

# Untaken

## **Alaska Housing Finance Corporation**

Special Needs Housing: Housing for Persons with Special Needs

### **HFA Staff Contact**

Daniel Delfino

[Ddelfino@ahfc.us](mailto:Ddelfino@ahfc.us)



HFA: Alaska Housing Finance Corporation (AHFC)  
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When people think of human trafficking, they tend to think of a 2008 blockbuster featuring Liam Neeson. While international human trafficking schemes do exist, the reality for most survivors is more insidiously local. It is easy to think it could never happen in your state, your town, or your community, but chances are *it does*. Human trafficking is a multi-billion dollar criminal enterprise hidden in plain sight. While there is no Liam Neeson figure in Alaska, AHFC created the SAFE-T (Survivors Assistance for Escaping Trafficking) Program to bring survivors of trafficking home safely and with less violence.

### **An Important State Housing Need**

Anchorage, Alaska had the highest reported prevalence of human trafficking in a cohort of ten cities across the United States according to a 2016 study of youth homelessness conducted by Loyola University and Covenant House. Of the trafficked youth surveyed at Covenant House Alaska, 42% identified as Alaska Native and 77% were homeless when they were taken.

Nationwide, 40% of women survivors of sex trafficking identify as Alaska Native or First Nations. This is a troubling statistic for Alaska in particular, as nearly 20% of our population identifies as Alaska Native or American Indian. Alaska also has the fourth highest rate of missing and/or murdered indigenous women nationally, even though Alaska is 48<sup>th</sup> in terms of total population. Many convicted perpetrators have admitted to luring young women from rural villages to hub communities, central locations for medical, retail, and other services, to coerce them into trafficking.

AHFC's SAFE-T program is a direct response to these terrifying realities and expands resources to rural communities that are otherwise overlooked in most trafficking-specific programs. SAFE-T aims to bridge the gap between trauma-informed services and access to safe and stable housing; focusing on breaking the cycle of re-traumatization, and providing long-term solutions and positive outcomes for survivors.

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AHFC's role in rural Alaska is often to be the lead agency that responds to federal funding opportunities that increase housing resources in small communities. In 2019, we identified a serious gap in services. Despite the limited data available, it was clear that our state just needed help for trafficking survivors. In response, AHFC staff developed an initial response plan, identified agencies with sufficient capacity and competence to provide services, and sought additional funding. By October 2020, we had partners, a \$500,000 multi-year grant from the Department of Justice, matched by state funding, and the beginning of a statewide response system.

The AHFC SAFE-T program's success is due to the partnerships with grantees in Fairbanks (interior Alaska) and Wasilla (South Central Alaska). These communities are the location for the SAFE-T pilot programs because they are regional hub communities. Hub communities often play an oversized role in attracting vulnerable adults, runaways, and the perpetrators that prey on them. Mat-Su Youth Housing (MYH) and Interior Alaska Center for Nonviolent Living (IACNVL) are person-centered, trauma-informed providers with the capacity to implement the SAFE-T

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program as AHFC envisioned it. MYH and IACNVL hired staff with lived experience, established transitional housing programs, and set about the multi-year process of assisting survivors, who had their personal agency stripped away, in restoring their self-determination.

Here is an example of how the program works (see visual aid for more information):

- 1) A person in crisis is referred to AHFC's partners by law enforcement, emergency shelters, and/or through self-identification;
- 2) Partner agencies provide emergency intervention and the client is placed into safe housing;
- 3) The person is put in touch with trauma-informed and person-centered services from highly trained experts with human-trafficking experience. This is the cornerstone of the success of the SAFE-T Program which works to break the cycle of re-traumatization, and restore seeds of hope and self-determination in survivors;
- 4) The final step is placing the person into transitional housing and providing ongoing therapeutic resources to facilitate their recovery and success.



*This dog has a very particular set of skills*

*“January is National Human Trafficking Awareness month. During the month we had 250 people in 15 different businesses/organizations participate in wearing our ‘Stop Human Trafficking’ t-shirts to bring awareness to our communities.*

*The Safe-T Program has given us resources here in Alaska to help survivors of trafficking...with knowledge on how to recognize, report and escape trafficking situations.”*

*-Staci Yates, Director of Human Trafficking Recovery Services, Mat-Su Youth Housing*

### **Innovation: Building On a Strong Foundation**

Providing services to survivors of human trafficking was no new feat for MYH and IACNVL. Both organizations had already identified numerous clients who had experienced trafficking, but there was no trafficking-focused program outside of the main urban hub of Anchorage where they could receive aid. Without a program dedicated to the unique needs of rural populations, the cycle of crisis intervention was more likely to continue.

SAFE-T's innovative strategy identifies community members already equipped to provide services to high-risk clients and amplifies their resources; networking them with other service

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providers across the state, and funding housing opportunities for long-term program support. The presence of programs dedicated to the recovery of trafficking survivors promotes community awareness of the issue and establishes safe havens for often overlooked community members.

Another key to SAFE-T's success is low-barrier entry requirements for high-risk populations. SAFE-T participants may self-identify as experiencing trafficking and do not have to provide government documentation to gain access to services.

### **Measurable Benefits**

AHFC's original 2020 goal for the SAFE-T program was to serve 40 clients annually. While applying for the grant, it was difficult to comprehend the scope of Alaska's human trafficking problem because it is largely invisible, and there is a lack of trafficking-focused programs. In the first year of operation, SAFE-T successfully provided services to 36 clients. Shockingly, by the second year of operation, SAFE-T provided supportive and housing services to almost 200 clients (over five times more than the first year).

To date, the SAFE-T program has provided life-changing services to **430** Alaskan survivors of human trafficking and their families. The scope of human trafficking may be difficult to fully grasp, but the numbers clearly speak to the impact of the SAFE-T Program and the necessity of the services it provides.

### **Benefits that Outweigh Costs**

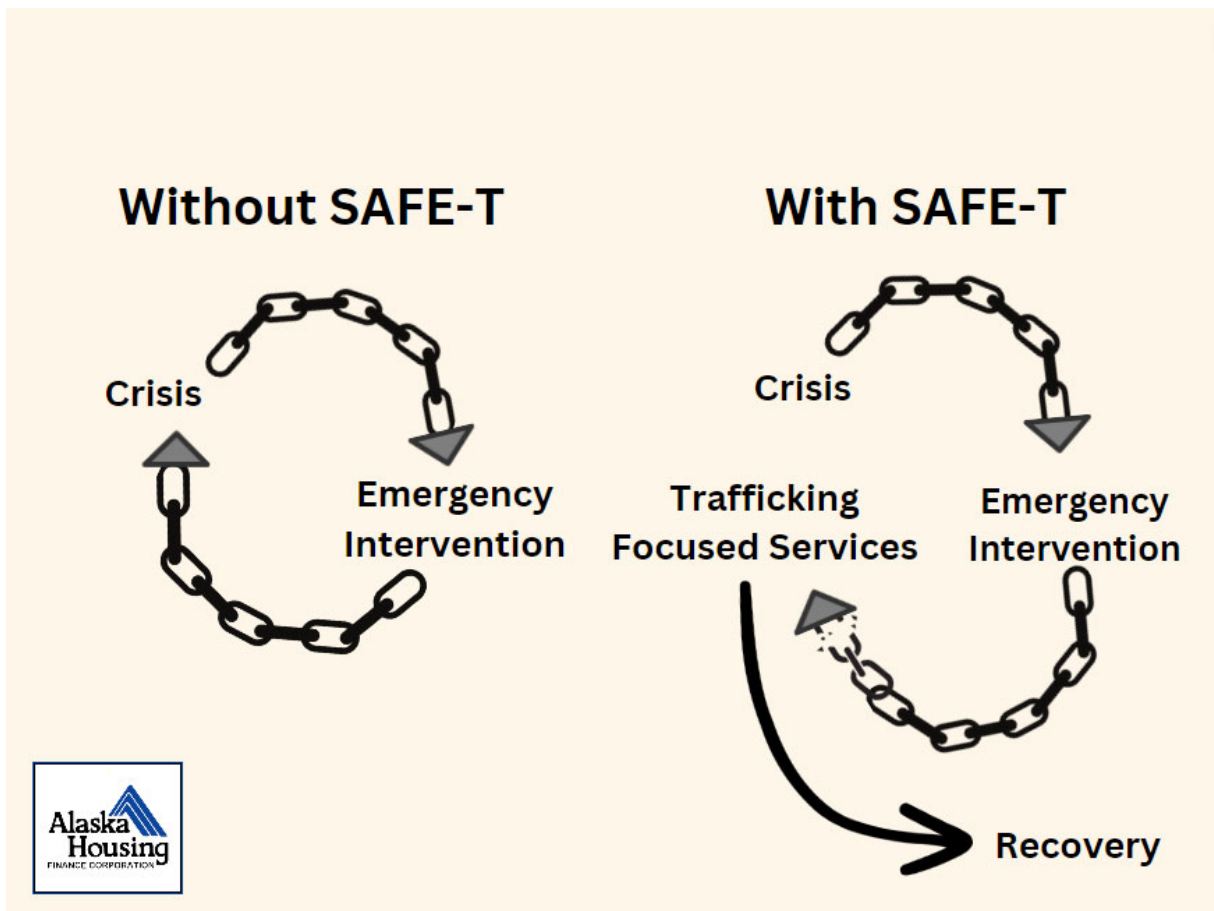
Every year millions of dollars are allocated across the nation to eliminate homelessness, support veterans, or assist refugees. Far less common is a housing finance agency that has the opportunity to drastically change lives for the often invisible populations affected by human trafficking. While it is impossible to put a dollar sign on the value of helping a survivor transition to a life after such a crime, the long-term success of programs like SAFE-T depend on measurable impact per dollar spent.

AHFC is working on a statewide de-identified database for reporting incidences of human trafficking. This database will address the current lack of statewide data sharing between agencies responding to human trafficking, and provide a common base for tracking and destabilizing predatory human trafficking schemes.

Alaska is committed to addressing human trafficking within the state and has recently introduced legislation for greater protection for survivors. AHFC participated in the Governor's Council on Human & Sex Trafficking throughout 2022, sharing de-identified, aggregate data from the SAFE-T program which allowed the council to better identify where survivors are engaging in state resources and where service gaps prevent individuals from accessing resources. The council determined unanimously that AHFC's statewide database would significantly improve the experiences of survivors.

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**Visual Aids:**



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### Crisis

A client is referred to pilot programs via emergency shelters, law enforcement, etc.

### Informed Care

Once the client is safely housed, they can access trauma-informed, person-centered care including medical, legal, vocational, and mental health care that is specialized towards the complex needs of survivors.

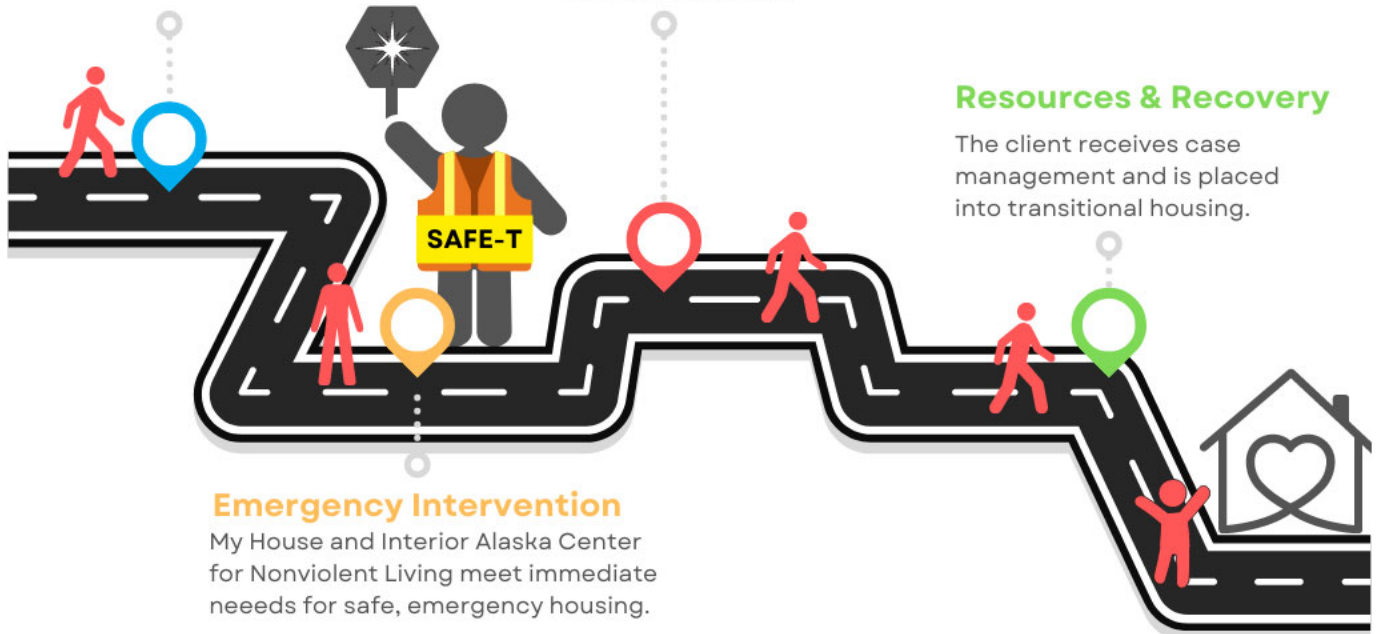


### Resources & Recovery

The client receives case management and is placed into transitional housing.

### Emergency Intervention

My House and Interior Alaska Center for Nonviolent Living meet immediate needs for safe, emergency housing.



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