

SECTION 4

Connecting Colorado

Introduction

In October 2021, the Colorado Department of Public Safety (CDPS), Division of Criminal Justice (DCJ) received federal grant funding from the Office for Victims of Crime (OVC) to support the project *Connecting Colorado: Building Effective Anti-Trafficking Systems*. This initiative was designed to address the challenges and gaps in the systems used to identify and respond to human trafficking of children and youth in the state. The project focuses on strengthening the work of multidisciplinary teams (MDTs) dedicated to assisting young victims and survivors through a collaborative approach involving law enforcement, child welfare, youth services and other professionals.

The origins of *Connecting Colorado* stem from a previous OVC-funded initiative called *Innovate Colorado*, which operated from 2017 to 2021 in partnership with the Colorado Department of Human Services (CDHS). That project enhanced the state’s ability to combat human trafficking by increasing awareness and providing training statewide. The train-the-trainer model designed by the Human Trafficking Team (HTT)—a subset of staff from the DCJ’s Office for Victims Program—empowered regional specialists to conduct community-based training in primarily rural parts of the state, leaving a strong foundation for ongoing capacity-building. Reflecting on the lessons learned in this initial project, the Human

Trafficking Team identified the need for continued improvements to statewide protocols and sought additional funding to address these system gaps.

With the new funding secured, the HTT, with guidance and support from the Colorado Human Trafficking Council (the Council), achieved several milestones to strengthen Colorado's systems for responding to trafficking of children and youth. In 2022, the team hired a project coordinator, engaged the Colorado State University Social Work Research Center (CSU-SWRC) and the Rocky Mountain Immigrant Advocacy Network (RMIAN) as subgrantees, and established a Multidisciplinary Team Working Group (MDT WG) under the Council. The MDT WG consisted of Council members as well as non-members with a wide variety of professionally relevant backgrounds, including existing MDTs. Represented backgrounds include:

- Local law enforcement agencies
- Local and state agencies
- Child advocacy centers
- Legal service providers and immigrant/refugee service agencies
- Medical professionals/healthcare providers
- Victim service providers
- Faith-based organizations
- Mental health providers

Additionally, the Survivor Leader Advisory Board (SLAB) was formed, consisting of five paid consultants who contributed critical expertise and lived experience to guide the project.

By late 2022, the project coordinator began developing the *MDT Toolkit*, drawing heavily on input from the MDT WG and SLAB members. Designed for both new and existing MDTs in Colorado, the toolkit provides guidance on implementing trauma-informed and culturally responsive practices for children and youth who are vulnerable to or have experienced human trafficking.

The *MDT Toolkit* was finalized in fall 2023 and launched at a statewide MDT Summit in February 2024. The event introduced the toolkit and offered skill-based training to existing MDTs primarily located in the Denver metro area, including the 17th and 18th Judicial

Districts, Boulder County, Denver County, El Paso County, and Jefferson County. This milestone concluded phase one of *Connecting Colorado* and ushered in phase two—the “beta test” phase.

Conducted throughout 2024, phase two involved providing individualized and group training and technical assistance (TTA) to six MDTs as well as collecting ongoing feedback on the toolkit’s use in practice. The phase concluded with a focus group of MDT coordinators, facilitated by the CSU-SWRC evaluation team, to gather comprehensive feedback on both the toolkit and the TTA provided throughout phase two.

The third and final phase of *Connecting Colorado* began in early 2025 with an MDT Summit in



Pictured: Participants at the MDT Summit 2025

Photo courtesy of Caleb Stewart

February, attended by three new communities. This gathering marked the launch of the *MDT Toolkit 2.0*—an improved version of the resource that incorporated lessons learned during the beta-test phase and additional useful information not provided in the previous version. During this final phase, which ended in September 2025, project staff continued to provide targeted TTA and worked closely with these communities to support their establishment of MDTs dedicated to addressing human trafficking in children and youth.

New MDT Community Selection

To advance this last phase of *Connecting Colorado*, the project team engaged with several communities that had expressed interest in participating in the project. Ultimately, the team selected three communities to participate in this phase of the project: Larimer County, Weld County and Routt County. These communities were either in the process of

developing an entirely new MDT or had already established an MDT very recently and wanted to refine their policies and procedures.

To participate, each community was required to fulfill a set of prerequisites, including completion of the Council's two introductory courses: *An Introduction to Human Trafficking in Colorado*, designed for community members or adjacent professionals to learn the basics of human trafficking and understand how to identify it, and *Human Trafficking Investigations*, designed for law enforcement.

An additional prerequisite was a four-hour, facilitator-led workshop titled *Meeting Human Trafficking Survivors' Needs*, which is an advanced course that teaches attendees how to be trauma-responsive and culturally sensitive as well as build community response networks that help connect human trafficking survivors to services.

The final prerequisite, contingent on completing the first two, was to attend the MDT Summit in February 2025. The summit, which was modified based on feedback collected in the evaluation process during phase 2, launched the final phase of the project, the "pilot test."

MDT Toolkit 2.0 Updates and Implementation

The overarching goal of the *MDT Toolkit* is to serve as a curated reference guide of example policies and procedures that promote a more consistent and holistic MDT response to Colorado children and youth who are experiencing, or at risk of experiencing, human trafficking. Ultimately it is intended to be used as a quick-start guide for communities interested in developing their own MDTs.

The original toolkit was developed by drawing on existing literature, incorporating input from the MDT WG, integrating feedback from SLAB, and revamping Colorado's screening tool—the Colorado High Risk Victim (HRV) Identification Tool—based on a critical analysis and a usability study conducted by CSU-SWRC. The HRV Tool was developed in 2014 by Jefferson County and later mandated for statewide use in 2017 to help identify risk for trafficking of children and youth. After the HRV Tool was in the field for several years without revision or evaluation, a critical analysis of the tool and potential replacement of it

was incorporated into the *Connecting Colorado* project. The CSU-SWRC utility study provided key insights from professionals using the tool, highlighting the need for improved training, better guidance on using the labor trafficking section, and updated indicators for online exploitation and gang involvement.

Following the study, the MDT WG considered other alternative, validated tools that met specific criteria, including applicability for children, youth and foreign nationals; coverage of both sex and labor trafficking; and gender-neutral language. Given the limited options, the MDT WG ultimately voted to revise the existing HRV Tool. The group formed subcommittees to focus on key revisions, leading to the creation of a final draft that included clear guidance, updated indicators and questions, integrated sex and labor trafficking questions, and a new supplement for foreign national youth. The revised tool was unanimously approved in November 2023 and renamed the Human Trafficking Vulnerability Assessment (HTVA). The HTVA includes trauma-responsive and culturally sensitive guidance, revised language and prompts, a final assessment process, a foreign national supplement, and a more accurate and descriptive name to describe its intended purpose.

Additional topics and resources were added to the *MDT Toolkit 2.0* based on feedback collected by CSU-SWRC during the beta test. At the October 2024 MDT WG monthly meeting, CSU-SWRC presented its findings on array of topics that MDTs felt would be beneficial to have in the *MDT Toolkit 2.0*.

These topics and resources include:

- Additional guidance for navigating confidentiality concerns and establishing memorandums of understanding.
- Information about the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children.
- A Colorado MDT Referral Form and sample referral definitions.
- Effects of trauma by age.
- Human trafficking versus human smuggling.
- Safety planning.

- Updated information on Special Immigrant Juvenile status that is an immigration process for foreign-born children and youth.

The MDT WG approved inclusion of these new topics in the *MDT Toolkit 2.0*, and project staff created materials to be reviewed and approved by the MDT WG and fully integrated into the toolkit.



Pictured: Austin Paul, HT Grant Project Coordinator

Photo courtesy of Caleb Stewart

The *MDT Toolkit 2.0* was officially introduced at the February 2025 MDT Summit. The summit agenda included instruction on the toolkit contents and how to navigate it, guidance on the HTVA with hands-on practice, a session on survivor empowerment, and a mock MDT meeting. Throughout the day, CSU SWRC collected surveys from participants to understand their comfort with using the toolkit and to establish additional TTA needs that would be provided in the following months.

Following the summit, a TTA plan was developed and scheduled for the months of March through August.

Due to the wide range of expertise needed for the TTA subjects, training was provided by a combination of project staff, SLAB members and other outside partners. This plan was informed by the survey feedback collected during and at the end of the summit. All three communities selected for the *Connecting Colorado* project shared several common TTA needs and required individualized TTA sessions. To deliver the necessary TTA to these MDTs, the coordinators of each MDT met with the project team once a month beginning in March to receive shared TTA and engage in facilitated discussion. The TTA topics for these monthly meetings included:

- April: Formulating a mission and vision statement (delivered by project staff).
- May: Further guidance for professionals using the HTVA (delivered by outside experts from CDHS).
- June: Trauma-responsive care (delivered by project staff).

- July: Survivor-centered care (delivered by outside experts from the Laboratory to Combat Human Trafficking).
- August: Child and youth agency and empowerment and engaging parents (delivered by project staff).

In addition, each MDT received monthly TTA unique to its own needs and/or community:

- Routt County: Member orientation and rapport-building, MDT funding, and service provider partnerships (delivered by SLAB and project staff).
- Weld County: Information-sharing, service provider partnerships and referrals, mission and vision statement development (delivered by SLAB and project staff).
- Larimer County: Referrals, information-sharing and additional HTVA training for screeners (delivered by SLAB and project staff).

RMIAN Project Outcomes

The Rocky Mountain Immigrant Advocacy Network was a critical partner on the *Connecting Colorado* project. When developing the grant proposal, it was clear to the HTT that the project would need to intentionally include education about labor trafficking as well as legal service provision to immigrant populations of children and youth. RMIAN's participation in the project fulfilled both of these goals.

During RMIAN's time on the project, its staff were essential to the MDT Working Group, helping to shape the toolkit's content on labor trafficking and legal considerations for foreign nationals. In addition, RMIAN greatly informed the foreign national supplement to the HTVA. As the project entered the second and third phases, staff at RMIAN provided training at the 2024 and 2025 MDT summits as well as specialized TTA for all MDT coordinators from both the beta and pilot phases, which also included providing training to members of participating MDTs, upon request.

Another key component RMIAN added to the project was immigration legal services to children and youth and their family members. The group was the sole service provider on the grant, and by highlighting its expertise and experience with MDTs across the state, it helped increase referrals for legal services. Over the entirety of the project, RMIAN served

113 new clients. To illustrate the breadth of work the group undertook, these clients would often work with RMIAN staff for many months or even years, depending on their individual situations. In addition, RMIAN provided services to 29 family members of new clients. Over the course of the project, staff may likewise work with a family member for months or even years. Table 3 indicates the types of services RMIAN provided human trafficking survivors and their family members.

Table 3: Types of Legal Services Provided by RMIAN, CY 2022–2025

Service Provision Areas	Types of Services
Information and referral	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Information about the criminal justice process. ▪ Information about victims’ rights, how to obtain notification, etc. ▪ Referral to other victim service programs. ▪ Referral to other services, support and resources (e.g., legal, medical, faith-based organization, etc.).
Personal advocacy/accompaniment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Law enforcement interview advocacy/accompaniment. ▪ Individual advocacy (e.g., assistance in applying for public benefits or other low-cost alternatives, applying for medical insurance, return of personal property or effects). ▪ Advocacy for immigrant assistance (e.g., special visas, continued presence application, other immigration relief). ▪ Family reunification.
Criminal/civil justice system assistance services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Legal support with immigrant assistance (e.g., special visas, continued presence application, other immigration relief). ▪ Criminal justice advocacy/accompaniment (providing support, assistance, advocacy/accompaniment to victims at any stage of the criminal justice process, such as filing a police report, testimony or post-sentencing support). ▪ Public benefits law. ▪ Other legal advice and/or counsel.

Note: Service provision areas and types of services outlined by the Office for Victims of Crime.

Figures 40, 41 and 42 provide demographic information about the 113 clients who worked with RMIAN during the *Connecting Colorado* project from 2021 to 2025. Due to delays in starting the grant, RMIAN provided no services in 2021. Additionally, the data provided in 2025 only cover a partial year, as grant funding ended on September 30. Figure 40 shows clients by type of trafficking: sex, labor or both. Overall, RMIAN served more labor trafficking clients (71) than clients who experienced sex trafficking (38). Figure 41 provides the client breakdown by age. Although this project focused on children and youth, RMIAN was allowed to provide legal services for clients up to 24. Most clients who received legal services were part of the 18–24 age bracket, followed by the 13–17 age bracket, and

five clients were part of the 0–12 age bracket. Finally, figure 42 provides the gender breakdown of clients. Overall, RMIAN served more female clients (67) than male clients (43), a non-binary client (1) and non-reported clients (2) over the four-year project period.

Figure 40: New RMIAN Clients by Type of Trafficking, CY 2021–2025

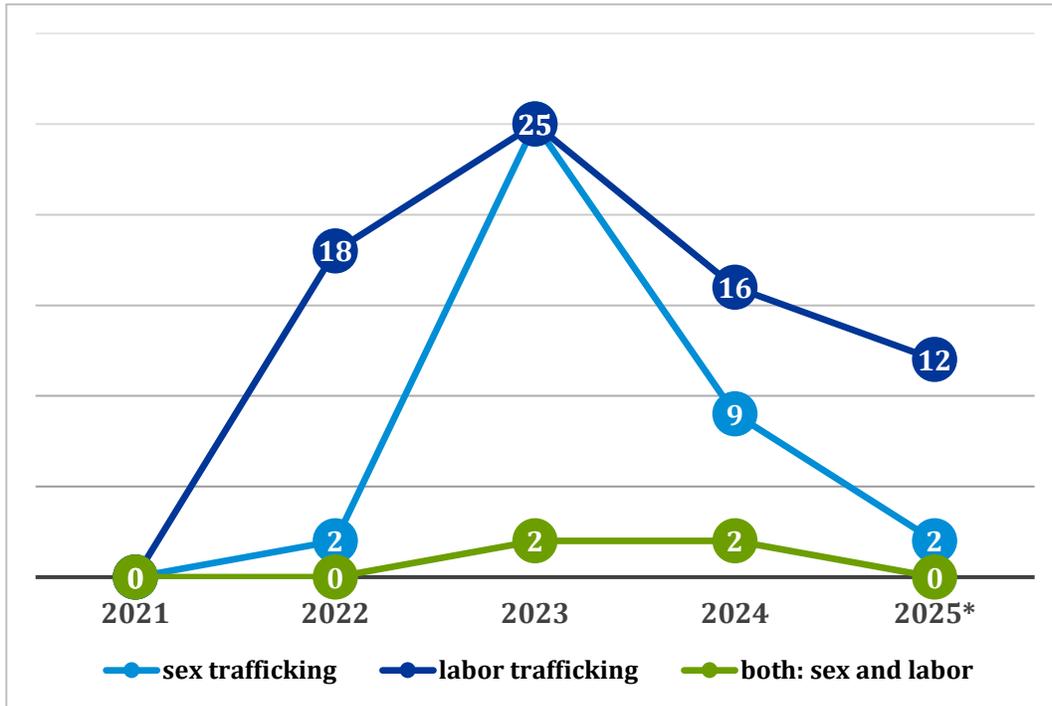


Figure 41: New RMIAN Clients by Age, CY 2021-2025

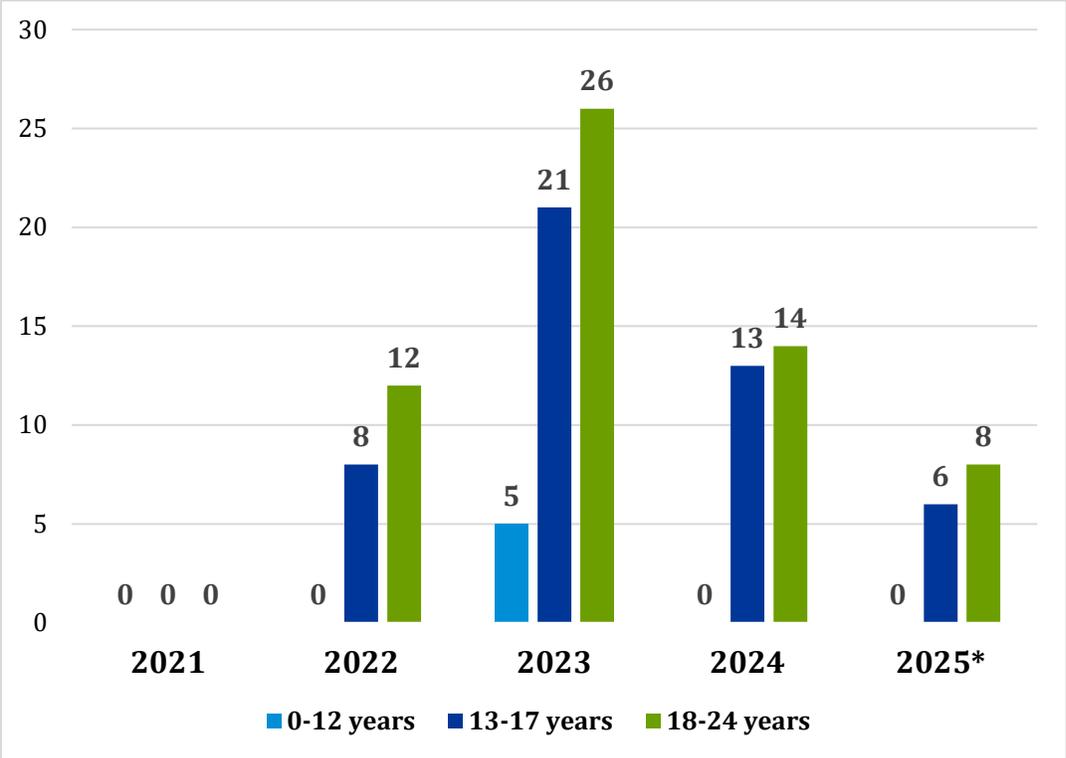
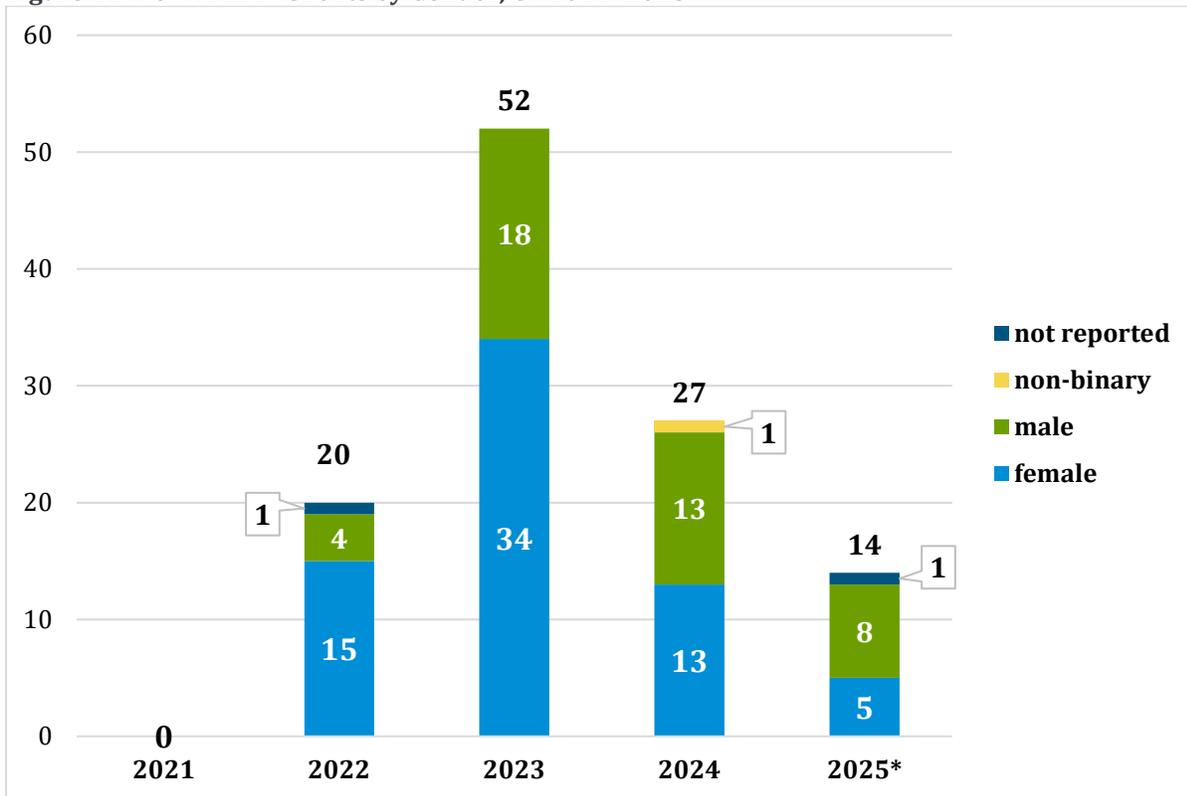


Figure 42: New RMIAN Clients by Gender, CY 2021–2025



Data Source: Data for all three figures obtained from grant reporting by RMIAN for the *Connecting Colorado* project.

* Data from 2025 only cover a partial calendar year, January 1–September 30, due to the end of the grant project.

Pilot Test Evaluation and Results

Similar to the phase 2 beta test, phase 3 of *Connecting Colorado* continued to collect feedback from participants to evaluate the usefulness of the *MDT Toolkit 2.0* and subsequent TTA. This process remained continuous, with designated time at each monthly MDT coordinator meeting reserved for CSU-SWRC to ask evaluation questions. The effort culminated in final exit interviews with participants in late August and early September, after all TTA had been delivered. These interviews revealed both the promise and challenges of implementing the MDT Toolkit across diverse community contexts. While the initial summit demonstrated high enthusiasm and preliminary confidence, the implementation phase exposed the complex realities of multidisciplinary team coordination in human trafficking response. The most significant finding was the overwhelming challenge of integrating MDT coordination responsibilities into already demanding workloads. This emerged as the primary barrier to full implementation,

highlighting a systemic issue in human trafficking response efforts. Despite implementation challenges, participating communities expressed strong appreciation for the toolkit.

Reporting both "*huge improvements*," and gratitude for the opportunity and the toolkit's value beyond the grant period.

The evaluation of the pilot phase also provided additional insight and recommendations for the improvement of the toolkit content, TTA provided and structural support.

Toolkit Format and Content:

- Develop electronic, searchable formats while maintaining physical copies.
- Create community education resources.
- Provide materials for youth education and peer-to-peer outreach.
- Develop resources for engaging community partners.

Training and Implementation Support:

- Offer regional training options outside major metropolitan areas.
- Develop train-the-trainer programs for community-based education.
- Provide clearer guidance on HTVA tool operationalization.
- Create practice sessions and role-play opportunities.
- Develop job aids for workflow integration.

Structural Support:

- Establish dedicated, funded coordinator positions.
- Provide contracted support during initial MDT establishment.
- Create a contact network for MDT coordinators to facilitate peer support.
- Ensure continued state-level coordination and technical assistance.

Evaluation partners from CSU-SWRC also hosted focus groups with members of SLAB to collect feedback about the members' experiences with the project. The overall sentiment shared by SLAB members was overwhelmingly positive. Consultants who provided numerical ratings in the pre-interview survey rated their overall satisfaction 5 out of 5, with participants describing the opportunity as "wonderful" and emphasizing that their "insights and perspective were taken into account and incorporated" into final materials

and project deliverables. One consultant, with extensive consulting experience, rated the project “an A+, in ranking it compared to other consulting projects.”

Survey responses validated the project’s success in avoiding tokenistic survivor involvement. One respondent explicitly noted, “I felt my involvement was meaningful and not tokenistic.” This view aligned with another consultant’s observation from their extensive consulting experience: “I’ve definitely been on projects where things felt tokenistic, or ... you know, they just have ... a survivor advisory, whatever to make it sound good, but ... there was actually no power or decision-making or influence ... [this project] actually felt like we had, like, influence.”

The consultants appreciated the balance between structure and autonomy in the project’s SLAB model, which they say allowed them to approach their work in ways that felt authentic and effective. Of note, the project facilitated knowledge transfer both within Colorado and to other states. Two of the consultants reported regularly sharing information about Colorado’s model with other task forces and jurisdictions outside the state.

Next Steps

The *Connecting Colorado* project concluded at the end of September 2025. Despite this end date, the materials created throughout will continue to be available and have a lasting impact going forward. Both the *MDT Toolkit 2.0* and HTVA will remain available as resources for communities and service providers throughout the state. Additionally, the establishment of SLAB will hopefully serve as a model for other states and organizations looking to engage consultants with lived experience. Throughout this phase of the project, other states have expressed interest in creating their own version of SLAB due to its success and thoughtful approach to engaging individuals with lived experience.

The HTVA will continue to have a major impact; it will be the required screening tool by CDHS’s Division of Child Welfare and Division of Youth Services. The HTVA will be added to the case management system used by these divisions. In addition, required training on

human trafficking and how to use the HTVA will be part of the statewide implementation process within CDHS.

A further goal is to make the HTVA available for use to service providers throughout Colorado. This endeavor will require users to be familiar with the topic of human trafficking by taking courses such as *An Introduction to Human Trafficking in Colorado* and receiving training on the HTVA. Project staff have explored ways to support these efforts with the hope of continuing the HTVA rollout more broadly in 2026.