Using Technology to Communicate with Survivors During a Public Health Crisis

During a public health crisis such as the current COVID-19 pandemic, when public health officials recommend "social distancing" to slow the spread of infection, technology such as video calls or web chats may be useful tools to connect with survivors remotely.

In considering new technology, survivors must be at the center of our decision-making. This is true in ordinary times and must still apply even in a public health crisis. In practice, this means prioritizing both access and privacy.

Digital services offer more ways for survivors to connect to advocacy and support services. We recently developed a **Digital Services Toolkit**, available in English and Spanish. The toolkit includes guides, worksheets, and recorded webinars focused on assessing capacity, choosing a platform and a vendor, and best practices for various types of tools including text, chat, and video.

While Safety Net recommends a thoughtful and planful approach to using technology, the urgent nature of the current public health crisis may lead some local programs to consider technology like video or web chat on a quicker timeline than ordinarily. **We encourage programs that implement digital services during the current COVID-19 pandemic to do so temporarily**, and re-assess once the pandemic has passed.

We encourage programs to limit urgent adoption of these tools to ongoing advocacy or scheduled conversations with survivors. Know that The National Domestic Violence Hotline and RAINN - the National Sexual Assault Hotline and some state hotlines offer 24/7 online chat and text messaging in English and Spanish, along with referrals to local services and advocacy for people reaching out for the first time during a crisis. Read more about choosing the type of technology, or platform, for services.

The following is a list of tools that programs might consider for communicating with survivors remotely that we think meet current best practice standards. **While we do not endorse these tools**, they are well-suited to protect privacy as they are currently set up.

- [ResourceConnect](#) – web chat and text
- [Gruveo](#) – video call
- [Cyph](#) – video call, messaging, groups

We share this list in an effort to reduce the privacy risks that go along with rushing to adopt tools quickly without time for more thorough evaluation. It's important to choose tools that do not create barriers for survivors (e.g. requirements to download an app or create an account), prioritize privacy, and minimize data collection. [Read more about choosing a vendor](#).

Survivor safety and privacy is important. Communicating with survivors through technology comes with benefits and risks. Below are three key risks, and you can read more in our guide to [Assessing Readiness for Digital Services](#).

- *Personal Safety* - Communication via text, email, and online chat leaves a trail that could reveal the survivor is seeking help, as well as other details that could compromise safety. For example, video call software may also automatically store call history.

- *Loss of Privacy* - Beyond risks related to personal safety, a survivor may also have their privacy compromised by message threads. If someone sees these without their consent, the survivor loses control over their decision to disclose the abuse.

- *Confidentiality* - When advocates use mobile devices to communicate with survivors, conversation threads and other related records include personally identifying information.

Using technology to communicate with survivors also helps to support advocate health and wellbeing. It is important to note that using advocates' personal

mobile devices or accounts for texting, calls, or video increases privacy risks and can also erode an advocate's work-life balance and self-care. For example, if an advocate's personal phone is the main contact a survivor has with a program, they might call or text in the middle of the night. A crisis like COVID-19 should not override our commitment to advocate well-being. Advocates should be able to be "off-duty" to make sure they are properly nourishing themselves and resting – both key points given by public health officials to maintain a strong immune system.

We recommend offering program-owned devices and accounts. This allows for better staff management across shifts and can increase privacy and safety measures. [Read more about best practices for mobile advocacy](#).

We know that with any type of public health crisis, access to services can be even harder for survivors who are seeking resources and support. By adjusting how we operate to meet the needs of survivors, while also understanding the risks of digital service provision, we can help to ensure that survivors and staff have the information they need to get help, and also do their jobs to the best of their ability.

Read more about [using technology in the day-to-day operations of your program](#).

If your agency has any questions or needs further guidance on how to implement digital services. Please reach out to the Safety Net Team at safetynet@nnedv.org. You can also reach out to the Coalition Technical Assistance Capacity team for any other COVID-19 related questions at capacity_ta@nnedv.org.