

## Improving Healthcare Readiness to Respond to Human Trafficking: A Case Study

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**Abstract :** Limited research exists on the readiness of emergency departments to respond to human trafficking (HT). The purpose of this qualitative case study was to improve the readiness of a Department of Emergency Medicine (ED), located in the southeast region of the United States, in identifying, assessing, and responding to trafficked individuals. The research objectives were to 1) provide an organizing framework to understand the ED's readiness to respond to HT, using the Transtheoretical Model's stages of change construct, 2) explain the readiness of the ED through a three-pronged contextual approach that included policies and procedures, patient data collection processes, and clinical practice methods, and 3) develop recommendations to respond to HT. Content analysis was used for document reviews and on-site observations, while thematic analysis identified themes of staff perceptions of the ED's readiness in interviews of over 30 clinical and non-clinical healthcare professionals. Results demonstrated low levels of readiness to identify HT through the ED's policies and procedures, data collection processes, and clinical practice methods. Clinical practice-related factors consisted of limited awareness of HT warning signs and low-levels of knowledge about community resources for possible HT referrals. Policy and practice recommendations to increase the ED's readiness to respond to HT included: developing staff trainings across the ED system to enhance awareness of HT warning signs, incorporating HT into current policies and procedures for vulnerable patient populations as well as creating a HT protocol that addresses policies and procedures, screening tools, and community referrals.

**Keywords :** emergency medicine, human trafficking, organizational assessment, stages of change

**Conference Title :** ICIMFHT 2019 : International Conference on Irregular Migration, Facilitation and Human Trafficking

**Conference Location :** Copenhagen, Denmark

**Conference Dates :** June 11-12, 2019