

Proposal

Title – Increasing Counselor Engagement with Survivors of Sex Trafficking: Considerations for a Holistic Approach to Mental Health Services

Program of Study – M.A., Clinical Mental Health Counseling

Presentation Type – Poster

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In recent years, sex trafficking has become a prominent focus of international legislative, economic, criminal justice, humanitarian, social justice, and religious initiatives; however, evidence that the field of professional counseling is actively engaging in this dialogue is scarce. Although community organizations exist to meet the needs of victims, most are able to provide basic services but not effective, evidence-based mental health services, which are critical to recovery and reintegration. Sex trafficking survivors (STS) face numerous obstacles to successful recovery including psychological disorders, language and cultural barriers, drug abuse, and PTSD. Spiritual care has also been identified as a critical component for successful recovery in this population, as spirituality is highly associated with resilience and well-being following sexual trauma. Despite the complex and far-reaching psychological effects that accompany sexual slavery, there are currently no evidence-based therapies evaluated for use with STS. Agencies and shelters working with STS report that available mental health services are insufficient to accommodate the complex trauma experienced by STS. With focused training in areas such as multicultural competence and crisis intervention, counselors are equipped to engage the many mental health needs of STS from a holistic wellness perspective that includes emotional, mental, and spiritual needs. Thus, counselors ought to lead in research and practice efforts related to the mental health of STS. The presenters contend that counselors, counselor

educators, and counselors-in-training can and should partner with shelters to identify, develop, and provide effective therapeutic services that can facilitate both spiritual and psychological wellness among this vulnerable population. This poster will review the literature related to sex trafficking survivors and current aftercare services as well as advocate for heightened professional counselor engagement with this vulnerable population. Recommendations for developing and implementing effective mental health services based on psychotherapeutic research will be discussed. Finally, biblical foundations for engaging this population and the integration of spiritual care in the clinical setting will be discussed.