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](#).*
**Online 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.

Online 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 Online Chat Best Practices.*

**Video Calls**

Video calls can also be used for hotline and crisis services. Videos 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.

*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.

For more information about video calls with survivors, including best practices, see Video Best Practices.

III. Platforms for Support Groups

Remote support groups can be helpful for a wide range of survivors – including those who live in rural areas, can’t make scheduled in-person meetings, are unable to leave their homes, or can’t find child care. Support groups can also be offered to survivors already receiving other services.

Platforms used for support groups should be private and secure with only survivors and the group facilitator allowed to participate. Generally, online support groups should be organized by a program that invites survivors to join. Providing space for survivors who are known to the program and have expressed interest in participating can help ensure that group members are well-suited for the discussions. This process can also help minimize the risk of impersonation. Support groups that are set up so that survivors who are unknown to the program can request to join requires the program to develop criteria to ensure that the person requesting to join is appropriate for the group. This approach could feel unwelcoming or compromise survivor privacy.

Below are some additional considerations specific to online forums and video calls used to facilitate support groups.

**Online Forums**

An online forum can be a private space where survivors share messages with other survivors. This can be set up so that everyone participates at the same time or at a time different times, based on the preference of the individual, rather than having to wait on a set time for a scheduled support group. The non-scheduled style of support group can be available 24/7, allowing survivors to drop in and out when they can. In this format it is important that survivors are aware they might
not receive immediate responses from other members. 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 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.

A benefit of using video call platforms is that group members can see each other, which can help prevent impersonation, while also giving sighted members the ability to see body language and facial cues. However, some survivors may prefer to be anonymous (and not have others see their faces), so make sure other options are available.

A drawback with video is that it requires users to have strong internet bandwidth to handle both audio and video. Callers may not get a clear reception or audio and video may lag or be dropped if internet connections are poor. Be sure to find out what kind of internet connection is required for the platform and match that to what’s available to survivors in your service area.

*For more information about video calls with survivors, including best practices, see Video Best Practices.*

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