What are Digital Services?

"Digital services" means using tech-based tools like online chat, text messaging, and video calls to provide services to survivors. Many victim service programs are considering or have adopted these to supplement in-person and hotline support services. But there's more to it than buying the right software. Programs must first invest time and energy to assess their readiness to provide digital services, and develop strong policies and procedures that will ensure high quality services that are centered in victim safety and privacy.

Some programs might use email or text messaging to send reminders about upcoming appointments. Other programs might offer video chat for ongoing advocacy with a survivor who isn't able to come in to the program. Some support groups might include an online space for a closed group who also regularly meet in person. Each example has benefits and risks.

Offering additional communication options is crucial to survivor-centered programming, but must be done with great caution. Investing in the software not right for your agency needs or without properly preparing your organization can place survivors in danger, and place advocates in jeopardy of violating the confidentiality regulations that govern their work.

Why Offer Digital Services?

They can increase access. Some survivors may feel more comfortable starting conversations using online chat than by phone. Some survivors cannot travel to the agency, but can connect online. Others may feel safer texting or chatting online than speaking out loud if an abusive partner or someone else in the house is close by. Additionally, these services may open up communication options for survivors with disabilities or who have language access needs. Many Deaf survivors prefer text, chat, or video calls over TTY or relay services.

Privacy & Safety Risks

Every communication tool, carries privacy and safety risks. For example, someone may see content on the survivor's device, or we may forget to delete emails containing personally identifying information, unintentionally preserving a digital trail[1] that compromises confidentiality. (See our Agency Toolkit for more information about how to minimize risks and empower survivors as they use technology.)

It's critical to research and understand the specific risks of platforms before implementing digital services. This will better prepare your agency to choose more secure software and create sound policies on use. It'll also allow you to train staff to talk with survivors about the privacy and safety risks of a specific platform *before* using it, and offer alternative options if survivors choose.

Staff should understand the following risks before providing online services to survivors.

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.

Impersonation
Other people, including the abuser, can impersonate a survivor in an effort to get information about their plan or location from the advocate. They may also

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[1] The traces of information created by communication technology can be found on devices, apps, networks, and in the systems of phone and Internet companies.

impersonate the survivor as a way to sabotage their support system, telling the advocate they want to stop services, or saying things that will cause the advocate to close the victim's case.

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

Advocate Safety
The digital trail left by these communications can lead abusers to a program, shelter, or even a specific advocate. For example, if an advocate uses a personal device to text with a survivor, that advocate's number may be automatically stored in the survivor's phone.

Is There a Need for Digital Services?
Before investing in digital services, it's important to identify if your community has a need for digital service. For example, some national and state hotlines already offer digital services. [The National Domestic Violence Hotline](#) and [RAINN - the National Sexual Assault Hotline](#) offer 24/7 online chat and text messaging in English and Spanish, along with referrals to local services and advocates. Map out the availability and quality of these and other services for your community. Can you offer something that's missing, or that meets a higher standard? Would local chat or text services be of benefit beyond the national services?

It is important to know that survivors have also formed their own support communities online. These websites, groups, email lists, and other resources offer information, encouragement, and connection, often with little or no participation from our field. Additionally, you may find survivors are seeking support services that offer online counseling, video sessions, or apps, but do not have a survivor-centered approach. The technology used may not meet the requirements of federal laws protecting survivor privacy and confidentiality. The existence of these options from outside our field offer a compelling reason for our programs to offer

digital services based on a survivor-centered, trauma-informed approach, together with strong safety and privacy protections.

If you identify an unmet need, the next step is to assess whether technology is the best solution. Many programs have assumed a lack of text-based services is keeping them from reaching younger populations; however, it may be that they don't know services are available. In this case, it could be a better use of time and resources to conduct outreach and connect with organizations that work with youth.

Goals for Digital Services

If you determine online services are needed, the next step is to articulate goals that are survivor-centered, reflect the needs of your community, and overcome barriers survivors face when trying to access your program. Writing out these goals will help your agency prepare to provide digital services. The following questions can help guide your goal setting process:

1. Who are you hoping will use the new platform?

2. What type of services will be offered? (Hotline? Ongoing advocacy? Individual counseling? Group counseling? Appointment reminders?)

3. What type of technology is best suited to provide those services?

4. When will services be available? 24/7 or during set hours? Will there be time limits set for ongoing advocacy services?

5. How will you notify survivors about availability? Will you market it broadly, or only discuss it with existing clients?

6. How will you know the new services are successful?

7. Do you plan to expand digital services over time?

8. What other resources need to be in place to support survivors that reach out through the new service?

Survivor-centered goal setting must include considering and planning for supplemental support that may be needed by survivors from culturally specific

communities. For example, a program might think that adding text messaging to a hotline will increase access for the Deaf community. But if the program hasn't properly prepared for a new influx of requests from Deaf individuals by building up a referral list, identifying interpreters, training staff about text lingo unique to the Deaf community, and determining how the shelter will accommodate Deaf survivors, they could actually end up causing harm.

Total Cost of Ownership

It's important to look beyond the advertised cost of a tool when considering affordability, and factor in additional costs related to:

- Software purchase, set-up, customization;

- Ongoing use fees and maintenance;

- Upgrading (or purchasing new) computers and mobile devices that will be compatible with the new software;

- Increased Internet bandwidth;

- Security measures like anti-virus and anti-malware software;

- Training for staff on how to use the software;

- Staff time for developing or revising policies and procedures, and for conducting ongoing assessment of the new services;

- Increasing staffing and supervision to provide digital services, and meet any growth in demand created by new outreach.

Quality Services

Using a new a tool can be challenging. Develop policies that help staff maintain healthy boundaries and stay grounded in survivor-centered services before adopting a new technology. For example, a messaging service may prompt survivors to try to extend conversations for many hours (or even days) with the advocate, which can become stressful for busy advocates trying to assist multiple clients.

Questions to consider include:

- How formal or informal should the tone be? For example, should advocates use emojis or texting lingo?

- Should you offer a satisfaction survey as a separate pop-up window or a link as a session closes?

- How do you handle shift changes when an advocate is in the middle of an online conversation?

- How will you curate a survivor's experience when your online chat service has a wait, or when it is not available during certain timeframes?

Providing quality services through online forums also requires unique training. Key skillsets to teach include how to:

- Help a survivor discern their unique privacy and safety risks related to the online platform so that they can make an informed decision before use;

- Assess the survivor's mood or tone via text-based communication;

- Convey empathy and active listening via online platforms;

- Practice ongoing safety checks during conversations;

- Practice communication that helps minimize safety risks while providing opportunities for disclosure and support;

- Handle dropped conversations or emergencies during an online conversation; and

- Obtain a written time limited consent to release of information.

Pooling Services

For many years, regions or whole states have pooled resources to offer phone hotline services. The advantages are greater availability, language access, and shorter hold times for survivors. Programs can share costs for the technology and staffing. Be sure to thoroughly consider the benefits and down-sides. For

example, depending on how the services are structured or how any data is collected or maintained, there could be some serious confidentiality concerns.

This is the first in our [Digital Services Toolkit](#), designed for local, community-based domestic violence and sexual assault advocacy programs. While other professionals may benefit from the information provided, the confidentiality concerns will differ. We recommend reading [Choosing a Digital Platform](#) next, and then, before launching any new service, use the [Best Practices for Digital Services](#) document to prepare to offer high quality, survivor-centered advocacy.

We update our materials frequently. Please visit [TechSafety.org](#) for the latest version of this and other materials.