



Confidential Shelter Locations & The Internet: How Information Gets Online & What To Do About It

With Google, Bing, and Yahoo search engines offering an abundance of information, it has become increasingly difficult for shelter locations to remain confidential. A simple Google search for “domestic violence shelter + city” may reveal a listing of a confidential shelter address along with a map to pinpoint the location. While this may make programs more accessible for victims seeking help, some programs are worried that abusers may come looking for survivors living in confidential shelters. Programs can request that their confidential shelter address be removed, but it is also imperative that programs understand how their shelter location information gets shared, how to lessen risk of shelter disclosure, and the different ways to get the shelter location off of the internet.

How Does Your Information Get Online?

Although shelters that have confidential locations are vigilant about not sharing their location with anyone, the reality is that location information is shared regardless. The location is shared with the post office, maintenance and utility companies, cab drivers who bring survivors into shelters, and the survivors themselves. Companies such as the post office, delivery companies or utility companies may share or sell address information with others companies, advertisers or information brokers. It’s important to know the privacy policy of those companies and learn with whom they may share your location.

Once your location gets sold or is given away, it can be used to inform local business listing services (such as Yellowpages, DexKnows, Infogroup, etc.) This information, in turn, is used by online business listings and mapping services (such as Google Places, BingLocal) to tell their users where a business is located. Online business listing services get their sources from a variety of places:

- Local business listing services such as Localeze, Acxiom, Infogroup, Citysearch, Superpages, Yellowpages and more.
- Other online “crowdsources” such as Yelp or Foursquare.
- People who use the online maps and directories can manually update the listing by correcting listings, update information, and even provide a review of the “business.”

Confidential shelter addresses can also be revealed online through websites that share contact information for social services in a particular area or websites of other service providers that list resources available for clients.

How to Lessen Risk of Shelter Location Disclosure

To ensure that your confidential location stays confidential, share that address with as few people as possible. Prevention of disclosure is a lot easier to manage than getting information removed from online spaces.

- Use a P.O. Box or administrative office address to receive mail and delivery.
- Reduce the number of businesses and people that know your shelter location.
- Don’t forget that putting your shelter location in an email may reveal your confidential location to more than just the person you’re emailing. Not only is email not a confidential form of communication, but that email could be forwarded or accidentally sent to the wrong people.
- Have clear policies and procedures on how and when your shelter location is shared with others in the community and ensure that all staff, volunteers, and board members are trained. Make note of the mail that comes to your agency. Junk mail is usually a sign that your confidential location might be in a database somewhere. (You can opt out of receiving junk mail by going here: www.dmachoice.org.)



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How to Get Your Shelter Location Off the Internet

Once your information is online, you can request that the online listing services remove your confidential location. Your confidential shelter location is considered a business. Each search engine has its own process for requesting a deletion. In general, you can “claim” your business and then request that it be removed or deleted.

Know the difference between a search result and a search engine business listing (Google Places or Bing Local). For example, if you put your shelter name in the Google search engine, and you see links that take you to a website that has your confidential shelter location—you need to contact the website owner to remove your confidential address. However, if it comes up in Google Places (along with a Google Map) then you can request that Google remove the listing.

Below are the steps to request a removal for a few of the major online business listings.

Google Places	Safety Net works with Google to suppress confidential shelter locations. Email safetynet@nnedv.org to request instructions on how to remove your shelter location (do not email the confidential address). Once the address is removed, the address should not be added to their listing again.
Bing Local	To edit or remove your listing from Bing Local, you will need to “claim” the listing and then edit it. You can claim it by logging into the Bing Business Portal: http://www.bing.com/businessportal . It takes 4-5 business days for edits or deletions to process. Once a business is tagged “Suppressed” or “Deleted” it should not be repopulated in their listings. However, if a user manually adds the business back, then it’ll go through their verification and validation system.
Yahoo! Local	You can request a listing removal by using this form: http://help.yahoo.com/l/us/yahoo/local/personal_info.html
Mapquest	You can contact them using this form: http://help.mapquest.com/contact-us/

Additional Tips

1. Search for your shelter in a variety of ways:
 - a. Use different forms of your shelter name or “domestic violence shelter + your city.”
 - b. Use different search engines. Search engines get their data from a variety of sources, so your confidential shelter may show up on one search engine but not another.
2. Check to see if your confidential shelter location gets relisted, even after you’ve requested its removal. Because these search engines pull their information from somewhere else, whenever that source updates their data, your shelter may be revealed once again.

A Non-Confidential Shelter

In this age of data sharing, keeping a shelter location confidential can be difficult. Many shelters, exhausted with the constant vigilance that is required to ensure that the address remain confidential, have decided that having a public shelter is better for their community. These shelters often have strong policies in place for safety and security, including steel doors, alarm systems, and neighborhood watches. They also have reliable community support and response in case an incident does occur. If staying offline is becoming impossible, this may be an option your program can consider.