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July 22, 2019

ALL COUNTY INFORMATION NOTICE NO. I-28-19

TO: ALL COUNTY CHILD WELFARE DIRECTORS
ALL COUNTY BOARDS OF SUPERVISORS
ALL TITLE IV-E AGREEMENT TRIBES
ALL CHILD WELFARE SERVICES PROGRAM MANAGERS

SUBJECT: HARM REDUCTION SERIES - SOCIAL WORKER

REFERENCE: [SENATE BILL \(SB\) 855 \(STATUTES OF 2014, CHAPTER 29\); WELFARE AND INSTITUTIONS CODE SECTION 16524.6 – 16524.11; SB 1322 \(STATUTES OF 2016, CHAPTER 654\); ALL COUNTY INFORMATION NOTICE \(ACIN\) NO. I-79-17, DATED DECEMBER 4, 2017; ALL COUNTY INFORMATION NOTICE \(ACIN\) NO. I-59-18, DATED September 14, 2018](#)

The purpose of this ACIN is to inform county child welfare departments and other interested service providers of the attached California Department of Social Services Harm Reduction Series -Social Worker. The California Department of Social Services (CDSS), in collaboration with a multidisciplinary team of subject matter experts, has identified the harm reduction approach as an evidence-informed practice for serving children and youth abused through Commercial Sexual Exploitation (CSE). This guide is intended to provide an overview of how social workers may apply a harm reduction approach in their practice, including a sampling of strategies that may be of benefit when engaging with commercially sexually exploited children and youth.

BACKGROUND

Over the past several years, there has been a dramatic shift in understanding the CSE of children and youth in California.

This growing awareness resulted in the identified need for specialized services to address their unique needs and complex trauma, including the creation of the Commercially Sexually Exploited Children (CSEC) Program made possible by [Senate Bill \(SB\) 855](#) and codified in [Welfare and Institution Code section \(WIC\) 16524.6 – 16524.11](#).

With the passage of [SB 1322](#), California acknowledged children and youth who experience CSE as victims, and should therefore not be criminalized, as noted in [ACIN I-79-17](#). This change in statute instead specifies that exploited youth may be adjudged dependent children of the court pursuant to [WIC 300\(b\)\(2\)](#), and may be taken into temporary protective custody. Therefore, California relies on the expertise of child welfare social workers, with the support of other practitioners, to appropriately serve commercially sexually exploited youth.

Although there are some treatment modalities that have shown to be successful in intervening with victims of CSE, there are no specific practices that have been identified solely for serving exploited youth. Therefore, the CDSS has identified the harm reduction approach as an evidence-informed practice for engaging commercially sexually exploited children and youth.

HARM REDUCTION SERIES - SOCIAL WORKER

As defined in [ACIN I-59-18](#), An Introduction to the Harm Reduction Series, the harm reduction approach is not intended to change the youth, but to reduce the reliance or desire to engage in an exploitive situation by promoting long term safety through the achievement and recognition of short-term incremental gains. Harm reduction recognizes that change for this population is both an internal and external process. Social workers, in particular, have direct impact over the external changes necessary to support and meet a youth's needs. The attached guidance explores ways in which social workers can utilize harm reduction as a framework from which they derive specific strategies for serving victims of CSE (See Attachment A – Social Worker). The attached guidance provides an overview of how harm reduction principles can be utilized by child welfare, foster family agency, or community based organization social workers in their service of commercially sexually exploited youth. This overview is meant to introduce the principles; however, more work should be done to determine specific practice methods.

TRAININGS FOR COMMERCIALLY SEXUALLY EXPLOITED CHILDREN

For additional CSEC related information and training opportunities, the CDSS has made available the following statewide training resource: The California Social Worker Education Center's 90-minute online training, [Commercially Sexually Exploited](#)

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[Children Awareness Training Module](#). For county specific training opportunities, please contact your County's CSEC Coordinator directly. (See Attachment B – County CSEC Coordinator List)

CONTACT INFORMATION

Additional inquiries and information related to the Harm Reduction Series and California's CSEC Program can be directed to the Child Trafficking Response Unit within the Child Welfare Policy and Program Development Bureau, at (916) 651-6160 or CSECProgram@dss.ca.gov.

Sincerely,

Original Document Signed By:

MARY SHEPPARD, LCSW
Branch Chief
Child Protection and Family Support
Children and Family Services Division

Attachments

HARM REDUCTION SERIES

SOCIAL WORKER

2019

CHILD TRAFFICKING
RESPONSE UNIT



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The Social Worker's Role in Utilizing Harm Reduction Strategies with Commercially Sexually Exploited Youth



The child welfare system is responsible for maintaining the well-being of youth by ensuring safety, promoting permanency and strengthening families. As such, child welfare social workers and support staff provide services to youth, their families and caregivers to achieve those outcomes. Traditional engagement and case management strategies have largely been ineffective in meeting the needs of commercially sexually exploited (CSE) youth. This is due, in part, to the complex trauma associated with their exploitation, the exploiter's manipulation of the youth, and the youth's reluctance to access services and support. Agencies and partners also lack specialized resources and training on how to best engage this population. This results in difficulty engaging in appropriate services, maintaining safety and building trust. All youth, and especially CSE youth, require a practice approach that is flexible, consistent and focused on serving a youth's whole being, not solely their traumatic history.

Utilizing a harm reduction approach can be especially uncomfortable for child welfare providers as it acknowledges that youth may continue to engage in risky behaviors, which, in this context, means interactions with exploiters and/or purchasers. Although it appears contrary to child welfare's mission of maintaining the safety and well-being of youth, harm reduction prioritizes long-term safety by engaging the youth to define their own safety. At times this may feel uncomfortable, but harm reduction reminds us that attempting to exert control over young people, particularly CSE youth, serves only to push them away. The approach is grounded in the principle that short-term incremental gains will lead to long term stability and safety.

Harm reduction recognizes that change is both an internal and external process. Social workers play a critical role in shaping the external process, serving as the primary convener in referring, navigating and coordinating the systems of care that deliver services to youth who are served by child welfare. Youth whose needs are not being met by these systems may be more vulnerable to exploitive situations. Thus, social workers have direct impact over the external changes necessary to ensure the totality of a youth's needs are met, and more specifically the needs that the exploitive situation was, or currently is, meeting. By meeting these needs, youth begin regaining their authority and capacity to make internal changes—a key tenet of harm reduction¹.



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Adoption of Harm Reduction in Philosophy and Practice

The harm reduction approach must be incorporated into practice at the case carrying level as well as be adopted by supervisors and executive leadership to ensure systemic buy-in. Systemic adoption is critical in effectively implementing and reaching intended outcomes, which include: building the youth's sense of power, establishing healthy relationships with adults, achieving lifelong safety, and readily accessing appropriate resources, among others.

Furthermore, the system must philosophically support the harm reduction approach, which may be viewed as a departure from traditional approaches to practice. As harm reduction is implemented, awareness, education and training must be provided beyond the case carrying social workers and reach staff including supervisors, leadership, family visitation and transportation staff, Team Decision Making (TDM), Child and Family Team (CFT), Multidisciplinary Team (MDT) and other family-centered meeting facilitators, county counsel,

placement workers, and members of the inter-compact placement committee team. Agency wide adoption of the harm reduction approach will ensure the support of direct service workers as they work to effectively utilize harm reduction strategies. Additionally, beyond individual agencies, harm reduction must be adopted across disciplines to ensure a consistent approach.

While this guidance is geared primarily toward child welfare social workers, many of the strategies shared are applicable to a variety of social worker roles, including those who are employed by community based organizations, foster family agencies, legal service organizations, tribal governments, or others. Further, application of a harm reduction approach is not meant to replace the use of other practices or engagement strategies, but to be used in conjunction with such efforts. The harm reduction approach is in and of itself trauma informed and a component of the practice.

Scenario

Below is a hypothetical scenario that will be used to identify ways a child welfare social worker can utilize a harm reduction approach while working with a CSE youth:

Rose is a 16-year-old female who has been in the child welfare system for two years. She was recently recovered in an operation orchestrated by local law enforcement and identified as a victim of sexual exploitation. At the time, she had been absent from her placement for approximately two weeks. Rose is currently residing at the county assessment center while her child welfare social worker, Greg, works to identify a more appropriate placement. Rose originally came into foster care at the age of 14 after a substantiated allegation of neglect due to her mother's substance abuse. Since that time, she has been in three different placements, including two foster homes and a group home, which she left most recently. She is on wardship probation for misdemeanor battery charges.

Rose is close with her mother and younger brother who is in another foster home placement. She has inconsistent visits with her mother due to the mother's addiction and lack of stability. She also does not have consistent contact with her brother due to her frequent absences from placement, but notes that he is very important to her. Rose loves basketball, shopping, and spending time with her friends, but has difficult time describing a future for herself. It is suspected she is actively using marijuana and cocaine. Rose maintains contact with her exploiter and is struggling with remaining at the assessment center. She does not feel a placement will ever work for her and feels the desire to leave daily.



Make every effort possible to meet whatever needs the youth identifies, regardless of whether other practitioners may define them as truly “immediate.”



Immediate Needs and Well-Being

Rose's experience in foster care increased her vulnerabilities and made her a target for an exploiter to recruit her. Her social worker now has the opportunity to engage with Rose in a way that demonstrates empathy and empowers her. When first arriving at the county assessment center, Greg checks in with Rose—asking what her immediate needs are. This allows Rose to define what she feels is necessary for her well-being in that moment. For example, she may be hungry, want a shower, be in pain or need medical attention, need a charger for her cell phone, or want to call a friend—all of these are reasonable needs and should be validated. Greg then acknowledges and expresses appreciation that Rose is still at the assessment center and is working with him, as opposed to immediately leaving.

Other strategies to consider:

- *Make every effort possible to meet whatever needs the youth identifies, regardless of whether other practitioners may define them as truly "immediate."*
- *Acknowledge every success, or improvement, however minor it may seem.*
- *Determine the primary factors that contributed to the youth running away or otherwise being absent from care².*
- *Assist youth in navigating resources to meet their own needs to promote self-sufficiency and empower independence. For example, ask if they would like assistance accessing reproductive health services, demonstrating how and where to do so.*



Identify their strengths and the characteristics that make them unique and worthy. Assist them in re-writing the narrative the exploitive situation has told them about themselves.

Safety Planning

Safety planning is an effective engagement strategy that empowers the youth to have an active voice in their case planning³. In this situation Greg acknowledges Rose's recent return and works with her to identify a plan that will help her remain safe both in and out of placement. By facilitating the conversation with Rose, Greg acknowledges that it is normal to feel uncomfortable given the circumstances, and validates Rose's potential anxiety around returning to placement.

In order to develop a safety plan, Greg should ask Rose to define what safety means to her. Greg may also share how he defines Rose's safety, while still honoring her definition. At a minimum, Greg's initial safety planning with Rose should include: identifying a safe person, noting how frequently Rose will contact them, identifying safe places to go in the community if she feels unsafe, and identifying coping strategies should she feel angry, sad, or anxious.

Other Strategies to Consider

- Allow the youth to be the lead in creating their safety plan.
- Utilize solution focused questions to empower the youth to be the curator of their own safety. For example, if the youth's brother is an important person in the youth's life, asking "What would your brother think safe means for you?" Or, "I noticed you chose not to leave yesterday. What was different about yesterday?"



- Safety planning is ongoing and ever-evolving, especially for exploited youth. During times of crisis, it may be difficult to create a formal written plan, and as such, runs the risk of feeling disingenuous and clinical. When in crisis, consider initially engaging youth in safety planning verbally or via text, should a youth find themselves in need of support. This can be especially helpful when a youth is missing from care, or planning to leave.
- Acknowledge the youth's feelings of connectivity to their exploiter, if applicable. It is important to recognize that it is less about the individual whom they attach to, and more important to see and respond to the connection. This illustrates to the youth that their feelings are of value and not shameful or wrong, conveying safety and trust. This can later be used as a platform to discuss healthy relationships and assist the youth in defining what love looks and feels like to them. In addition, it is a way to begin identifying the needs the exploiter was fulfilling, and outlining that which needs to be met within the contexts of the systems serving the youth.

- Utilize Safety Mapping⁴ tools to assist youth in visualizing where they hope to be as well as to help create a shared understanding amongst the team members, youth and social worker. These plans can be focused on either the short or long term, or both. Validate feelings of anxiety and urges to leave placement.
- Clearly define each agency's roles and responsibilities in creating and implementing the plan.
- Share safety plan with the youth and all parties of the treatment team, including those identified within the plan.
- Safety plan should include a location the youth can seek safety at any hour of the day-including nontraditional locations which may include peers' homes, relatives, those persons identified in the safety plan, among others.



- Identify ways for a youth to maintain safety in other domains beyond physical, such as emotional, relational and meeting basic needs. For example, how can a youth stay safe when needing to get from one point to another- asking a safe support person for a ride instead of hopping a turnstile at the light rail. Or, identifying which peers a youth has a healthy relationship with and how to access more time with them.
- Discuss scenarios in which the youth would utilize their safety plan once it is made. For example, practice making phone calls when reaching out for help, remembering phone numbers in case youth may not have their phone, or asking the youth to share with you whom they would call in case of an emergency in the middle of the night.



Placement

A belief central to most practitioners is that an appropriate placement is essential to a youth's achievement of stability. However, some youth may not feel a placement is essential to their well-being. This, at times, can contribute to the difficulty in identifying and engaging youth around placement. In this scenario, an appropriate placement may reduce Rose's anxiety and diminish her urges to return to exploitive situations. Greg must work with Rose to identify what she requires and/or desires in a placement in order to feel safe and supported. Rose says she wants to either be placed with her mother or go back to her most recent group home. Greg should explore specific reasons why those options are most appealing to her. Even if Greg is unable to place Rose in those locations, he should attempt to incorporate some of those appealing

aspects into the eventual placement decision. If, for whatever reason, Greg cannot fulfill her requests, he should candidly discuss the reasons why, which ideally will further promote an open and trusting relationship. Greg suggests options including returning to her initial foster home or potential placement with Rose's basketball coach. After brainstorming options, Greg shares with Rose his next steps in the search for placement, ensuring Rose is aware of what will happen next and roughly how long they will take to accomplish. Greg is transparent with Rose about his inability to place her with her mother, but instead suggests increasing visitation while continuing to reassess placement with the mother-- seeking opportunities for creativity and compromise where possible.

Other Strategies to Consider

- *Encourage youth voice and choice; the youth's participation in decisions.*
- *Consider and re-consider placement options. Continue to explore how safety can be achieved in these options if initially not approved.*



- *Keep the youth updated on every step of the placement process- including timelines, communications, and considerations even if they are not ideal.*
- *Hold a teaming meeting to discuss placement- engaging supervisors, county counsel, the youth's attorney, the youth's family, and other formal and informal supports.*
- *When the "safest" placement option is rejected by the youth, consider a "safer" placement option- the one the youth may be least likely to leave and most likely to be engaged.*

- *Be solution focused- meaning, if a particular placement is not viable, consider how to incorporate the aspects of the preferred placement in other placement options, or provide those supports through other community providers/relationships. For example, if a relative is pending approval and otherwise appropriate, consider requesting an order for an extended visit or weekend visits to help maintain stability until a permanent placement can occur.*
- *Facilitate a conversation between the youth and proposed placement provider/caregiver to address concerns/apprehensions, to ensure it is a good fit and to begin developing rapport.*
- *Ask the youth who they want to live with, regardless of viability.*
- *Consider the factors that led to the youth's previous absence from care (AWOL) while evaluating placement options.*
- *Assist caregivers in establishing and maintaining limitations and boundaries.*
- *Make every effort possible to locate, produce and provide a youth with their belongings as quickly as possible upon placement changes or a return from an absence from placement. Avoid assuming a youth will "just run again", recognizing that a youth's identity is often tied to their possessions, however meager.*

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Thus, social workers have direct impact over the external changes necessary to ensure the totality of a youth's needs are met, and more specifically the needs that the exploitive situation was, or currently is, meeting.”





Coordinated Response/Teaming

A collaborative approach is essential to effectively serving CSE youth⁵. A youth's treatment team is key in meeting the totality of the youth's needs, and thus critical to a social worker's ability to successfully manage a youth's case. In Rose's situation, her team could be of great support to her during this transitional time. Therefore, in this scenario Greg emails all members of Rose's treatment team, updating them on the current situation and plan going forward. Greg shares the safety plan he and Rose jointly created and asks if any team member is available to visit with Rose during the weekend. He further notes he will schedule a teaming meeting as soon as possible. Upon leaving the assessment center, Greg reminds Rose that since it's Friday he will be unavailable during the weekend, but Rose can call him until 7:00 pm. Greg reminds Rose that her Wraparound mentor, Mary, is available during weekends and will respond to Rose's calls within 2 hours.

In addition, Greg mentions utilizing Rose's basketball coach for support, reminding Rose of their agreed upon safety plan. Greg texts Rose the phone numbers for her coach and Mary. Before leaving, Greg also ensures that staff at the assessment center have his, Mary's, and the coaches' phone numbers. Greg explains to the staff that Rose needs to be allowed to call Mary and her coach at any time. He also, with Rose's consent, talks with staff about Rose's triggers, the ways she de-escalates herself as well as ways they can help her de-escalate. Greg leaves an approved list of supports with the assessment center including what type of contact is permitted. Greg calls Rose's mother to inform her that Rose is no longer missing from placement, is safe at the assessment center, and works with her to schedule a visit as soon as possible.



Other Strategies to Consider

- *Maintain boundaries while being accountable- be available when you say you will be.*
 - *Remind youth of their safety plan and who they can contact when the social worker is not available.*
 - *Communicate with relevant staff about the safety plan and the youth's potential triggers. Ensure the youth's entire treatment team (including family if appropriate) know how to get in contact with the assigned social worker in a timely manner (text, email, phone calls).*
- *Use open communication as appropriate. Coordinate with the treatment team to provide multiple levels of engagement in using consistent messaging.*
 - *Offer a "warm hand off" to other members on the team when introducing the youth to new supports/services to ensure smooth transitions.*

“ Not every strategy will be successful every time, but it is vital to not give up.”

Ongoing Engagement

The scenario between Rose and Greg is crisis centered; however, a harm reduction approach should be consistently utilized in ongoing case management and engagement with the youth, regardless of whether they are in crisis. Below are strategies to consider during ongoing engagement with CSE youth:

Other Strategies to Consider

- *Identify what needs the exploitive situation may be meeting for the youth. Do they feel secure, loved and as if they belong? Engage them in these discussions, and identify ways these needs can be fulfilled outside of exploitation.*

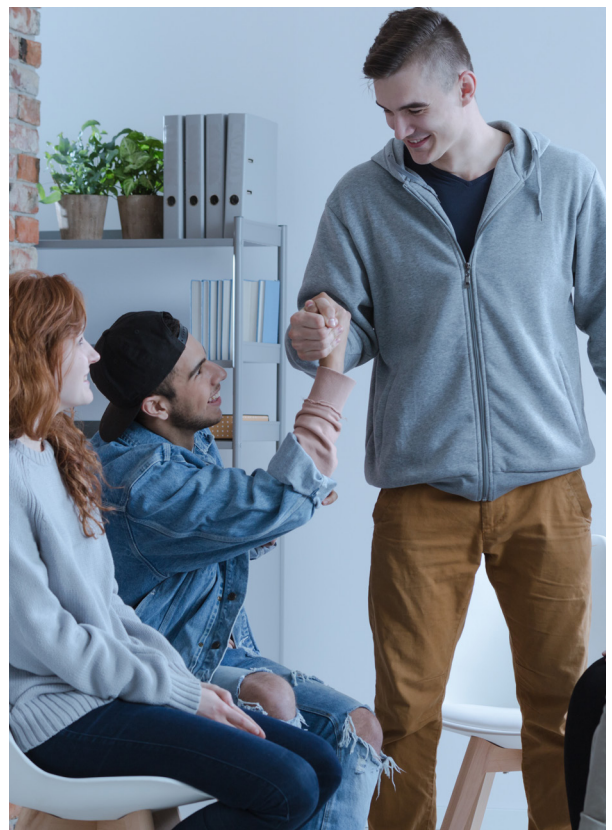


- *Recognize and acknowledge that their exploitive experience does not define them.*
- *Ensure the totality of the youth's needs are met- healthy and supportive relationships, personal supports, youth's interests—not just their needs related to the exploitation.*
- *Create normalcy by encouraging age appropriate activities and interactions.*
- *Reduce barriers to supports and services that the youth has identified as helpful; for example, facilitate skype video calls with family or loved ones who may live too far for frequent visits.*

- *Maintain transparency.*
- *Fulfill what is promised to the youth, yet do not overpromise.*
- *Empower the youth to participate in decisions, case planning and goal setting.*
- *Ask the youth their preferred communication method, whether phone, text, or social media.*
- *Redirect the youth's harmful and negative perceptions about themselves while helping them envision their future potential. Identify their strengths and the characteristics that make them unique and worthy. Assist them in re-writing the narrative the exploitive situation has told them about themselves.*
- *Set and maintain boundaries around communication, visits and interactions.*
- *Acknowledge every success, even if they are within or connected to a risky or dangerous action. For example, if a youth used contraceptives while engaging with purchasers/exploiters, or used substances once in a day versus twice.*
- *Regularly tell the youth that you will be there and provide support regardless of any detours in reaching their identified goals.*



- *Even when a youth seems resistant to accepting support, be persistent and consistent, conveying care and concern. This will demonstrate a commitment to the relationship and ongoing support.*
- *Offer and allow frequent opportunities for choice, empowering youth to participate in their own decision making experience.*



What to Avoid

A harm reduction approach requires patience, consistency and a recognition that lasting change will take time. Most importantly, social workers should understand that when a youth is being exploited, a rescue mentality that seeks an immediate and complete break in the abusive relationship is often ineffective in the long term. It is important to recognize that a youth's exploitation is not their choice. Assuming youth own this choice will result in a youth's disengagement and distrust. Below are other actions or situations to avoid when working with youth abused through commercial sexual exploitation:

Do not:

- Lie or omit information from the youth or their family/support system.
- Prioritize out-of-county or out-of-state placements. Evaluate the appropriateness of using such placements. While distance can remove the youth from a harmful situation, question whether it will promote long-term safety, connectedness, feelings of security and stability. Consider what could be accomplished by this move and how the youth will remain successful when they return to the same environment and community they were removed from.
- Place blame and/or tell the youth they are wrong, or that it is their fault for how things are.
- Ignore problematic behavior; instead, hold the youth accountable while responding in a trauma informed way. For example, it is important to understand what drives the youth's actions. This does not mean that certain actions are appropriate. One way to acknowledge problematic behavior is by responding with, "I care about you enough to help you recognize that what you are doing is negatively impacting you or others."
- Solely focus on the exploitive situation, as opposed to the holistic needs of the youth.
- Attempt to change the youth's mind; instead, engage in real, honest conversations aimed at helping the youth come to new, healthier conclusions, understandings and decisions. Using solution-focused techniques as well as motivational interviewing can help facilitate these conversations.
- Minimize the youth's attachment to their exploiter, or the exploitive situation.



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A harm reduction approach requires patience, consistency and a recognition that lasting change will take time.

Conclusion

The short-term incremental achievements gained through the use of harm reduction strategies are the building blocks a youth needs to build a life free from exploitation. Utilizing a harm reduction approach allows for authentic engagement that builds trust and relationships while empowering the youth; all of which are instrumental in effecting positive change and lasting healthy outcomes. A social worker has a unique opportunity to be this instrument and dispel the messages an exploitive situation tells youth about themselves, ultimately providing an opportunity for a brighter future. It is important to remember that serving CSE youth is challenging and often heartbreaking. It will take time and there will be set backs. Not every strategy will be successful every time, but it is vital to not give up. Harm reduction is an approach most successful when used consistently. Further, it is important to practice self-care and be cognizant of the impacts of vicarious trauma, secondary trauma, compassion fatigue or burnout.



Contact Information

For further information relative to CSE youth, the California Department of Social Services has made available a free, 90 minute online learning module at the California Social Worker Education Center's "[Commercially Sexually Exploited Children Awareness Training Module](#)" link.

For county specific training opportunities, please contact your county's Commercially Sexually Exploited Children (CSEC) Coordinator. A list of each county CSEC Coordinator can be found attached. For any additional resources needed with regard to CSE youth please contact the CDSS's Child Trafficking Response Unit at CSECProgram@dss.ca.gov.

Resources

- 1 Hickle, Kristine, and Sophie Hallett. "Mitigating Harm: Considering Harm Reduction Principles in Work with Sexually Exploited Young People." *Children & Society*, Wiley/Blackwell (10.1111), 20 Dec. 2015, onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/chso.12145
- 2 [All County Letter No. 16-15](#)
- 3 [All County Letter No. 17-107](#)
- 4 [Safety Organized Practice: Safety Mapping Quick Guide](#)
- 5 Kate Walker, California Child Welfare Council, *Ending The Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children: A Call for Multi-System Collaboration In California* (2013)





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Child Welfare Policy & Program Development Bureau
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<http://www.cdss.ca.gov/inforesources/Child-Welfare-Protection/Child-Trafficking-Response>

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Updated 07/22/19

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