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# **An Evaluation of the Safe Harbor Initiative in Minnesota – 2023**

**REPORT TO COMMISSIONER**

APRIL 1, 2021 to JUNE 30, 2023

## **An Evaluation of the Safe Harbor Initiative in Minnesota 2023 – Report to Commissioner**

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<https://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/humantrafficking/index.html>

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## Executive summary and introduction

Safe Harbor became Minnesota law in 2011, and in the years since, the state has built an extensive network in response to the sexual exploitation of youth and, more recently, human trafficking, both sex and labor. The network spans from state and local government to Tribal Nations and community-based nonprofit programs. Founded on a public health approach led by the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) in recognition of the significant health and social impacts created by exploitation and trafficking on populations, Safe Harbor also partners extensively with entities in public safety, human services, and human rights, including the Minnesota Department of Human Services (DHS), the Minnesota Department of Public Safety (DPS), and the Minnesota Attorney General's Office to offer a comprehensive multidisciplinary response.

State law requires the Safe Harbor Director, based in MDH, to submit a biennial evaluation of the program to the commissioner of health under Minnesota Statute Section 145.4718. The purpose of the evaluation is to ensure Safe Harbor is reaching its intended participants, increasing identification of sexually exploited youth, coordinating across disciplines, including law enforcement and child welfare, providing access to services, including housing, ensuring the quality of services, and utilizing penalty funds to support services. The evaluation process is an opportunity to hear and learn from trafficked and exploited youth as well as participants from a variety of disciplines who respond to the needs of these youth daily.

After Safe Harbor became law in 2011, a three-year planning period called No Wrong Door laid the groundwork for full enactment of the network in 2014. In the years since, Safe Harbor has submitted four evaluation reports to the legislature beginning in 2015 and including reports in 2016 (mid-year report), 2017, 2019, and 2021. Wilder Research at the Amherst H. Wilder Foundation conducted each evaluation under a competitive contract with MDH.

The current evaluation was conducted by The Improve Group. The evaluation centered youth and applied mixed methods to tell the whole story of Safe Harbor. Youth advisors with lived experience provided valuable input on the evaluation (e.g., how to ask survey, focus group, and interview questions). Data sources for this evaluation included a survey of youth, key informant interviews with youth, analysis of the MDH Safe Harbor program data, and focus groups with grantees and multidisciplinary partners. Where necessary, this evaluation report indicates the method(s) used for the described data. The following questions developed by The Improve Group guided the evaluation process:

1. Which services and supports are needed by and being provided to youth, and are these services and supports culturally appropriate for all who need them?
2. What factors contribute to Safe Harbor's impact?
3. What are the gaps and challenges that impede the work of Safe Harbor?
4. What are the opportunities for improvement?

The complete Improve Group evaluation is available on the MDH website at [Minnesota Safe Harbor Evaluation \(www.health.state.mn.us/communities/humantrafficking/reports/sheval.html\)](https://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/humantrafficking/reports/sheval.html) hereinafter Improve Group report).

All findings in the Improve Group Report focus on the Safe Harbor network and activities between April 1, 2021, and June 30, 2023. The Improve Group data collection, analysis, and report writing occurred between March 1, 2023, and September 30, 2023. The Improve Group submitted its report to MDH, including several findings and

recommendations. The Improve Group found evidence for outcomes related to multidisciplinary partnership and access to services, including culturally specific services, the factors contributing to Safe Harbor's impact, gaps and challenges, distinct regional needs, and opportunities for improvement through training and policy change. In addition, The Improve Group, in its evaluation, reiterated the Safe Harbor network's responsibility to address historic and ongoing societal harms contributing to the sexual exploitation of youth, as quoted here:

*Today's state agencies, grantees, and multidisciplinary partners responsible for implementation of Safe Harbor inherited a system built on policies that have oppressed communities of color and American Indian communities. Safe Harbor is not at fault for this harmful legacy—but people involved are accountable for responding to sexual exploitation in a way that remedies, rather than perpetuates, these injustices.*

MDH presents this 2023 evaluation report as a summary of key information, including tables, contained within the Improve Group report, providing details on service provision, participant experience, and findings supporting several recommendations listed below. Table numbers sometimes differ from the Improve Group report in this 2023 evaluation report due to summarization (footnotes or parentheticals provide guidance). The reader should review the full Improve Group report for all tables and figures, evaluation methodology, participant input, and complete recommendations.

**Recommended Actions from The Improve Group and Supported by MDH Safe Harbor:**

1. Provide more resources for centering youth voice as a trauma-informed practice.
2. Support shelters to respond to violence in trauma-informed ways, while increasing housing options for youth committing violence.
3. Support small, rural organizations to increase their cultural responsiveness.
4. Help agencies plan for youths' transition to adulthood.
5. Provide more time for collaboration among grantees and community organizations to foster stronger relationships and facilitate new introductions after turnover occurs.
6. Work to increase the supply of and connections to mental health providers, especially for culturally specific services and evidence-based therapy.
7. Provide training that goes beyond Trafficking 101 and addresses current challenges.
8. Support quality Safe Harbor program data entry through ongoing training and technical assistance for grantees to ensure an accurate picture of Safe Harbor services.
9. Incorporate ways to support grantee staff retention into Safe Harbor strategic planning and increase funding to Safe Harbor to support grantee staff retention.