Choosing a Digital Services Platform

In choosing a digital services platform, the first step is to consider which type of tool is best suited to the service you want to provide, and how using that platform may impact security, privacy, and safety. The following questions will assist with this process:

1. **Does the platform meet the need you are trying to address?**
   Some technologies are more suited for a specific type of communication or service. For example, text messaging, which is generally intended to be one-on-one, would not be a good fit for a support group.

2. **Is the platform accessible to survivors?**
   Do not assume that all survivors will be able to use all technology platforms. A therapy session that meets via video call might help remote survivors connect; however, survivors in a rural area with poor internet connectivity may not be able to access the session. Choose a platform that the survivors you work with will be able to access.

3. **Does the platform increase privacy or safety risks?**
   No online platform is free from all risk, but some tools lack the minimal level of privacy and security recommended for the service being offered. For example, social media is not a private or secure platform to facilitate support groups.

Below are considerations of which digital platform to use when offering these types of services:
   I.   Hotlines & Crisis Response
   II. Ongoing Advocacy & Counseling
   III. Support Groups

I.   Platforms for Hotlines & Crisis Response

Using text messaging, online chat, or video calls to offer hotline and crisis services can increase victims' access to advocacy and support. Some survivors prefer communicating over text messaging or online chat rather than phone calls or feel safer or more private texting or chatting online than speaking aloud if someone else is nearby. All three types of platforms 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.

Below are some additional considerations specific to text messaging, online chat, and video calls when used to offer hotline and crisis services.

Texting & Messaging

An advantage of texting or messaging is that it is a familiar way to communicate, and all mobile phones have a texting app so survivors don't need to download a separate app.

A basic approach is to use a cell phone to text with survivors. However, this method can be challenging when used as a hotline service, because it requires one advocate to juggle multiple text conversations on a single device. It is not equipped for triaging hotline calls. A better alternative is for programs to use a computer-based messaging platform that allows multiple staff members to triage, assign, and respond to messages that come in.

Text conversations can create privacy and safety risks if a survivor's device is being monitored or accessed by someone else. Unlike a voice call, text conversations preserve a written record of the entire conversation; usually saved on the device until they are manually deleted. Some computer-based texting platforms can delete message history on the program side by default, but texts on the survivor's device cannot be erased unless done so by the survivor. Advocates

should inform survivors about risks before beginning a sensitive conversation over text.

For more information about texting and messaging with survivors, including best practices, see [Texting & Messaging with Survivors: Best Practices](#).

Chat

Online chat is another platform used to offer hotline services. Generally, survivors access the platform by going to a program's website and initiating a conversation via the online chat link. The program then uses a computer-based chat platform to respond.

Incorporating a chat platform into your website allows a survivor to easily connect to your program. You can also post information before the survivor initiates a conversation (such as service hours or disruptions in service) and link to helpful resources.

Chat is more secure than text messaging because of the technology itself and because conversations are typically not automatically stored onto the device. In most cases, after an online chat conversation is over, a history of that conversation will disappear from the survivor's device (although it may be possible that the survivor's device was being monitored by spyware – [read more about Spyware](#)). Remember – privacy and safety are never guaranteed.

For more information about online chat with survivors, including best practices, see [Chat Best Practices](#).

Video Calls

Video calls can also be used for hotline and crisis services. Video can offer more of an in-person feel, and can offer visual and audio cues that can help advocates

assess for mood and tone. This can help minimize miscommunication when compared to texting or online chatting. Many video platforms also make it easy to add in third-party live interpreters. This can increase accessibility for victims who are Deaf, hard of hearing, or speak different languages than the advocate providing the service.

When considering video, it is important to communicate with survivors about the safety of their devices and surroundings. Even if their device is secure, their conversations could be overheard by someone else in the space, including the abusive person. In addition, some survivors may not have access to the internet bandwidth or cell network needed for a video call.

For more information about video calls with survivors, including best practices, see [Video Best Practices](#).

II.   Platforms for Ongoing Advocacy & Counseling

When an advocate and survivor have been working together, they may want to communicate through text messages, online chat, email, or video calls. There are benefits to using these platforms to supplement phone conversations or face-to-face meetings.

Depending on the type of platform used, programs should be aware of the risks and benefits specific to each platform; talk to survivors about those risks so that they can make informed decisions for their current situation. See our Best Practice Guides for each type of platform for more detailed information.

Below are additional considerations specific to using text messages, email, and video calls to supplement in person ongoing advocacy & counseling.

Texting & Messaging

Sometimes it is easier to send a quick text when a phone call isn't possible or when the message is short, such as confirming the time of an appointment. Some survivors may ask an advocate to text them with information because they are some place where they cannot pick up the phone, such as work or court.

In most cases, texting with survivors while providing ongoing advocacy means the advocate will be using a mobile phone to communicate. It's important to keep in mind that by default, all text conversations are saved on both the sender's and receiver's devices, unless they are manually deleted. This privacy and safety concern is something that advocates should talk about with survivors in the safety planning process, and programs should follow a policy of deleting text history immediately or regularly.

For more information about texting and messaging with survivors, including best practices, see [Texting & Messaging with Survivors: Best Practices](#).

Online Chat

Online chat is another option for ongoing communication with a survivor. Online chat might be preferred by survivors who feel they don't have a private place to have a verbal conversation or who find chat to be more accessible. An advocate and survivor might schedule an online chat in advance. If an online chat is scheduled, it will be important that survivors knows whether they will be speaking to specific advocate or the advocate staffing the chat line.

Unlike texting, online chat conversations are generally not automatically stored on the survivor's device or account. However, impersonation could be an issue, so when using chat services for ongoing communication, establish a method that verifies their identity.

For more information about online chat with survivors, including best practices,

see [Online Chat Best Practices](#).

Emailing

Some survivors may prefer to communicate by email. However, email can be easily intercepted, particularly if the abusive person knows the password to the email account or has access to devices that the survivor uses to check email. As with any communication method, it's important to check in regularly with the survivor to make sure email is still a safe way to communicate. As with other communication methods, take guidance from the survivor and allow them to choose what is safest and best for them.

For more information about emailing with survivors, including best practices, see [Emailing with Survivors Best Practices](#).

Video Calls

Video calls can be used to supplement phone calls or face-to-face meetings or to provide counseling services. Video can offer visual and audio cues that can add more context to the conversation, including tone and mood. Another benefit to video calls is that it is easy to add in a third party, including live interpreters. This can increase accessibility for victims who are Deaf, hard of hearing, or speak a different language than the advocate who is providing the service.

When considering video, it is important to communicate with survivors about the safety of their devices and surroundings. Even if their device is secure, their conversations could be overheard by someone else in the space, including the abusive person. In addition, some survivors may not have access to the internet bandwidth or cell network needed for a video call.

For more information about video calls with survivors, including best practices, see [Video Best Practices](#).

III.   Platforms for Support Groups

Online support groups can be a valuable way to for survivors to connect with support and other survivors when they are not able to meet in person. There are a wide variety of technology options to connect survivors using technology, including online forums where survivors can read and post messages at any time, and real-time online group web chats or video calls.

Whatever technology you choose to offer, platforms used for support groups should be private and secure with only survivors and the group facilitators allowed to participate. Online forums should be moderated by a staff person to monitor what is posted, check in with survivors, and offer additional information about available services as needed. Video or audio support groups should be facilitated much in the same way as in-person groups are.

Below are some additional considerations specific to online forums and video calls used to facilitate support groups. *For more information, see [Online Support Groups for Survivors](#).*

Online Web Chat
Use a service where survivors just click on a link or go to a specific web address at a scheduled time, rather than using personal accounts that survivors may already have such as social media or cloud accounts. This way, they don't need to sign up for an account or connect their personal information to the group. Read more about best practices when communicating with survivors using [chat](#).

Video Calls
Video support groups tend to follow the same format as in-person support groups, being scheduled in advance for a set period of time. As with online web chat, use safer and more private options that allow survivors to simply click a link

to join a call without having to download an app, set up an account, or share personal contact information. It's best to avoid personal accounts that survivors already have. Read more about best practices for communicating with survivors using [video](#).

Online Forums or Message Groups

With tools that allow people to post and read messages at any time, it is important that survivors are aware they might not receive immediate responses from other members or program staff. There are also additional privacy risks associated with creating a user account, receiving notifications about group updates, and impersonation risks if others use a survivor's account to access the group space.

We update our materials frequently. Please visit TechSafety.org for the latest version of this and other materials.