



NNEDV

Best Practice Principles for Digital Services

Digital services offer more ways for survivors to connect to advocacy and support services. This handout is part of our [Digital Services Toolkit](#), which includes [Assessing Readiness for Digital Services](#) and [Choosing a Digital Platform and Vendor](#).

This document is a general overview of best practice principles. These principles will help your organization offer high quality, survivor-centered advocacy through digital services (like text messages, online chat, and video calls). See the [Digital Services Toolkit](#) for best practices specific to technology platforms including [messaging](#), [online chat](#), and video call. Keep in mind that your organization should consider its unique circumstances, such as applicable laws, available resources, current practices, and other local considerations, when designing a digital services advocacy program.

<p>Best Practice Principle 1: Prioritize safety and security.</p>
--

In victim advocacy work, survivor safety and privacy are paramount. Digital services through text messaging, online chat, and video calls, come with benefits and risks. Often, the risks are specific to the platform. For example, someone with access to the survivor's device could easily pretend to be the survivor while texting with the advocate. Another example of risk is that text and instant messaging platforms often store entire conversation histories. Unlike a spoken conversation where the only chance of getting access to details is by being nearby or recording the conversation, with text and chat, someone with access to the survivor's device or account could read the entire conversation.

Programs should work to minimize the risks related to using digital platforms, and should update safety and privacy planning protocols to educate survivors about those risks. These protocols should include helping survivors make informed choices about their use of each platform, and strategies to help them safety plan about how to minimize the storage of sensitive information on their devices or accounts. You can review the best practices handouts specific to technology platforms to learn the privacy and safety risks associated with each digital platform.

**Best Practice Principle 2:
Clear communication is important.**

Minimize Miscommunication

With the exception of video chats, communication over digital services will be through written words. Without being able to see body language or hear tone of voice, advocates lack important cues that help assess and convey tone, mood, and emotion.

When communicating through text or chat, advocates should be aware of how their words or tone may be misinterpreted. Check in with the survivor to make sure they understand. It's important to provide training to advocates using these platforms on how to actively listen, convey warmth, and match a survivor's choice of words when using text or chat.

Use Automated Responses Sparingly & Thoughtfully

Automated responses can help ensure consistent messaging for standard safety reminders and mandatory reporting obligations, and they can be easier and quicker for advocates to send. However, pre-written content may come off as stiff or formal or may interrupt the flow of conversation. If someone receives a long message that clearly is a standard message, the conversation may not feel as intimate or personal. Agencies can use automated responses, but be cautious of

how they are used and think about how the conversation, as a whole, might feel to someone who is in crisis.

Some chat services offer the use of chatbots. Chatbots automatically respond to what the person has said using artificial intelligence. This type of technology has been used to help people fill out legal forms like protection order petitions. Although this technology is useful in certain contexts, it is not currently advanced enough to replace humans in having nuanced, sensitive conversations with survivors.

Avoid Using Emojis & Internet Slang

Text, chat, and even email platforms offer the option of using more than just written words to communicate, including internet slang (such as IMO, LOL) or emojis. However, these ways of communicating can be easily misinterpreted, so advocates should avoid using them when replying to survivors.

Language Translation

Some text and chat platforms offer machine-based language translation for people who need to communicate to each other but speak different languages. Conversations with survivors are nuanced and require specialized terminology and sensitivity of tone, which machine-based language translations aren't currently able to do. The best option is to provide service coverage by multi-lingual advocates or use live interpreters.

Best Practice Principle 3:

Protect survivor privacy by collecting minimal information.

Digital services platforms can be used to collect a lot of information about users. Most products on the market were created for retail businesses and other industries that aren't bound by strict confidentiality obligations. In victim service work, programs are required by law to protect personally identifying victim

information from access by third parties. That's why it's important to choose platforms that prioritize privacy and minimize data collection.

Some platforms also offer the option of collecting information through forms set up by the program – like demographic or satisfaction surveys. Some platforms also make it possible to record, save, or back-up specific messages or entire conversations, including attachments sent via the chat or text platform. In the context of these services, this would be highly sensitive and personal information.

Minimize Incidental Data Collection

Many platforms automatically collect incidental data that can be personally identifying, like a user's phone number, IP address, location, device type, etc. Programs should only use tools that allow you to turn off this feature, or at minimum allow you to regularly delete the incidental data.

Collect Only the Information you Need

Just because a platform offers numerous ways to collect information, does not mean you should use those features. Your data collection policies should be the same whether you are speaking with a survivor face-to-face, on the phone, or via a digital platform. A survivor's data belongs to the survivor. Best practices related to data collection require that you collect only as much information as is necessary to provide services. The more client data you collect, the greater the confidentiality risk to victims. By collecting and storing less data, you minimize the chances that personally identifying victim information will be shared against the survivor's wishes. For example, if an abusive partner's lawyer succeeds in court when demanding records from your program about a survivor, if you haven't stored many details, you have reduced the harm they will experience from the exposure of their private information. (Check out our [FAQs on Record Retention and Deletion](#) for more information.)

Do Not Save Documentation of Abuse

While it may be easy for survivors to attach photo, video, or audio evidence of abuse to messages, programs should not keep these files. Having this information could put your program in a position where your advocate may be compelled to release that information through court orders or to testify in court. Discourage survivors from sharing evidence, and if it is sent, delete it right away. If you don't have it, you can't be compelled to share it.

Be Cautious when Requiring Survivors to Set up User Accounts

Avoid using platforms that require survivors to create a user account (username or email, and password) in order to access services. For online support groups where a user account may be necessary, look for ways to maximize survivors' privacy options. One approach might be to send an invitation or link to join to the survivor rather than asking them to fill out an online form that includes personally identifying information in order to request entry to the group. If what survivors are sharing will be visible by others, remind them that they don't have to share certain identifying details when posting to the group.

<p style="text-align: center;">Best Practice Principle 4: Survivors have the right to make informed choices.</p>
--

Survivors have the right to choose whether to seek services from victim service programs, and they get to decide what information they share with advocates. Even when services are provided through technology, survivors should be offered opportunities for meaningful informed consent, including the benefits and risks of digital services. Determine how and when you will share information about client rights, confidentiality, mandatory reporting, and other information your program usually provides to clients in face-to-face interactions; preferably at the start of the conversation before the survivor discloses too much information.

Mandatory Reporting

Depending on your state laws, some information shared by survivors may trigger mandatory reporting obligations. First, it's important to know your state laws and whether advocates in your programs are included in any obligations. If so, those obligations and limitations to confidentiality should always be explained at the beginning of an advocate/survivor relationship, and periodic reminders should also occur. There are challenges to this when using digital platforms. For instance, during verbal conversations, if an advocate senses a survivor is about to disclose information that will trigger a mandatory report, it's relatively easy for them to interrupt the survivor and remind them about mandatory reporting obligations, so that the survivor has a choice of whether or not to disclose that information. In a chat or text conversation, the advocate can't always interrupt or stop a message that triggers a mandatory report, so letting the survivor know before they disclose is best; preferably at the beginning of a conversation.

**Best Practice Principle 5:
Provide quality digital services.**

To provide quality digital services, agencies need to make sure staff are properly trained, help survivors understand what to expect, and be clear with survivors about the times services are available.

Staff Capacity

It's important to consider the ways in which offering digital services will impact your staff's capacity. We surveyed a number of national and state hotlines who shared that text and chat conversations take longer than hotline phone calls. One hotline estimated that an average hotline call takes roughly ten minutes, but an average chat conversation lasts about an hour. Having a new method for survivors to connect with your program, along with an increased demand on advocates' time, means your program will likely need to consider hiring additional staff.

Because chat and text conversations tend to be longer, also consider how to handle shift changes in the middle of a chat. If an advocate needs to leave in the middle of a chat or text hotline conversation, consider how the new advocate will be brought up to speed and how to inform the survivor that another advocate will be speaking.

Communicating with survivors via text or chat may have a stronger emotional impact on your staff. Hotlines that we've spoken with said that abuse disclosures via text and chat are higher than on phone calls, and the disclosures tend to be more graphic. In addition, because of the nature of text and chat, conversations may end abruptly without closure. This can impact an advocate's experience of vicarious trauma, and requires support structures to help them debrief and take time for self-care.

Be Clear About When Services are Available

Some survivors may assume that your digital services are offered 24/7 or after regular office hours. If your service is only available within a certain time frame, specify that information up front.

It's also important to consider how you will handle multiple requests coming in at once. You may find that your staffing isn't sufficient to meet the need, and survivors will have to wait for the next available advocate. If so, ensure that your digital platform has the ability to provide notice of that wait time, and to offer other more immediate resources. To address limited staffing and availability, some programs have chosen to make text, chat, or video services available only to ongoing clients or to market it to only to a select group of survivors (e.g., students on a college campus or the Deaf community).

Create Policies that Address the Unique Communication Norms of Digital Services

Communicating via digital platforms, such as text and chat, is different from a face-to-face conversation. The shift from one topic to another isn't always linear, there may be long pauses within a conversation (that could stretch from hours to

days), or a survivor might drop out of the conversation completely. Ensure that you have protocols for how advocates should handle these unique communication norms.

Particularly in conversations when a survivor stops responding, advocates will need to know how to proceed. Some programs reply back once to see if the survivor wants to continue the conversation at another time, or might send a closing message with links or a phone number. Other programs don't reply at all, out of concern that it might not be safe or private for a survivor to receive another message.

Finally, because of the nature of text messaging (and to a lesser extent chat) survivors may feel that they can pick up a conversation hours (or even days) later with the same advocate. Develop processes for advocates so they know how to manage open-ended conversations and how to communicate to survivors what they can expect when they reach out again.

Prepare Advocates to Successfully Deliver Digital Services

Advocates should receive specialized training before they begin providing digital services. At a minimum, training should include text-based communication skills, technology safety planning, and informed consent via digital services.

<p>Best Practice Principle 6: Plan for the unexpected.</p>

Offering digital services is a new frontier. While the goal of serving survivors is still the same, the different method of connecting brings inherent benefits and challenges. As much as possible, consider potential issues that may arise and plan ahead so that advocates can be ready to handle them.

Some of these issues may be similar to situations that your program already has processes for, such as people who call looking for different services, or prank callers, or abusive partners calling and leaving messages that are offensive, harassing, or threatening. If your general process is to refer these callers to a supervisor, some text and chat platforms offer the capability for a supervisor to monitor or step into a conversation.

Another area to consider is the continuity of digital services in disaster and emergency plans. Plan for how you will let survivors know that your services are down. This might include setting up an automated reply that your service is unavailable, or forwarding your text/chat services to another program during the emergency.

© 2019 National Network to End Domestic Violence, Safety Net Project. This product was supported by cooperative agreement number 2017-VF-GX-K030, awarded by the Office for Victims of Crime, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this product are those of the contributors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

We update our materials frequently. Please visit [TechSafety.org](https://www.techsafety.org) for the latest version of this and other materials.