafficking. I am excited to host today's episode with three people doing very meaningful work in this space. Here to discuss employment, skill building, and career development are Lenore Schaffer, Tiffany McGee and Laura Hackney. Tell me about yourselves and the organizations you are with.

Lenore Schaffer [00:01:39] Thank you, Shani. Happy to be here. I'm Lenore Schaffer. I'm the chief program officer at Restore NYC.

Tiffany McGee [00:01:45] Hi, everyone. Thank you for having me today. I'm Tiffany McGee, founder and president of Survivor Ventures.

Laura Hackney [00:01:50] And my name is Laura Hackney, and I'm the co-founder and CEO of AnnieCannons.

Shani Bacy [00:01:55] Thank you. So, tell us, who does your organization work with and how do you support people who have experienced human trafficking? And let's start with Lenore. Can you share first?

Lenore Schaffer [00:02:03] So our mission at Restore NYC is to make freedom real for survivors of trafficking. Since 2009, we've served more than 2800 survivors and those at risk. We build on the strength and resilience of survivors by offering a range of trauma informed and low barrier services through three core programs: client services, housing and Economic Empowerment Program. In our client services program, we're providing counseling, case management support. In housing, we're assisting with emergency housing for those in unsafe situations. And we also have a supportive housing program for up to 12 months in a confidential space. And we are assisting survivors with independent living through our rapid rehousing service. In our economic empowerment program, we're focusing on creating pathways to economic security by helping survivors develop skills,

secure and maintain employment, or start their own small businesses through our entrepreneurship service.

Shani Bacý [00:02:58] Great. Thank you for that description. Tiffany, can you tell us more about Survivor Ventures?

Tiffany McGee [00:03:02] Yes. Our mission at Survivor Ventures is clear. We provide survivors of human trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation with the resources and support they need to achieve economic empowerment. We are a unique 100% survivor led and operated organization dedicated to helping those affected by both labor and sex trafficking, including their dependents. We started in 2018 serving the seven cities of Hampton Roads, Virginia, and today we have chapters in Virginia, Delaware and the National Capital Region. We believe economic empowerment is the key to releasing survivors from the life. Survivor Ventures flagship program, Survivors Entrepreneurs, is designed to lower barriers for survivors to enter or reenter the workforce across industry sector, according to the survivors' interest. Through partnerships with vetted and trauma, informed, trained small business partners. With supported employment and subsidized wages, we create opportunities for survivors to secure immediate employment above minimum wage and in their field of interest. Without stable housing or living wage, survivors can easily cycle back to homelessness and other vulnerable situations that led to trafficking in the first place. It's our mission to break this cycle through programing that provides opportunities for survivors to achieve economic independence.

Shani Bacý [00:04:16] Thank you, Tiffany. I really do look forward to hearing more about entrepreneurship. It sounds like that's a central part of your program. Lastly, Laura, can you share about AnnieCannons?

Laura Hackney [00:04:26] Yes, absolutely. At AnnieCannons, our mission is to train, prepare and connect individuals who've experienced human trafficking to sustainable careers in technology. So AnnieCannons offers a free trauma informed training program that bring survivors of trafficking into STEM fields and links them to high paying, highly skilled careers. And we know that financial independence is one of the most critical factors in a survivor's healing journey and in many instances, a job training program that centers survivors' unique needs and leads to high wage career opportunities can mean the difference between re-exploitation and economic stability. AnnieCannons uses a supportive framework to help survivors build their technical skills, confidence, professional networks and career skills. And we also partner with other organizations working with survivors for referrals and student support. And we partner with companies for direct placement of our students from our program.

Shani Bacý [00:05:19] So what a terrific range of experts that we have here today. So, thank you for being with us. Your organizations each address economic empowerment, specifically employment, skill building and career development with different approaches. What employment or career development needs does your program address? Lenore, maybe you can start us off by describing your work at Restore.

Lenore Schaffer [00:05:37] So at Restore our program tackle several key employment and career development needs for survivors of trafficking. So, the first is our job readiness class. We offer an eight-week group, job readiness training service that's tailored to survivors. And it's not just covering the basics like communication, resume building or interviewing skills, but also covering essential topics such as worker's rights and the impact of trauma and how to cope with stress. We're teaching them how to recognize

triggers and use healthier coping strategies, which is so crucial given that many survivors past experiences with work. After completing our job readiness training, survivors get ongoing individual support for job placement. We connect them with job opportunities through our network of vetted business partners, and we're offering trauma informed workplace training to those business partners with partners help. This helps create a supportive environment that's aware of the unique challenges that survivors may face. And we don't just stop at placing survivors in jobs. We also offer job retention support for up to one year post placement. They have access to our staff for ongoing coaching and support to ensure a smooth transition and a good match between them and the role. More recently, we introduced a career development service to help survivors who are ready to advance their careers, which is very exciting. And whether they're aiming for promotion or pay raise or just want additional training and education, this service provides the resources and support that they need to achieve long term success and professional development. So, at Restore our goal is not just to help survivors find and keep their jobs, but also to empower them to grow in their careers and achieve lasting stability. In fact, last year we observed a significant 184% increase in earnings for survivors who retain jobs from their initial job placement. Just highlighting the effectiveness of our program in promoting economic empowerment.

Shani Bacý [00:07:35] That's great. It's great that you're not just focusing on placement, but also retention and development as well. So, Tiffany, can you tell us about Survivor Ventures program?

Tiffany McGee [00:07:42] Yes. Survivors to Entrepreneurs, which I'm going to refer to as S2E is a 24-month program, and it includes three phases. The first phase of S2E focuses on housing stability. It's really hard to be productive at work when you don't even have four walls and a roof. So, we partner with crisis shelters and sometimes we even provide our own through the rental of entire place, Airbnbs and VRBOs, to provide immediate access to safe housing. Additionally, we assist survivors in achieving long term independent housing by providing housing, location advocacy services, as well as tenant based rental assistance through partnerships with independent community minded landlords. The second phase centers on an employment first model of job training, where participants learn essential industry skills while in a paid position. We provide placement, support, wage subsidies and coaching for both participants and employers. Survivors face system-based barriers to securing employment. As a workaround, we identified small mom and pop type businesses and startups as the main partner in the fight against human trafficking. These employers often struggle to find cashflow that would allow them to hire their first employee or a new employee during potential business growth phases. Small business owners often get stuck just keeping the doors open. They have no time to grow their own business and eventually they close simply because of cash flow issues. It's one of the reasons why there are such high rates of small business failure, recognizing the small business need for employers and at the same time understanding the lack of employment opportunities for survivors. So, our venture decided to simply fill the wage gap. Survivor Ventures reimburses small businesses for the participants gross wages full time, 40 hours a week for the first year of employment. This provides a free employee for the business, giving them the time they need to grow and increase revenue and begin paying into the participants wages. We recruit businesses across industry sectors from our many business association memberships. Our business association partners include diverse referrals such as small women owned, minority owned businesses and immigrant and even second chance entrepreneurs. Fostering an inclusive and culturally responsive model. Personalized job coaching is offered twice a week to participants and once a week to worksite supervisors. Our participants quickly become valued employees and the right-

hand person of the business owner. Literally holding the keys to the castle and gaining entrepreneurship experience for eight hours a day by wearing all the hats and learning on the fly everything one must do when working at a small business. Now, skills training is a crucial component of the S2E program. With this Employment First model skills and certifications are required on the clock in coordination with work sites, helping survivors become even more value added to their employers while simultaneously developing competencies needed to run their own business in the future if they choose to do so. Survivor Ventures Partners with Ed2Go and their Virginia, DC and Delaware based university affiliates to offer on demand individualized training and education from the comfort of participants, homes or offices. Through working with a small business owner, many survivors realized they could run a business too. The skills training provided often focuses on transferable skills such as bookkeeping and social media marketing. This not only makes survivors valuable to their employers, but also equips them with the competencies needed to run their own businesses in the future. And that brings us to the third and final phase of S2E program, which focuses on business plan development and connecting survivors to business incubation resources. 37% of our 200 participants have gone on to become business owners themselves.

Shani Bacy [00:11:22] Wow. Thank you, Tiffany. Finally, Laura, we would love to hear more about the program that's available at AnnieCannons.

Laura Hackney [00:11:28] Yes, absolutely. It's just it's so wonderful to hear about all of this work. At AnnieCannons our coding training program incorporates training, career development and client-based project work in one cohesive program. So, our training is fully remote, and it's divided into learning modules that allow survivors the flexibility and agency to build their own career pathways in tech. We start with the Tech Career Foundation's course, where students gain increased skills and understanding and confidence in securing employment in tech industry jobs. And this module solidifies critical 21st century digital workplace skills and bridges the gap in understanding the tech industry, the software lifecycle and the foundations for programming. In our introduction to programming class, students build a foundation of knowledge to be successful in software development and programming. Students have increased skills and understanding and confidence in algorithmic thinking and web principles and problem solving. And then, in our advanced learning classes, students learn topics in front end and back in software development. And these modules incorporate project-based learning, which allows students to apply skills in active client projects. Or they can grapple with coding challenges, discover and test solutions, and interact with structured teams. Students contribute code. They attend technical meetings such as stand ups, sprint reviews and retrospective meetings. And they work on real projects in the structure of real tech companies, so they're better prepared for future roles as well as job interviews. Participants also have access to one-on-one coaching from mentors, our student success manager and our career development manager. Students develop resumes and portfolios, prepare for technical interviews, and build confidence for the workplace through time management, professional communications and self-directed learning. We also focus on social and emotional learning outcomes, and we help our students do things like embracing learning, think about how they collaborate in community and overcome imposter syndrome. And we also work on how people can build stress tolerance. And then AnnieCannons partners with companies like Accenture and Intuit for direct student placement for jobs after completing the program. And then our mentorship program and alumni have a network of alumni of the coding training program help to facilitate knowledge exchange and build meaningful connections to help accelerate personal and professional growth in the tech industry. And we really feel that by investing in these

community connections and career development activities or ensuring that individuals continue to grow and learn once they're placed at tech companies.

Shani Bacý [00:13:50] You are doing a lot of good work and so that's really exciting to hear. But I do want to shift gears a bit. We know that survivors of trafficking often are excluded from many sectors, right, any in the employment field. So, what are some of the barriers that survivors may experience when they're trying to maintain or obtain employment? And how do the programs that you all have address these barriers?

Tiffany McGee [00:14:11] Low paying jobs that keep one from being vulnerable to re-trafficking are scarce. Like many marginalized communities, many survivors struggle to compete for available positions due to structural racism, lack of formal job experience and having a criminal history.

Laura Hackney [00:14:26] Absolutely. Having a criminal history is a barrier that many of our participants face when seeking employment. At AnnieCannons, we partner with organizations that support our participants in efforts towards criminal record relief, including expungement and vacatur.

Tiffany McGee [00:14:40] Yeah. And in addition to that, at Survivor Ventures, we have found that when we subsidize wages, it encourages employers to overlook traditional employment barriers like a criminal record and addition to ongoing recruitment through business association partners and networking opportunities and events. We sometimes actively recruit vets and train S2E worksite partner; after meeting the survivor and understanding their unique goals and employment needs, this approach has enabled us to find workplaces that can accommodate survivors with disabilities, transportation barriers, childcare challenges and limited English proficiency.

Lenore Schaffer [00:15:15] Absolutely. And I'm glad you brought that up, because English language fluency is a significant barrier for many of our clients at Restore. Most jobs are requiring at least basic to intermediate English skills. But learning English takes time. Right? ESL classes often require a part time to a full-time commitment and are meeting multiple days a week for several hours. And while these classes are usually free, attending them often means you cannot work creating this Catch 22 situation, right? You need to learn English to get a job, but you need to get a job to get by. So, our program at Restore partners closely with ESL providers and we are referring clients to these services. But the time commitment remains a significant challenge. And Tiffany, you also mentioned childcare challenges, which is such a widespread issue in this country. The cost is a huge obstacle for parents wanting to work. Our counselor advocates at Restore help clients access childcare assistance through New York City. But this also usually takes time, right? So, to cover the gaps we at Restore, we're prioritizing having funds available as resources allow to help us cover or assist clients that childcare in the form of a subsidy. Additionally, since the trauma occurred in a so-called work environment, right, that was unsafe, exploitative, and not really work at all. It can also be extremely difficult for someone to return to work, especially if they've never had a positive work experience, whether due to sex trafficking or labor trafficking. So that's why, you know, our job readiness class, like I mentioned, includes information on trauma, identifying triggers and coping mechanisms. We want to normalize and validate the challenge of returning to work for survivors and provide support for years to help with retention because it is a challenge.

Tiffany McGee [00:17:05] Yeah, I absolutely agree. At Survivor Ventures, we have hypothesized that a trauma informed approach to gainful employment may be the most

critical service required to reduce rates of relapse to the life, particularly for a population desensitized to work being a painful and traumatic experience. Conventional managerial processes like timekeeping can be triggering. In addition to supporting the survivor in this area, we believe that a trauma informed approach is critical from the employer side as well. We ensure trauma, informed training and vetting before partnering with any employer.

Laura Hackney [00:17:40] Yeah, absolutely. Partnering with organizations that train companies on trauma informed practices is so critical to building out our network of employers, aware of the ways in which the workplace can be triggering. We're also focusing on ensuring our training program itself is trauma informed and accessible to diverse participants. So, we're building a new curriculum methodology. So excited about it, and it's a structure that seamlessly blends trauma informed principles, rigorous accessibility standards with Bloom's taxonomy, a way of organizing cognitive skills to support learning. And this unique approach ensures that learners receive comprehensive, empathetic education tailored to their individual needs while promoting cognitive development through structured progressive learning stages. And by prioritizing accessibility, the curriculum guarantees that all learners, regardless of their backgrounds, have equal opportunities to succeed in advanced technology fields.

Shani Bacý [00:18:33] You all bring up some really great strategies to address some of the barriers that survivors are facing today. With that, though, what are some of the biggest successes that you've experienced in your programing?

Lenore Schaffer [00:18:43] An innovative strategy we've piloted at Restore is providing direct assistance in the form of scholarships. So, we first piloted this in 2021, and since then we've distributed no strings attached cash assistance to help survivors upskill and advance their careers. This support has enabled them to secure new roles and areas of interest and increase their earning potential. When we followed up with clients one year later, we found a 54% increase in annual earnings among those who received cash assistance. And this increase is attributed to the promotions and the new job opportunities that resulted from their training and education endeavors. Higher education and professional development opportunities are often out of reach for many survivors due to the cost. So, we found at Restore that cash assistance is a critical need and it's been a huge benefit in helping survivors achieve long term independence and economic security.

Tiffany McGee [00:19:38] One of the biggest successes we've seen at Survivor Ventures is our survivors' entrepreneurs program participants graduating from the program and starting their own businesses and then hiring their first employee through S2E. It really doesn't get much better than that. And this was really always our vision. We believe that through this program we can create a community of survivor entrepreneurs free from exploitation to create economic opportunity for future vulnerable populations residing in environments inhospitable to human trafficking by significantly driving down supply.

Laura Hackney [00:20:11] Yeah, and I think our product-based learning has been one of our biggest successes at AnnieCannons. In our software shop, we've designed opportunities for our students to build their portfolios and their incomes without having to confront many of the barriers to entrance at technology companies. And our student developers have worked on over 100 software projects and earned over 3.3 million in income building software. And furthermore, we've been able to foster partnerships with hiring companies, leveraging those internal software shop experiences to deliver the comprehensive training that the industry needs. And this holistic approach to economic

empowerment has facilitated smoother career transitions for our trainees. And we're seeing 75% of students being directly hired or accepted into paid apprenticeship programs, pursuing higher level degrees in computer science or starting their own software businesses.

Shani Bacy [00:20:59] It's exciting to hear about these unique approaches to programing. What innovative approaches in the economic empowerment space are you most excited about right now?

Lenore Schaffer [00:21:07] So one of the things I'm most excited about is financial inclusion and literacy programs. At Restore, we realize how crucial financial literacy is as part of our low barrier and trauma informed model. It's not just about understanding credit scores, although that's important. It's also about understanding someone's relationship with money. Right. Which can be shaped by their family background or their trafficking experience. So, this perspective helps us provide more effective cash assistance and address the gaps that prevent true economic freedom, like the need for wealth building education. So, I'm thrilled to see more organizations recognizing the importance of this approach. For instance, Megan Lundstrom, Survivor's Guide to Money has been a fantastic resource for us at Restore as we develop our programs and think about the future.

Tiffany McGee [00:21:55] Yeah. In a similar vein. I'm really most interested in trying to figure out how best to serve survivors in their journey towards ownership and generational wealth. I think it's such an important conversation for this field because we know the generational impact the trafficking can have. Survivors, like many other marginalized communities, may have access to financial literacy and budget training provided by local banks and nonprofits, some tailored specifically for low-income populations. Despite this, homeownership remains out of reach for many, not because of financial illiteracy or poor budgeting. It's the lack of access to sufficient. When you consider the disparity between minimum wage and fair market rent, it becomes evident why survivors and other marginalized populations are trapped in a cycle of high rent. They simply cannot afford not to rent. Homeownership should be accessible to everyone, not just the wealthy or those with good credit. So, I'm really interested right now in developing programing and learning from existing programs that have been successful in addressing that ownership and the creation of wealth.

Shani Bacy [00:22:55] You all are doing so much to advance economic empowerment for survivors. As we wrap up, is there one thing that you would like to leave listeners with?

Lenore Schaffer [00:23:02] I would say the key takeaway I want to leave listeners with is that economic empowerment is a long-term journey. There is a lot of unlearning and relearning involved. To truly make an impact and reduce the risk of trafficking or further exploitation, we need to think long term in our strategies. It's about more than immediate support. It's not just a job. It's about sustained growth and independence.

Shani Bacy [00:23:26] That's a great note to leave on today. So, Lenore, Tiffany, Laura. I've enjoyed learning from you. And more importantly, thank you so much for the work you are doing. It has been a pleasure discussing how each of you and your organizations are addressing economic empowerment for those who've experienced human trafficking. Thank you for joining us today. To learn more about the work that our guests are doing or the Human Trafficking Policy and Research Analysis Project, view the links in the episode description. I'm Shani Bacy, and this has been another episode of Just Science.

Intro [00:23:55] Next week decide to sit down with Megan Lundstrom, the inaugural director of the Polaris Project's Resilience Fund, to discuss different types of direct financial assistance and the benefits these programs have for people who have experienced human trafficking. 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.