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Team Approaches to Addressing Sex Trafficking of Minors: Promising Practices for a Collaborative Model

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Abstract: The extant research literature is lacking in its focus on community-based responses (CBRs) to sex trafficking involving minors in the juvenile justice system. To address this research gap, the present study draws from 35 interviews with social service and justice system practitioners who work with juvenile justice-involved minors experiencing sex trafficking to examine collaborative responses in two Study Sites. Specifically, protocols to respond to trafficking and collaboration with community partners are explored. Results indicate that a formal protocol engaging a team approach inclusive of multiple community partners is a promising mezzo level response to addressing the sex trafficking of minors involved in the juvenile justice system. Informal and formal relationships, establishing a shared goal, open and ongoing communication, and trust building were also found to enhance community-based responses. Implications include establishing a protocol to respond to sex trafficking in the juvenile court system when sex trafficking is suspected and/or confirmed, which would engage a CBR team involving the survivor, parent(s)/guardian(s), DJO, supervisor, investigator, judge, Children's Division caseworker, and social services provider(s). Establishing a shared goal within the CBR team and developing a pattern of communication and follow up can facilitate trust building, ultimately benefitting CBRs addressing the sex trafficking of minors involved with the juvenile justice system.

Keywords: community-based responses; collaborative response model; human trafficking; sex trafficking; DMST; juvenile justice

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1. Introduction

Community-based response models were largely developed and gained popularity following the advent of the U.S. Trafficking Victims Protection Act in 2000, with the aim of providing a coordinated and collaborative response to address human trafficking. The extant research examining community-based responses to sex trafficking is primarily focused on education and awareness initiatives, with the aim of increased identification, the inner workings of coalitions, and legislative efforts such as the development of a safe harbor policy. There is a dearth of literature examining mezzo level practices across organizational sectors used by practitioners when working with minors experiencing sex trafficking. In particular, little is known about the processes and ways actors within organizations interact with one another to adequately respond to the sex trafficking of minors. Drawing from 35 interviews with social service and justice system practitioners, the present study examines mezzo level practices among stakeholders in two Study Sites in a Midwestern region. Specifically, the current study explores the processes and collaboration among social and justice system practitioners in addressing the sex trafficking of minors who are involved with the juvenile justice system.

1.1. Development of Community-Based Responses

Community-Based Responses (CBRs), sometimes referred to as interagency or multidisciplinary coalitions or teams, coordinated community responses, or collaborative response models, aim to provide a coordinated service response to improve outcomes for those receiving services. While varying in their forms, CBRs typically build partnerships between social service providers, justice system personnel, and other select community partners. CBRs range from informal relationships and referral networks among practitioners in various organizational sectors to formalized government-funded interagency collaborations. CBRs first became popularized in the response to intimate partner violence and rape and sexual assault [1,2]. Decades of research focusing on CBRs involving intimate partner violence and rape and sexual assault find support for CBRs; findings show reduced future victimization, increased likelihood of willingness to use services again in the future, increased well-being, and increased satisfaction with services [2–6]. Because of the identified benefits of collaborative responses in other areas, CBRs were replicated in anti-trafficking response [7]. The U.S. TVPA unlocked funding streams for anti-trafficking collaborative models in the form of task forces, coalitions, and multidisciplinary teams [8].

1.2. Community-Based Responses to Sex Trafficking

The aim behind the development of CBRs to address sex trafficking involves coordinating and thus streamlining and strengthening the responses of law enforcement, service organizations, and political leaders in areas such as policy and legislative advocacy, prosecution efforts, social service coordination, and education and awareness initiatives within the community [5,8–10]. Initially, Rescue and Restore Coalitions and specialized task forces were tasked with providing education and awareness to the broader community, as well as professionals likely to encounter trafficking. The purpose of such efforts emphasized the identification of trafficking survivors. Related research focuses on various elements of outreach and identification, education and awareness, and prevention efforts [7,11,12]. The extant research also emphasizes the inner workings of coalitions and the benefits and challenges of CBRs. For example, collaboration facilitated by CBRs can enhance key stakeholders' understandings of a particular social issue and further develop partnerships to address it [13]. Anti-trafficking CBRs also work to build mutual understandings of various stakeholders' goals, and to develop a shared goal among CBR members providing enhanced cohesion and trust building [14]. CBRs can enhance cooperation between survivor-centered organizations and law enforcement, and increase service collaborations and resource referrals [14,15]. Furthermore, collaborative responses result in streamlined services for trafficking survivors; when services are streamlined and coordinated, outcomes for survivors are improved [16,17].

Despite such benefits of anti-trafficking CBRs, challenges have been identified as well, including developing and maintaining a shared goal and mutual trust among stakeholders. "Long-standing tensions between the law enforcement and victim services sectors are also acknowledged; these are characterized as impeding collaboration" [8]. Law enforcement's emphasis on prosecution may take precedence over the goals and long-term needs of survivors [18]. Furthermore, Jones and Lutze (2016) found that meaningful participation in anti-trafficking coalitions was challenging because of lack of formalized roles and responsibilities [19]. Bintliff and colleagues (2020) uncovered the ongoing need for enhanced collaboration and referral networks, as well as addressing service gaps [20]. Another study found that divisive perspectives on trafficking within a coalition (e.g., all commercial sex is trafficking/sex trafficking and sex work are distinct) resulted in differing policy response preferences (e.g., abolition/decriminalization), which further fragmented coalition action in community-based responses [21]. While some benefits and challenges to anti-trafficking CBRs are known from this small body of work, less is known about CBRs specifically focused on trafficked minors involved in the juvenile justice system.

1.3. Community-Based Responses to Juvenile Justice System-Involved Minors Experiencing Sex Trafficking

CBRs to sex trafficking involving minors within the juvenile justice system largely emphasize the development of domestic minor sex trafficking (DMST) courts, as well as advocating for related legislative changes, such as Safe Harbor laws [24]. DMST courts typically aim to divert minors away from punitive responses, such as juvenile detention and towards social and mental healthcare services. Safe Harbor laws predominantly focus on decriminalizing minors involved in commercial sex, and increasing penalties for traffickers as well as those who are buying sex. Other focal points of CBRs include educating others in multi-system responses to minor sex trafficking, cross-training involving multiple organizational sectors, and advocacy across multi-systems [22–24]. Developing collaborative reports and making referrals to other system partners, such as between counselors and child welfare and law enforcement is also recommended and has been identified as a benefit of CBRs more broadly [14,23]. Rebecca Bender, a survivor-leader, indicated "organizations should develop a response protocol when referring clients, and then engage in professional networking to connect with others who are credible and committed to delivering supportive practices" [20]. Yet research specifically examining response protocols involving juvenile justice-involved sex trafficking survivors outside of diversion to MST[1] courts is lacking. Much of the existing research examining juvenile justice-involved MST survivors focuses on risk factors, identification practices, or Safe Harbor laws rather than specific mezzo level CBR protocols [25–33]. Other work focusing on juvenile justice-involved sex trafficked minors emphasizes transformational relationships [30,32] survivors' positive perceptions about specialty courts [31], or survivors' negative perceptions about punitive responses they experience in social services and the criminal justice system [34]. Furthermore, research broadly indicates the multitude of immediate and aftercare needs of survivors [35–37], and that such needs are better met when coordinated [16,17,38]. Reed and colleagues (2021) indicated minors should receive a combination of services to meet basic needs, as well as mental healthcare and interventions to address trauma and safety [39]. Yet, Vollinger and Campbell (2020) found in their exploration of a collaborative task force, that respondents reported the lack of service availability and lack of centralized referral protocols as key barriers to an adequate trafficking response to youth [38].

In summary, much of the literature on sex trafficking-related CBRs focuses on the inner workings of coalitions, legislative advocacy/DMST courts, education and awareness initiatives, and survivors' perceptions of responses. The ways CBRs function specifically among collaborating organizations responding to MST is understudied [14,19]. The research is extremely limited in specifically examining the role of CBRs in responding to the sex trafficking of minors involved with the juvenile justice system, including formal or informal processes used post-identification of sex trafficking and the benefits and challenges to collaboration with community partners. To address these gaps and contribute to the small body of literature in this area, the present study focuses on the following research questions, with the aim of scaling beneficial responses and addressing challenges:

1. What are the benefits and challenges to collaboration with various community partners in social services, the justice system, and the child welfare system?
2. What processes are being used in the juvenile justice response to trafficking, and how do practitioners perceive their efficacy?

2. Methods

2.1. Sample

The current study is drawn from a larger study broadly examining the experiences and perceptions of social service providers and justice system professionals who work with minor sex trafficking (MST) survivors involved in the juvenile justice system, emphasizing micro, mezzo, and macro level responses. The present study focuses specifically on identified processes in addressing MST in two Study Sites, and related collaboration within and between systems. Data are drawn from in-depth interviews with 35 participants who were

involved in the response to juvenile justice system-involved MST in two Study Sites (henceforth referred to as Study Site A and Study Site B), including social service providers and justice system personnel who worked with minors experiencing ST. Sample information, such as job title (e.g., investigator/therapist) and Study Site location are provided in Table 1. Further sample details, including demographic characteristics, can be found in [40].

Table 1. Study Site Participants and Job Titles.

Study Site A (n = 13)		**Study Site B (n = 9)**		**Study Site A and B (n = 13)**	
Participant	**Job Title**	**Participant**	**Job Title**	**Participant**	**Job Title**
Taryn	Investigator	Dominick	Investigator	Janet	Therapist/Director, Children's Services
Kevin	Investigator	Peter	Investigator	Debbie	Therapist, Children's Services
T'Asia	Shelter staff	Phil	Investigator	Anita	Therapist/Coordinator of Prevention Education Groups
Bruce	Truancy Officer	Griffin	Investigator	Chloe	Program Director
David	Truancy Officer	Carla	DJO	Clover	Therapist, Residential and Outpatient, sex trafficking specific
Sophie	DJO	Candy	DJO	Lynda	Director, Youth Shelter
Henry	DJO	Diane	DJO	Dorothy	Therapist, Youth Shelter
Elliot	DJO	Leslie	DJO	Jenna	Case Manager, Youth Shelter
Shirley	DJO	Ruby	DJO	Amelia	Case Manager, Children's Services
Cassandra	DJO			Madonna	Director, Case Manager, Youth Drop-In Center
Shileah	DJO			Kristi	Program director, Youth Shelter
Thalia	DJO			Tessa	Case manager
Tina	DJO			Nora	Drop-In Center

Sample Recruitment

The sample was recruited through purposive and snowball sampling methods. The first author has more than ten years of involvement in a large, local anti-trafficking coalition, and has engaged in multiple research studies involving community action research methodology with the coalition. As such, longstanding relationships allowed for initial contacts and entrée into the sample of providers in social service and justice system sectors. Initial contacts included two justice system officials (one in each Study Site), two directors working in the family courts in Study Site A, and social service organizations serving both Study Sites A and B which included one director working in residential services, another director working in drop-in services, one therapist working in residential services, and one case manager working in residential services. Snowball sampling from the initial contacts, involving referrals from these initial contacts to further contacts, then led to expansion of the sample. After each interview, each respondent was also asked for referrals to other potential interviewees, consistent with snowball sampling methodology. In addition to snowball sampling from the initial contacts, purposive sampling was conducted to recruit individuals in underrepresented organizational contexts (such as foster care; homeless youth services) through referrals and email introductions from initial and snowball-sampling-derived contacts. These contacts were asked if they knew individuals working in the underrepresented areas, and were then asked for an introduction and referral.

The first wave of sampling and data collection in both Study Sites included those working directly within the justice system (n = 21), including deputy juvenile officers (DJOs), police/investigators, and truancy officers (see Table 1). DJOs in both Study Sites provide case management to juveniles with criminal or status offenses (i.e., running away, curfew violations, and truancy), and are trained to identify MST. Truancy officers in Study Site A work to identify minors with excessive absences from school and are also trained to identify MST. There are no truancy officers in Study Site B. Police investigators investigate cases of human trafficking, including MST, and were part of specific units or task forces focused exclusively on human trafficking. The second wave of sampling and data collection in both Study Sites included social service providers (n = 14), who were case managers or therapists who encounter MST survivors in various organizational contexts, such as homeless youth shelters, transitional housing and children's services residential programs, youth drop-in centers, foster care, and sex-trafficking specific residential programs for minors.

The justice system officials worked largely within a single Study Site (A or B), although there was occasionally some crossover when the minors they worked with moved from one Study Site to the other if placed in foster or other protective care, or were picked up in one location for a status or criminal offence but resided in another. However, the social service providers served both Study Sites A and B (see Table 1).

2.2. Data Collection

Interviews were conducted in person in the first author's private office (n = 3), or the respondents' offices (n = 31). One respondent chose a quiet coffee shop. At the time of the interview, respondents were given an informed consent form, which indicated anticipated risks and benefits of the project and assured confidentiality through de-identifying audios and transcripts. Pseudonyms for individuals and organizations are used throughout this manuscript. The interviews were audio recorded, transcribed by a professional transcriptionist, and rechecked by the first author. Only one participant declined recording, and field notes were used in this instance. The interviews on average were approximately 30–45 min in length. IRB approval was obtained for this project. An interview guide was used, but interviews were semi-structured in nature. Additional themes were allowed to develop, following the natural flow of the conversation. The interview guide was structured to address confirmatory bias by eliciting negative cases through specific questioning about both the benefits and challenges of various aspects of collaboration.

Systems theory was used as a general framework to develop the research questions and interview guide in the larger study from which the present study is drawn [41,42]. Systems theory is an interdisciplinary organizational model centered on the interrelated concepts of (1) objects ("parts" of systems/variables), (2) attributes (qualities, aspects, properties, or contexts of the system and its objects), (3) internal relationships (collaborations within a system and between objects), and (4) the environment (external/ecological factors that impact the system). The "system" as a whole involves these interrelated aspects. The system is designed to address sex trafficking among juvenile justice-involved minors; its objects, attributes, internal relationships and collaborations, and environment were examined in the larger study from which the present study is drawn, specifically focused on the benefits and challenges experienced within these four major areas. Objects include the juvenile courts, child protective services, law enforcement, and social service organizations. Attributes include processes, policies, and practices. Internal relationships and collaborations include those that reflect both formal and informal connections between the objects. The environment includes ecological factors such as access to resources and family environments.

Data specifically examined in this study focus on the mezzo level, including processes (attributes) and collaborations (relationships) among the objects and are derived from the following interview questions and prompts: 1. What does the typical process look like when a juvenile becomes involved with the system? (Prompts: What types of services do youth receive? Is there a procedure or protocol to follow? What does that look like? What are the benefits and challenges of any procedures/protocols?) 2. What systems do you collaborate with? Can you describe the benefits and challenges of working with (each group named)? (Prompts re: justice system officials, children's division, and social service providers).

2.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis of the transcribed interviews was inductive in nature, and initially involved both open coding by hand and selective coding based upon the research design (e.g., coding the benefits and challenges of processes and collaboration with various groups). A coding tree was developed as a result of coding the first set of transcripts, and subsequent coding was guided by the coding tree. The first set of transcripts involving justice system practitioners was independently coded by three members of the research team, including two graduate students trained in qualitative coding and one experienced coder. The

second set of transcripts was independently coded in pairings of two experienced coders with two mentees, who received hands-on instruction and training. After independent coding, discussion of codes and any discrepancies were noted and recoded as a part of the multi-phase coding process. Any discrepancies in codes involved overlapping codes (e.g., something that was simultaneously a process as well as involving collaboration with law enforcement) or identification of additional subthemes which were then coded as such. Following the coding of the transcripts and identification of core themes, merged narrative accounts for each core theme were created [43,44]. The merged narrative accounts of core themes were then further coded through taxonomic analysis [45]. Taxonomic analysis involved the independent coding of the transcripts by two members of the research team to identify subthemes, who then met to discuss each individually-coded transcript to ensure reliability in the interpretation of the data and related codes, recoding overlapping areas with both codes, following the same practice as the initial coding.

3. Results

Results are presented with the juvenile courts as the primary point of interest, organized by Study Site for comparative purposes, with data triangulated by the community partners—social service providers and investigators—working with each Study Site.

3.1. Processes Used in Study Site A

Study Site A had an established process related to MST. Specifically, when any member of the juvenile court system identified or suspected MST, they reported it to the supervisor, which then engaged a team approach to the issue (see Figure 1). The team typically included the deputy juvenile officer (DJO), a Children's Division Caseworker, a detective from the Human Trafficking Unit (HTU), any social service providers they were working with, the minor, and the minor's family member(s) or guardian(s). A plan for the minor would then be collaboratively developed by the team. All DJOs offices in this Study Site were centrally located, along with their supervisor.

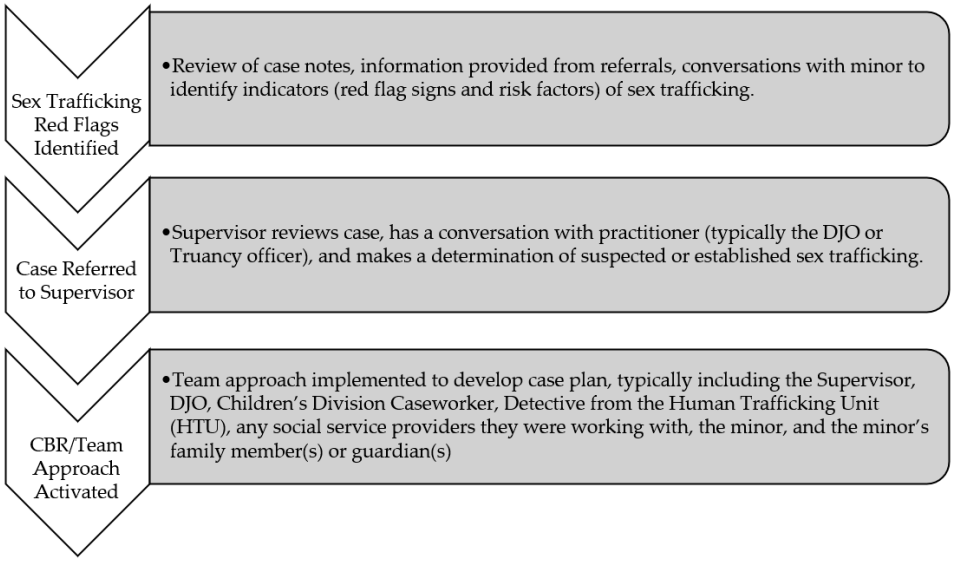

Figure 1. Process used in Juvenile Justice System, Study Site A.

To illustrate the process used in Study Site A, when asked if he had a process to follow once identifying a minor experiencing sex trafficking, Bruce, a truancy officer stated,

> What's the protocol? So, there's a long form that the chief gave us a while back and I rarely use it because it's so long. It's a lot of information we don't have. So, I'll immediately talk to my supervisor if she's here but then, the investigator,

> almost immediately, we shoot an email or a text or make a phone call and say, "Hey, I have this situation. Can we talk about it? . . . "

Importantly, in Bruce's narrative he indicates the use of an assessment tool but found it impractical to use because of its length. He indicated their process was to refer to the supervisor, and if the supervisor was not immediately available, to go to the next step in the CBR to contact an investigator from the HTU.

Internal Organizational Collaboration

Respondents in the juvenile courts in Study Site A indicated that working with people in their unit, including supervisors, truancy officers, and DJOs with prior experience working with MST, was beneficial. They were able to gain advice and expertise from their co-workers within the unit. Bruce, a truancy officer in Study Site A indicated, "So because there are people in the unit like Devan, supervisors, etc. who have gone through similar stuff, so you bounce it off the unit and get ideas." When asked, "Could you give me an example of what that might look like or how that might be beneficial?" Bruce responded,

> Right, so, I actually got a call from somebody last night at 10:34. A kid at [High School] who had some trafficking concerns. So, I didn't really know what to do with it. And so, you go and you get direction. I mean, supervisors give you direction anyway, but it's helpful for clarity because with this stuff, you really don't want to miss something. It's kind of critical. I mean, attendance- that's important. Trafficking is a different concern.

Bruce further elaborated,

> It's scary to think about the stuff these kids go through. And so when you're uncertain, you have got to have people and certainly the inner unit stuff is a good process before you even start talking to the police department and other people, just so you cover all your bases. You know, experience is important, especially if they've succeeded in helping the kid and stuff, it's really important.

Bruce indicated that having inner unit support and discussions, drawing from the expertise of other co-workers who had more experience working with sex trafficking survivors was beneficial to his work as a truancy officer when encountering survivors with identified risk factors of trafficking.

3.2. Benefits of Team Approach Used in Study Site A

When asked about her perspective of the benefits of the process used in her unit, Shileah, a DJO in Study Site A, indicated,

> I think when the child come in and see there's a lot of people who have an interest in her and want to help her. And then, each of us have our own ideas of how to bring positive things to the team, because no one person thinks the same and everybody has different ideas, but if it can be brought to the team and we can all agree to it, I think that's one of the things, you know—cause I think each team member has something to bring to the team, including the child herself.

Shileah's narrative shows that different stakeholders can offer different ideas to ultimately benefit the minor. These ideas are then collaboratively discussed, and the case plan agreed upon. Importantly, minors themselves are included in this collaboration, and have a voice in their own case plans. This survivor-centered approach centers the minor's goals and needs, and they are participants in the development of their own case plans. As Clover, a social service provider, stated, "Nothing about you without you" was a shared value among providers using the team approach.

3.2.1. Collaboration between Social Service Providers and DJOs

Chloe, a social service provider, described positive collaborations using a team approach in Study Site A, in which the courts and DJOs working within the courts engaged

not only in collaboration with particular cases, but also with working to fill gaps such as prevention, services, grant collaboration, and facilitating a team model through site visits to the residential services offered by her organization:

> With the DJOs in [Study Site A], they have been very intentional . . . . And so they've been very good about, "Okay, let's try to look at the gaps. What can we do?" Looking at it bigger than just like the courts, but how can we help supplement these other agencies? What grants can we bring into the city so that we have some different avenues. And little things like we're talking to them even right now about could we set up some groups for their kids, some preventative measures so that even if kids haven't been identified [e.g., suspected trafficking/high risk], they have these options where they can come here for services or we can go there for services. So I think they've been very intentional. And they're very good about, their DJOs come and- I think this is important. They're very good about coming to see the home and the program and wanting to know where they're referring kids.

Chloe's narrative delineates cohesion with members of the juvenile courts in Study Site A, particularly the DJOs, in actively participating in the collaborative "Team" approach, inviting the social service providers from the [organization providing services, including therapeutic residential services, to trafficked minors], visiting the residential home and learning about the services offered to inform their work, and writing grants to support service access to children at risk of or experiencing sex trafficking.

Clover, also a social service provider, described how the supervisor in the juvenile division of the family courts in Study Site A coordinated connections between DJOs and social services, making sure to include them as a part of the Team:

> She's just really good on working and making sure DJOs . . . they invite us to family support team meetings, they invite us to just about everything, and they're really involved. In [Study Site B], I've only worked with a few, and it's been a hit or miss. I'll be honest with you, that the procedures are more defined in [Study Site A], or more . . . the enforcement and follow-through . . . .Better involvement. So even if it's on the detention side, the juvenile side, or if it's on the protective custody side, I've seemed to have a better relationship because it's more . . . I don't know. I guess the enforcement of it is better . . . That's a big part of it. They bring the whole team to the table, and they're making sure that everybody's talking . . . And the [Study Site A] is kind of DJO-led, and they have a really good system. It's effective.

Clover further elaborated that the DJOs in Study Site A were effective in bringing the judges to share the goals of the team and educating judges about the dynamics of trafficking:

> And they get the judges on board. And that's the best part about the DJO's, is they get the judges on board. And so they're the ones who educate the judges on trafficking and saying, "Hey, here's the situation that we have, and we need to look at it differently." And then when we're in court and the attorney for the court presents, "The DJO is saying this," and they have their report, the judges are asking different questions now, versus just looking at behavior. They're looking at the whole scope. So the DJO is that liaison with that too, with the court. And so that helps a lot with making sure that sentences aren't punitive, or they're really looking at parents, or looking at the actual danger in the situation of the trafficking.

3.2.2. Collaboration between Social Service Providers and Judges

Like Clover, Chloe further noted that collaboration with judges was an important part of her work in Study Site A. While not a part of the Team process, judges in this Study Site

were described as having positive informal relationships with Team members, including the DJOs, supervisors, and social service providers:

> Where a lot of times, judges go based on what a DJO recommends . . . but it seems like they're very active in like "Let's look at all the pieces and see what we can do to get the services for the kids." So it looks very different and recognizing them as a victim so that was something that I've seen just in the courts as a whole from everyone I've interacted with. It's how do we get the services for the kids that they need.

This approach resulted in a shared goal between service providers and the juvenile courts, ultimately working to support the well-being of the minor experiencing trafficking.

3.2.3. Collaboration between the Juvenile Court and Investigators

In Study Site A, all the DJOs were aware of who to call and built a specific relationship with a particular police investigator. Cassandra stated, "And with most of the cases that have any form of trafficking, Detective Stark is the one we talk with." When asked about what makes the collaboration successful or challenging, she replied,

> Dedication to what you're doing. Trying to help save these kids. To me, that's it. Just being dedicated to what you're doing, knowing that you're doing something to help somebody. I mean, that's . . . We're in helping professions. And that to me makes all the difference.

In Study Site A, the DJOs had built a relationship with investigators, who were called in every case of suspected ST. They had a shared goal, which was viewed as looking out for the best interests of the kids and helping them. Communication with the investigators in Study Site A was also described as beneficial to the collaboration, as Bruce noted,

> Mr. Stark, and so, I definitely like the way he does his follow-ups, and if there's something pertinent, of course he's going to follow up . . . Because it actually happens. You know, and so sometimes it's just a professional courtesy to say hey okay, so we just took this next step with your client. There's nothing you can do about this next step we took, all right, you can't add to it, you can't stop it, take away from it. But I thought you should know this just in case it comes up when you meet with the parent or the kid. And so that stuff, in that respect, it's important.

Similarly, Shileah, a DJO in Study Site A, also described the positive interactions with detectives, highlighting good communication as key:

> With the cases I had, I describe it as very good. They [detectives] were very helpful. They kept us in contact what was going on. I was able to keep in contact with the prosecuting attorney, also with the FBI, and all of those that was involved. So they were very supportive.

Further, Shirley, A DJO in Study Site A, pointed out the importance of trust and relationship building in a collaborative system:

> I think we trust them [Study Site A detectives], they trust us, and having that good rapport, whether it starts from the police department or what not. Having that good rapport relationship with them- it helps us to build that relationship, that positive relationship, so that we can see a case through.

In Study Site A, collaboration, trust, relationship building, communication, and a shared goal were described favorably by justice system officials and social service providers alike. They appeared to have a strong collaborative model that was based on informal relationships as well as an established team approach. As Taryn, an investigator, stated,

> Yeah, I think a lot of working together with other organizations, having resources, and knowing people in those resources that you can call and contact and open

> lines of communications so that when we do have victims, we know where to send them. We can find places for them to go . . .

Kevin Stark, another investigator working primarily in Study Site A, similarly described trust building with the Juvenile Courts and DJOs, through a shared goal of serving the survivors' best interests:

> That's big. Trust is big with juvenile courts because you're looking at trust on two sides. You're looking at trust on, not just the attorney side, but you're looking at trust on the defense attorney's side to know that your goal is not to have their client incarcerated. When the defense attorney's know what you're ultimate goal is in understanding that's what you're looking at, that is the most important and key part of relationship building and trust.

Kevin further elaborated on his collaboration with DJOs:

> the good thing about is that they're able to call us after hours when they need things as well. That's big for them, because they don't have basic law enforcement contact. When they need something specific that needs to be done related to these kids, they will call . . . Typically, we find the missing kids if they're involved in exploitation, which they know that, so they'll call us and tell us hey, this particular kid is missing. They're probably involved in exploitation. What do you suggest we do? Are you able to go look for them? This is what we have set up if you find them.

3.2.4. Collaboration between the Juvenile Court and the Children's Division

One collaboration which was described as problematic by DJOs and Truancy Officers in Study Site A was with the Children's Division. Bruce indicated that once an investigation started, the communication broke down and the collaboration was nil:

> So, when we make a hotline call, after they do their investigation, then yeah, they will call us back and tell us what's going on usually. Especially if we have an active case in the unit. Usually. But in terms of collaborating an investigation-they do their own thing once they get this information. Right? And I do have a current case in the unit where initially the children's division investigator talked to me but they haven't talked to me since then about anything.

Tensions with children's division caseworkers were continuously described as problematic, primarily due to their large caseloads, which resulted in a lack of follow up, gaps in communication, and frequent caseworker turnover.

3.3. Processes Used in Study Site B

Study Site B did not have an established process to report MST to supervisors; however, supervisors were sometimes aware of cases involving MST that the DJOs were working on through informal conversations. Most DJOs in Study Site B were located off-site from where the supervisor was located. In Study Site B, there was not a formal process, rather, DJOs engaged in case management and referrals in cases of MST and relied on informal relationships largely with area social service providers (See Figure 2), particularly with an organization that explicitly provided services to sex trafficked minors. The juvenile courts did not have a specific process to contact or work with investigators. Supervisors also indicated that they did not have a specific position of Truancy Officer that they regularly worked with. There was a human trafficking task force established in Study Site B, in which investigators worked with front line officers and social service providers when cases of ST were identified. Relationships between investigators and DJOs were described by both parties as non-existent or strained; thus law enforcement was rarely a part of the informal collaborative response. However, investigators did have informal relationships with social service providers which were mutually described as beneficial. Service providers described investigators as working with minor survivors authentically, respectfully, and working for

their best interests. Investigators described service providers as benefitting their work with survivors, by providing crisis intervention, advocacy, and residential or outpatient care. Service providers also described having strong informal relationships with select DJOs, but not with supervisors or judges. Overall, the process in Study Site B could be described as fragmented; it involved various informal collaborations between various groups without any structure or cohesive inclusion of multiple collaborative partners simultaneously.

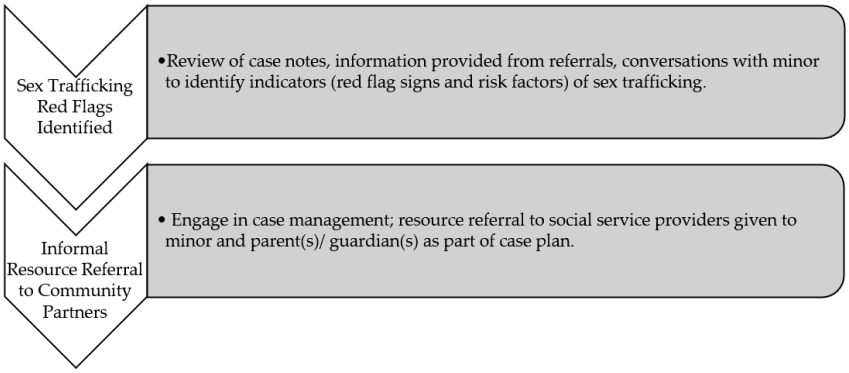

Figure 2. Process in Juvenile Justice System Study Site B.

When asked if she had a process to follow once identifying a minor experiencing sex trafficking, Carla, a DJO, indicated, "We don't have a process." Other DJOs in Study Site B similarly responded that there was no specific process in place, and there was no established formal or informal CBR process. When asked, as a follow up, "Do you think a process would be helpful?" Carla replied,

> Yeah, I do. I think we all need to be informed, because I think we sometimes think in categories, like we have the sex-offender unit, we've got the informal unit, we've got the investigative unit. I think that if we, in general, all are aware and it's a protocol for everyone, not just a particular unit, that would be very helpful.

Carla's narrative indicates that she believed having a process would be useful to bring awareness and connection among the different units in her group.

3.3.1. Collaboration between Social Services and the Juvenile Courts

Chloe, a social service provider, indicated her work with Study Site B was very positive with DJOs, but not as much with court administrators:

> With [Study Site B], it hasn't been as intentional from the administrative level, but we've had some really good luck with DJOs. So we have like 3 or 4 DJOs that I think are really intentional about looking for it [sex trafficking] and having us come in . . .

Chloe further described that their collaboration relied largely on informal relationships with the DJOs in Study Site B:

> . . . we've had really good experiences, but it's been very specific DJOs. But it's the DJOs who are seeking it out, not because they have some kind of process. And if I look at my [Study Site B] girls, they're coming to us predominantly through three DJOs. Okay. So it's usually like -and those DJOs they have my cell number. We may talk on the weekends because they're trying to figure out what's best services for their kids, but it's usually those specific three DJOs so to speak.

The DJOs in Study Site B confirmed their relationship with Chloe's organization, as Diane illustrated:

> Well first of all, I discovered them quite a while ago and asked them to come and speak to our group and our unit during a unit meeting so we could get

> information about who they are. So, that collaboration right there is a good one because they're willing to share information about who they are and what services they offer. In regards to my youth and other people's, as DJOs that are . . . have been in [Organization] and used their service, they're very prompt on letting you know what the youth, and the family, and the admission, and how they're doing.

These narratives suggest that a successful informal relationship, communication, referral process, and education and training were provided, largely through the actions of a few DJOs in Study Site B rather than a formal process inclusive of multiple community partners.

3.3.2. Collaboration between Social Service Providers and Judges

Chloe went further to describe challenges in Study Site B with judges and court supervisors:

> The difference for me is I've also had interactions with their [Study Site A] judges and their commissioner, so it's pretty universal in the sense of like I couldn't say the same thing about [Study Site B]. Like I couldn't— Like I know who the judges are, but I never had like meetings and conferences with them so to speak. Even some of the, like I said, at the administrative level, we know who each other—we've been introduced to each other. But I don't necessarily work with them as closely as—Violet and Helen [court administrators in Study Site A] . . .

Thus, there was some communication breakdown with court administrators and judges in Study Site B, which resulted in a breakdown of the collaborative model, which appeared to be rooted in a lack of formal and informal relationships.

3.3.3. Collaboration between the Juvenile Court and Investigators

Dominick, an investigator in Study Site B, similarly described positive relationships and informal connections with local area social service providers, but similarly noted a breakdown in communications and relationships with the family court system, including both DJOs and prosecutors:

> Well, it can kind of be a pain. We kind of look forward to when they [minors experiencing sex trafficking] get assigned to a facility out of the DJO system because it's easier to have access to them than it is sometimes with the DJOs, and that sometimes can allow their attorneys, which . . . Even when we try to talk to them as victims, not as a suspect of any crime, their attorneys often tell them, "Don't say a word to the police ever about anything," which then stops us from being able to help them as a victim, if that makes sense.

When asked for an example to illustrate, Dominick stated,

> Well, we had several occasions where we had notified -Through whatever means, we had notified that there is a young girl over at the juvenile building that is there that they believe is a trafficking victim, so we'll say, "Okay, we want to go talk to them." And then we'll come over to talk to them as a victim, but they say, "Well, we gotta talk to their attorney first." And then, of course, their attorneys will say, "Don't say a word."

The lack of collaboration between investigators, DJOs, and attorneys indicated that there was a breakdown in the collaborative system in Study Site B.

When asked about collaborating with police, Carla, a DJO stated, "I've been to trainings where the task force has come in and we've been trained about what to look for and all that, the signs. That's probably it." When asked if she worked with investigators or police officers in the trafficking cases she had come across, her response was, "No." She was not aware of officers to collaborate with, and said there was no process to work with police: "I'm sure there's an officer that is probably assigned, I'm just not aware of who that

is." However, Diane, also a DJO in Study Site B, did know the detective to call, in both Study Sites:

> I have had contact with [Study Site A detective] and [Study Site B police investigator] in regards to this particular youth. I don't look at anything as being any obstacles with them. . . . it's always been cooperative. I mean, it really has been with them as far as dealing with the situation. They do what they can and we do what we can. [Interviewer: What makes those relationships seem cooperative?] The communication. We communicate well and we're all on the same page. It's the concern, I think, for the youth.

In this example, Diane delineates the importance of a shared goal and the concern for the youth they worked with, as well as highlighting communication as the impetus for positive collaboration. Carla and Diane may have different experiences in collaborating with law enforcement, because Study Site B DJOs were spread across a county in different locations, with Diane being in a more central location.

3.3.4. Collaboration with Social Service Providers and Investigators

In contrast, social service providers and investigators in Study Site B worked well together, largely when specific investigators built relationships with service providers and survivors, building trust, a shared goal, and enhanced communication. Peter, an investigator working largely in Study Site B, maintained,

> I think that we-and I'm speaking about this point of contact, she and I are on the same page as far as wanting to be able to get a particular victim into a stable home . . . But I think that because we understand what is best for this victim and what's not, because we talk about it, we can relate to each other, and work towards this goal.

Peter's narrative illustrates a shared goal between investigators and social service providers in focusing on what is best for the survivor, and communicating in an open and ongoing dialogue about working towards this shared goal.

3.3.5. Collaboration between the Juvenile Court and Children's Division

Like DJOs in Study Site A, DJOs in Study Site B also reported collaboration with Children's Division as often challenging due to caseworkers' high loads and high turnover. Carla added that while they did not have a formal process specifically to address sex trafficking and develop collaborative case plans in Study Site B, there were family support team meetings established through the Children's Division, but the DJOs were not typically invited or encouraged to attend:

> It wasn't encouraged. That's the problem, too. The management in CPS does not encourage DJOs and CPS to go to family support team meetings. That's where you learn everything. That's where you learn about who their supports are, what's happening, what's not happening.

Respondents indicated that often it was the DJOs who were the constants in a child's life, because they had the most consistent presence. In both study sites, the turnover of DJOs was low, yet DJOs reported frustration at not being included in meetings, communication, or follow up in their cases involving juvenile justice-involved sex trafficking survivors.

4. Discussion

The research findings indicated some differences between Study Sites A and B related to their processes, which impacted collaborations among community partners. First, in Study Site A, a team approach was established in the juvenile court system that applied to all confirmed or suspected cases of sex trafficking. DJOs, Children's Division caseworkers, detectives, social service providers, the minor involved, and their family members/guardians were a part of the collaborative model. Respondents in both social

services and in various aspects of the justice system generally described the team approach as effective, and illustrated a high level of collaboration among various individuals and systems. This was a formal process, as the juvenile courts implemented a protocol requiring a team approach.

Overall, Study Site A reported high levels of collaboration among the various systems involved, indicated by justice system officials and social service providers alike. In the HTU, the lead investigator was well known and well liked throughout the anti-trafficking community. In the majority of interviews, he was described as the primary person to call, along with the supervisor in the juvenile division of the family courts. Interestingly, he had a background in social work as well as policing, which may account for the strong collaboration with DJOs, court administration, and social service providers.

Social service providers also indicated that their relationships with judges and administrators in the juvenile courts were strong in Study Site A. In addition to the team approach, informal relationships between detectives, social service providers, judges, and DJOs were generally described as positive, beneficial, and contributing to the overall efficacy of the system. This was described as making responses to trafficking easier and more appropriately focused on the needs of each individual child in the system. Shared goals, trust building, ongoing communication, and establishing a formal process in the form of a team approach were described as beneficial by DJOs, investigators, and social service providers alike in Study Site A. The only collaboration that was consistently described as problematic in Study Site A was the relationship with children's division caseworkers, whose high caseloads and consistent turnover impacted their ability to effectively participate on the teams in terms of communication and follow up.

In contrast, Study Site B did not have a specific process in the juvenile courts or a formal protocol; instead, DJOs engaged in case management and referral, and relied on limited informal connections to respond to MST. In Study Site B, collaboration was described as positive between individual DJOs and social service providers, and investigators and social service providers, but there was very little or strained collaboration between investigators and DJOs in most instances. Specific actors within the system in Study Site B were described as contributing to the efficacy of the system by social service providers, particularly three DJOs. While collaboration with specific DJOs and investigators was described by social service providers as positive, relationships with judges, court administrators and supervisors were described as ineffective, largely because those connections were not present; there was no real communication, and this caused ineffectiveness within the system. Essentially, service providers and DJOs in Study Site B were relying on informal relationships as they had no process or structure in place to guide their responses and collaborations. DJOs engaged in case management in order to find the best resources for their clients. Relying on these informal relationships and resource referrals was key to responding to MST, but the relationships were limited, and the communication breakdown and varied relationships between investigators and the courts contributed to the lack of a holistic team approach. The perception of juvenile court personnel that investigators would criminalize survivors, as well as the failure to establish open communication and a shared goal resulted in stymied collaboration.

While Study Site B was lacking in a formal process and team approach, specific actors within the system were described as contributing to the efficacy of the system. However, there is the possibility of a lack of continuity in structure built on informal relationships and key people, for example, if any of the three DJOs identified in Study Site B retired or changed positions, the relationship with social service providers and the courts to address trafficking would be significantly limited. Some DJOs in Study Site B indicated that they would like to establish a formalized process, as well as a team approach in all suspected cases of trafficking. This approach would create a sustainable protocol that is not dependent upon key actors in the system.

5. Implications

5.1. Team Approach

The team approach was supported by participants working in the juvenile justice system in Study Site A, as well as by the social service providers and investigators who worked with them. The study findings showed triangulated support for the team approach; DJOs, service providers, and investigators provided similar responses related to the effectiveness of this approach. The team approach is potentially scalable to other sites; thus, a recommendation of the present study is to establish a formal protocol within the juvenile courts, to establish a team approach to any case in which there is a suspicion or confirmation of sex trafficking.

In Study Site A, a protocol was implemented in which all cases of suspected MST were reported to the supervisor. This provided the first step in the process when identifying suspected sex trafficking in the juvenile courts. The supervisor then worked to establish a team meeting/team approach to address the child's needs holistically. This team approach is a form of CBR, and is supported by prior work indicating a wrap-around approach to trafficking is the most effective [17,39]. Implementation of regular team meetings to collaborate and establish shared goals and develop informal relationships to build trust may also be beneficial, as respondents in both study sites indicated that these informal relationships were necessary for formal relationships and the team approach and/or informal referral networks to work as intended. Prior work supports this approach, as one study found that coalition building may be a fruitful avenue for engaging in trust building, establishing a shared goal, enhancing communication, and building informal and formal referral networks [14].

Respondents also indicated having an assessment tool available to them that they did not use, because it was too long and cumbersome to work with. This indicates that DJOs should be aware of short assessments validated for use in the juvenile court system such as the STAR [25]. Training to identify indicators specific to MST survivors may also supplement a short assessment rather than a lengthy tool found to be impractical by respondents [11].

Respondents in Study Site A described informal relationships within their unit, in which they could go to co-workers and their supervisor for advice in cases in which they suspected trafficking. These discussions and support from their supervisors were described as beneficial. Implications include facilitating a community of support, and making it known in the unit which co-workers have the experience and expertise to provide advice. Implications also include having supervisors and judges who are well educated about the dynamics of trafficking (e.g., cross-training), as both were described as benefitting the collaborative response by the service providers and investigators who worked with them. This finding is consistent with prior research indicating cross-training positively impacts responses [22–24]. We also recommend including judges as a part of the team. Notably, collaboration included working for the interests of the minor involved, but also included things like prevention efforts and grant-related collaboration. This type of collaboration can also be supported through coalition involvement, networking, and building formal and informal relationships [14].

Such findings also parallel the concept of capacity, rooted in organizational theory research, which relates to attributes of organizations that facilitate goal achievement [46]. Inner unit collaboration, as well as collaboration among cross-trained judges, supervisors, investigators, DJOs, truancy officers, and Children's Division caseworkers facilitates informal and formal relationships and a team approach to the issue, and creates the capacity to accomplish a streamlined anti-trafficking response to the sex trafficking of minors involved with the juvenile justice system. Attributes of capacity in the present study included establishing a shared goal, trust building, and communication [46].

5.2. Shared Goals and Trust Building

Development of shared goals among stakeholders appears to be a key aspect of success/difficulty in team responses. Respondents described an ideal scenario of cross-team collaboration working toward a shared goal: what is best for the survivor. Professionals involved in response to the domestic sex trafficking of minors often have markedly different backgrounds, which may in turn be conducive to different approaches to engagement with clients. Indeed some professional backgrounds may foster mistrust of other professional backgrounds [8]. In the present study, in Study Site B, there was discord between the juvenile courts and investigators, in which survivors were essentially warned not to disclose to investigators. A history among criminal–legal system workers of treating sex trafficking victims/survivors as criminals is likely a contributing factor to mistrust. Education surrounding specific sexual victimization and sex trafficking myths (e.g., viewing survivors as such rather than criminalizing minors with prostitution) may create the common ground for re-establishing such trust.

Organizational theory research emphasizes general barriers to collaborative models, and working to address such barriers is key to trust building and collaboration [8,14,46]. Focusing attention on creating a shared goal and agreed problem definition works to address uncertainty, establish trust, and facilitate informal and formal collaboration [46]. Another facet of organizational theory research is the concept of incongruence, and the ways that divisive ideological perspectives stymie collaboration and subsequent action in anti-trafficking work [14,46]. Finding common ground through a shared goal is a way to address barriers and incongruence among collaborative partners.

5.3. Communication

Cross-training may be useful in responding to MST, to facilitate not only a shared goal, but also to enhance communication. Several professionals indicated a need for increased training, whether for themselves or others they have come into contact with during their practice. Cross-training may provide the opportunity to create communication channels, or shore up existing communication channels. Research finds cross-training improves responses to the issue [14,22–24]. There are multiple implications for communication that can be derived from the results. First, the existence of formal channels for communication may be beneficial. Though professionals in Site B had informal processes for connecting with detectives experienced in the world of MST, the knowledge was (a) not standardized across those working in Study Site B and (b) had nothing to ensure its continuity. Informal processes can be wonderfully functional; however, the success of the model depends almost exclusively on the individuals involved.

Providing a structure for communication through an established protocol and team approach would be beneficial. Respondents also described updates and follow ups from community partners as benefitting their work. This aspect of communication could potentially be built into a formal protocol. Having shared language for discussing common scenarios and issues may promote both efficiency and collaboration, and may in turn facilitate the development of a referral process across teams/groups. Research supports coalition involvement as facilitating informal and formal relationships, trust building, and establishing a shared goal [14]. Consistent with this previous research, joining or creating a coalition of professionals likely to serve on such teams is consequently recommended. Respondents in both study sites indicated experiencing challenging collaboration with the Children's Division, largely due to high staff turnover and high caseloads, which resulted in fragmented communication and a lack of follow up. Study Site B DJOs also reported being excluded from family team meetings with the Children's Division. Jones (2023) indicated that a negative collaborative environment contains barriers to collaboration among potential community partners, rather than facilitating collaboration [46]. Examining the ways an organizational structure facilitates or hinders collaboration can be used to build capacity, allowing for collaborative models to develop [36,47]. While a predictable implication, reducing the caseloads of Children's Division caseworkers and providing assistance with

addressing vicarious trauma to reduce turnover is recommended. It is difficult to build relationships, shared goals, and communication under the current conditions caseworkers are often faced with.

Jones (2023) maintained that "Collaboration can also be challenged without relevant stakeholders at the planning and implementation stages to inform and help make decisions about collaborative activities [46]." Inviting DJOs to family team meetings can also expand the communication and support network for minors experiencing trafficking. DJOs in the current study were center points of identification, service referral, and case management. Their exclusion as community partners in addressing the trafficking of children involved in the juvenile justice system is problematic. Service providers and investigators in the current study found DJO and supervisor involvement in the team approach to trafficking as highly effective in Study Site A.

5.4. Conceptual Model

Infante (1997) indicated that an integrated theoretical model can be used to build theory within specific contexts; a grounded theoretical approach [43,44] combined with tenets of systems theory and organizational theory research [41,42,46] were utilized to develop a conceptual model related to anti-trafficking response in the juvenile justice system.

As shown in Figure 3, collaboration and capacity are reciprocal; capacity includes elements of organizations that allow for and enhance collaboration, "the inputs, throughputs, and outputs that can help agencies working together on anti-human trafficking activities to achieve desired collective outcomes [45], p. 11." Collaboration allows for capacity building, in turn providing the grounding for a Team Approach protocol to address the sex trafficking of minors involved in the juvenile justice system. Collaboration is more likely to be successful if collaborative partners are able to first develop capacity. In the present study, an attribute of capacity included establishing a shared goal among stakeholders (e.g., not criminalizing survivors; obtaining the services that they need). Having a common way of conceptualizing the problem and developing a shared goal among stakeholders in turn can facilitate trust building and open communication, which better allows for addressing barriers and improving collaboration. Taken together, these facets of collaboration allow for the formal and informal relationships needed to develop and sustain a collaborative response to the issue: a team approach involving multiple collaborative partners.

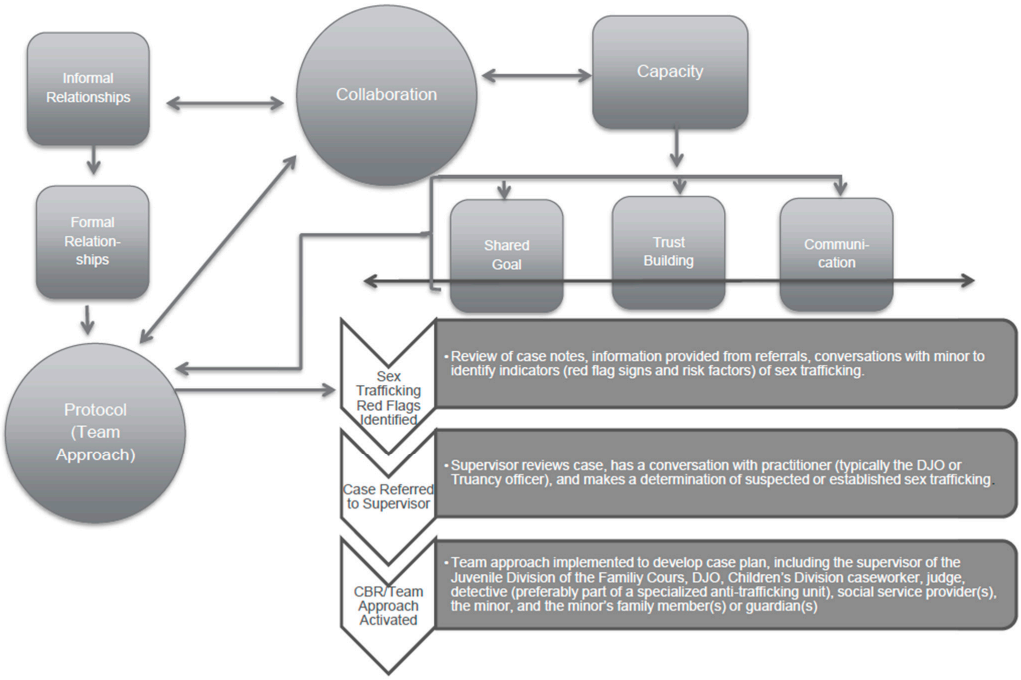

Figure 3. Conceptual Model of Mezzo Level Collaborative Anti-Trafficking Response.

6. Limitations

The current study is limited by its regional context, in that the research findings reflect the experiences and perspectives of those who work with MST in two sites in one region of the Midwest. Responses to MST vary widely across the nation, and dynamics of MST may be distinct in various regions. Yet the aim of the study was to uncover the benefits and challenges of CBRs. Key findings, such as developing informal collaborative relationships and a team approach to responding to the issue have the potential to be replicated in any system. Further, the challenges identified in this study, such as communication breakdown and lack of collaborative responses may parallel those seen in other locales, and the study recommendations may be useful for those with similar challenges or those who are in the process of developing or revising their response to MST.

7. Conclusions

In conclusion, the current study indicates that establishing a formal process in the form of a team approach to addressing MST in the juvenile courts is recommended. This study identified promising practices for CBRs, such as developing informal relationships with collaborative partners through establishing a shared goal, open communication, and trust-building. Drawing attention to challenges to guide targeted change, such as the lack of a protocol to address sex trafficking of minors in the justice system and communication breakdown among collaborative partners, is another implication of the study. Our aim in the present study was to examine processes and collaboration in community-based responses to juvenile justice-involved MST. As a result, we were able to uncover phenomena that were described as positively impacting respondents' work, as well as those that presented challenges. It is our hope that this research can be used for organizations to better identify challenges in order to address them, and to scale the formal processes and practices that benefit collaboration.

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Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author due to privacy restrictions.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Notes

[1] DMST (domestic minor sex trafficking) is the term often used to describe sex trafficking of minors, however, the authors prefer MST (minor sex trafficking) to include survivors who are trafficked internationally.

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