



NNEDV

## Chat with Survivors: Best Practices

Some victim service programs are considering online chat as another way to communicate with survivors. This can help with survivors who aren't ready to speak to someone on the phone and it can increase accessibility for survivors who can't or prefer not to use other communication methods because they are Deaf, hard of hearing, or have a disability. Some programs may use chat as a hotline for crisis response and others may use it to provide on-going advocacy.

### Understanding Chat-Based Services

For the purposes of this document, "online chat," is referring to browser-based platforms where a survivor connects to an advocate through a link on the program's website. Although the term "chat" is also used to describe app-based messaging, and some platforms offer the ability to manage both browser-based online chat and app-based messaging through one dashboard on a computer at your program, this document focuses specifically on browser-based chats. For more information on mobile-based messaging, see the [Texting Best Practices](#) handout.

In a typical setup, survivors initiate chat conversations by clicking a link on the program's website. This is ideal in many situations because the conversation remains in the online chat box, and the survivor won't have to worry about deleting messages out of an app. Online chats can be set up so that as soon as the conversation ends, the chat history is erased.

For more information about specific platforms, please [contact us](#).

It's essential for programs to incorporate safety and privacy considerations into all of the work they do and to develop policies and protocols that help make services easier to access while minimizing related risks. Chat tools come with their own unique set of safety and privacy considerations, which we'll cover below.

## **Minimize Interception**

In the context of domestic violence, stalking, or harassment, there is always a chance that someone else is monitoring the survivor's device. This could happen either by someone physically looking at the device (with or without the survivor knowing) or because of spyware installed on the device.

### Best Practice:

- Always check in with survivors about their safety at the beginning of the conversation. Ask if they are concerned about their device being monitored. Let them know that chat can be a risky way to communicate if the device is being monitored. If they are worried, you can suggest options for safer communication (see the next point). If the survivor suspects the device is being monitored but still wants to chat, respect that wish. Give survivors the safety information they need, but let them make the final decision about what is best for them in their current situation.
- If the survivor doesn't want to continue the chat because they're concerned about interception, discuss other ways to safely communicate with you, such as using another device (for example, a library computer), making a phone call, or coming in to talk in person.
- Some chat services allow you to set up the platform so that when the conversation is ended by the advocate, the chat window on the survivor's device is automatically closed and the conversation history is erased. Let survivors know what will happen when you end a chat conversation.
- Turn off options that allow chat messages to be saved or copied. Just as how hotline calls and in-person interactions with survivors are not recorded, chat conversations should follow the same privacy practices.
- Find out how the web address of the chat service will look in the survivor's web browser and help the survivor create strategies to eliminate or minimize risks related to the abusive person seeing it.

## **Prevent Impersonation**

Without being face-to-face or hearing the person you are communicating with, it could be easy for someone to pretend to be a survivor. This can be a serious concern if the advocate has ongoing communication with the survivor and will be discussing issues from previous conversations. Below are best practices to help prevent impersonation.

### Best Practice:

- Apply the same safety and privacy protocols to chat hotlines that you do on phone hotlines when the caller could be an abuser or someone unknown. Address specific questions, but don't share personal information about anyone else, including other clients or staff.
- When using chat services for ongoing communication with a survivor, establish a method that verifies their identity. Code words can be used at the beginning of each conversation to confirm the identity of the person chatting. Let them know that you may ask them for it again during the conversation just to make sure you're still speaking to the same person. Update the code word regularly.
- Don't rely on user accounts as a method to confirm a person's identity. While it may seem that they're more secure because they require a username and password to sign on, they aren't a guarantee that the person you're communicating with is the survivor. An abusive person could access the account by guessing the username and password or discover them by monitoring the survivor's device. Also, creating a user account may create a barrier to a survivor accessing services.

## **Ensure Data Privacy**

Most chat platforms on the market were created for customer service communication and not for providing victim services. By default, these platforms gather a lot of information. This can include incidental data, such as the survivor's IP address, the type of device used, and general location. The platform may also

store detailed personal information, such as how many times someone has reached out, the dates and times they reached out, and full transcripts of conversations. Some platforms can be set up to collect specific data as part of the chat communication. For businesses, this information can help build customer satisfaction and increase profits. For victim service organizations, however, capturing this information can create complex privacy and safety risks and potentially violate confidentiality best practices.

### Best Practices for Client Data

- Collect the least amount of information needed to provide the service requested and keep that information for as short a period of time as possible. Do not collect more information than you would for a traditional hotline call or in-person conversation.
- Choose a platform that doesn't store the content of conversations; if the platform allows saving or recording conversations, turn off that feature.

### Best Practice for Collecting Demographic Data

- When demographic questions (or any questions) are asked before a chat starts, the survivor may think they're required to answer the questions if they want to get help. It's important to make sure that it's very clear survivors can skip or opt out of those questions.
- Explain to survivors why you're collecting this information, and let them know how sharing information may impact their privacy and safety. Give survivors the opportunity to make meaningfully informed choices on whether they want to participate.

### Best Practice for Satisfaction Surveys:

- Carefully think through safety issues when setting up satisfaction surveys. Requesting email addresses, adding links to outside websites, and enabling pop-up windows could create unintended risks to a survivor's safety.

- As with all aspects of victim services, satisfaction surveys should be voluntary. Before starting the survey, let the survivor know that you are collecting feedback on your services and that it's voluntary.
- Do not collect personally identifying information in satisfaction surveys and make every effort not to collect incidental data (see below).

#### Best Practice for Incidental Data Collection:

- Incidental data (IP address, device type, general location) may be collected by the chat platform automatically. Ask the chat platform: do they collect such data, who has access to that data, if they share data and with whom, and how regularly they delete it. (Most of this information will be in their privacy policy.) If the platform allows it, opt out of collecting incidental data. Otherwise, ask to customize the system to delete the information as quickly as possible (ideally automatically). If their data access and sharing practices do not match your privacy and safety needs, find another platform.
- Some platforms may have the ability to integrate with your client databases, automatically storing data about the contact. This goes against best practice. Do not store or include chat data in client databases.

#### Best Practices for Data Security

- Choose a platform where employees of the company cannot see or retrieve content of chat conversations. This is sometimes called “zero-knowledge” or “no knowledge” encryption or “no view” services. In such a system, your program holds the key to unscramble the data and the company does not. No one at the company can see that content, accidentally or on purpose. In addition, if they were to receive a subpoena or court order, they would not be able to reveal any readable information because the data is encrypted in that way.
- If the platform company has the ability to see personally identifying information or content from survivors, have your own attorney negotiate

for strong language in the contract that imposes strict consequences should the company access this information. If a breach occurs, the company should notify you immediately.

- Advocates should minimize sharing personally identifying information of survivors and others over the platform.
- Inform survivors of the platform you are using so survivors can choose, based on their own safety risk, whether to communicate with you via that platform. Some survivors may choose not to use a particular technology because they know or suspect that it is vulnerable to being accessible by the abusive person.

### **Inform Survivors of their Rights and Choices**

Just like with hotline phone calls and face-to-face meetings, your program should have processes that inform survivors of their rights and choices. These include the right to: voluntarily access services, choose what they do or don't want to share with you, decide if and how their personal information is shared with third parties, and be aware any mandatory reporting obligations your program may have. With chat services, your program will need to create processes to pre-emptively inform survivors of their rights.

As an example, if an advocate is a mandatory reporter and they are having an in-person conversation with a survivor who is about to disclose something that may fall under the advocate's reporting obligations, the advocate can respectfully interrupt to remind the survivor of those obligations. The survivor can decide whether to continue disclosing. In a chat conversation, it is more challenging since the disclosure may come through before the advocate can interrupt with information about their obligation. It is important to ensure that notice of rights and obligations are given upfront.

#### **Best Practice:**

- Initiate conversations at the beginning of each hotline chat about the survivor’s rights and safety, any limitations to confidentiality, and any other issue commonly covered in voice calls.
- Some platforms can set up “canned” messages that automatically appear at the beginning of each chat session. (If the software doesn’t allow for canned messages, you can cut and paste the standard message from an electronic document.) However, keep the language short, meaningful, and in plain language, with a link to more details elsewhere.
- Give survivors a chance to discuss these issues with you if they have any questions or want more information.

### **Ensure Appropriate Staffing**

Chat conversations are often longer in duration than traditional phone calls, and survivors tend to disclose more graphic information over chat. In addition, chat conversations can end abruptly if the survivor simply stops responding. Because of this, staffing chat conversations may require different skills, in addition to more support and staffing than traditional services.

#### Best Practice:

- Develop processes on how to respond if a survivor stops communicating. Draw on existing practices for when a phone call is dropped.
- Prepare clear messages that advocates can share with survivors to let them know that if a certain amount of time passes and the survivor hasn’t responded, the conversation will be closed.
- Since chat conversations often last longer than phone calls, consider how you will handle shift changes if the conversation continues beyond a staff member’s working hours. You may transfer a chat conversation from one advocate to the next; however, be sure to include processes for informing the survivor of the change so they know they’re speaking with someone new. Or you may create a policy that advocates don’t start new conversations within the last 30 minutes of their shift.

- Because chat conversations tend to have more graphic disclosures than phone calls, ensure that staff have appropriate debriefing and support.
- Provide training for staff to address privacy and safety issues specific to informed consent and device monitoring. [Read more information about Spyware.](#)

### **Provide Quality Chat Services**

It's important that advocates using chat receive training in the nuances of communicating non-verbally with victims. It's also important to ensure survivors have a clear understanding of when chat is available (days of the week, times of day) and that they know what the alternatives are if the system is down.

#### Best Practice:

- Clearly post on your website the hours that chat is available. If those hours change unexpectedly or if there are technical issues, ensure that is clearly communicated. Always include alternative ways to reach a crisis advocate.
- Train staff so they are comfortable communicating in writing with victims in crisis. Verbal cues that can be helpful in a phone call do not exist over chat, meaning staff need to check in more often to ensure they understand.
- Do not assume that you understand the meaning of the words someone writes or why they are using a particular writing style. Just because someone is using all capital letters doesn't mean they are shouting, and someone who is typing slowly with a lot of pauses isn't necessarily hesitant. Check in with the survivor about meaning, tone, and emotion to help minimize miscommunication.
- Avoid using Internet slang, acronyms, and emojis. Not everyone has the same understanding of what they mean, and some may not be familiar with them at all.
- Do not use machine-based language translation. Currently, this type of translation is not high quality and is unable to translate domestic violence and sexual assault issues with nuance and sensitivity. Consider using chat



platforms that allow for three-way conversations. Then, use a live, qualified language interpreter. Be sure to follow proper consent and disclosure guidelines when including third party interpreters.

- Find out how the platform will handle messages sent in characters and alphabets other than those often called “Basic Latin” (meaning English and other European languages). Make sure that all character sets and alphabets are supported, including those for languages such as Arabic, Mandarin, Hindi, etc. If the platform doesn’t support other languages, have a plan on how to respond to survivors, which may include providing notices on your website inviting them to call the hotline if interpretation is available there.

## **Plan Ahead**

There will always be situations that impact your chat service that aren’t related to speaking with survivors. This may include natural disasters or emergencies. It will also include contact from people who aren’t survivors, such as prank callers, abusive individuals, or callers with mental health crises including suicidal ideation.

- Identify unintended and unexpected scenarios that could impact your chat service and plan accordingly.
- For inappropriate callers, some chat platforms allow for conversations to be transferred to a supervisor. Draw on existing policies and procedures.
- Include chat services in your program’s emergency and disaster planning, and ensure that survivors know when your service is unavailable and alternative options to get help.

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