



# Considerations for Conducting Remote Supervised Visitation and Modified Safe Exchange Services for Families Experiencing Domestic Violence in a Time of a National Health Crisis-Part 1\*

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\*Released on March 24, 2020 - please be advised that new information is being released to the public rapidly, and updates to these considerations may need to be taken into consideration. Please be mindful that these are suggestions and not programming requirements.

Important note for all Office on Violence Against Women funded programs: Please reach out to your OVW program specialist if you have questions regarding the temporary changes in delivering services. Additional information will be provided from OVW.

The current health crisis the world is facing is putting us all in uncharted territory. Circumstances are rapidly evolving, and individuals, families, and communities are facing challenges in their everyday living. As a program that serves families impacted by domestic violence, you are being looked to to provide services as safely as possible in uncertain times.

As we all co-create a new temporary reality in how we provide supervised visitation services to families in times of crisis, we want you to know that Inspire Action, in partnership with OVW, is committed to the health, welfare, and care of each of you and your communities and take our responsibility for supporting you and your programming seriously.

As we obtain new information, we will be putting out new and updated ideas to consider. We are supporting programs to take protective measures and consider possible programming modifications that may be needed during this time of uncertainty. Programs may be forced to limit the level of services available or



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modify how some services can be provided to families while still maintaining high quality, trauma-informed, adult and child survivor-centered, safety-driven services that successfully meet the unique needs of families impacted by violence.

Contact between children and a parent who has caused harm can have a dangerous impact if that contact is not emotionally and physically safe and monitored by safe adults who understand domestic violence and the unique needs of adult survivors and their children.

To ensure safety and that no further harm comes to adult survivors and children, it is important that visitation programs do not create programming modifications that ignore the different safety needs of each individual family ordered to use supervised visitation services. There is room for unintended consequences that can pose risks to families if services are not maintained with a high level of expertise related to adult and child safety. Different and changing levels of risk will require different levels of response. Many family circumstances are unique and will change over time, so flexibility is a necessity.

Modified exchange services or remote supervised visitation services will not be safe or appropriate for all families. Some families need an intensive and heightened level of service that cannot be assured when providing modified or remote services. It is essential during these challenging times to stay connected with community partners: in particular, the courts and domestic violence partners. Reach out to your court partner to understand what the court is doing to support survivor safety and to share strategies. Our coordination at this time will have both immediate and long-term benefits to survivors and their families.



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Additionally, create opportunities for regular and ongoing communication so that each partner can respond to the ever-changing circumstances in the safest way possible.

### **Possible situations that may render virtual remote supervised visitation or modified safe exchange services inadequate or inappropriate:**

- The adult survivor indicates fear or risks associated with modified or remote access.
- Children and youth express fear or concerns about modified or remote access.
- Ongoing stalking behavior.
- Continued threats of or acts of violence, intimidation, and harassment.
- Allegations or findings of child sexual abuse.
- Ongoing attempts to manipulate staff.
- A parent has used the center as a platform for ongoing power and control tactics or to manipulate or undermine others.
- Supervised visitation center staff have had difficulty in the past redirecting behavior during visits.
- The center has not previously provided services to a family.

### **Approaches to Supporting Safety When Providing Remote Supervised Visitation and Modified Safe Exchange Services:**

- Ensure there is regular and open communication with the adult survivor parent about any unintended consequences that may emerge as a result of remote supervised contact.
- Ensure there is a regular, intentional time to check in with each child engaged in services.



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- Ensure there is a regular, intentional time to check in with the parent who has caused harm.
- Work with adult survivors to ensure they have supportive social connections and needed resources.
- Breaking isolation and helping parents build a community of support is vital. Recognize the parents' diverse cultural, social, ethnic, racial, and religious backgrounds and discuss with them who and what they turn to in times of social isolation to reinforce support.

### **Considerations for Remote Supervised Visitation Services**

Determine what is safe, based on the unique needs, risk factors, and safety considerations of each family. Following are suggestions of how to ensure the highest level protection:

- Determine how you will address and mitigate safety concerns unique to each family.
- Create a plan for how you will intervene when there is an issue, with the caveat that if risk or harm is being caused, you will do what is necessary to interrupt the behavior.
- Prepare and provide a new orientation with every person in the family utilizing services. Provide as much detail as possible (the schedule they will follow, who will be where, where they will go after arrival, what happens next, who will be with them during visits, what they can expect if there are changes and how you will notify them of changes).
- Establish a routine in your remote services. It is essential for visitation center staff to work with infants and youth to prepare them for visitation, and predictability helps young people build trust and confidence with the center. It also allows them to help inform program



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staff about how they are feeling and what they might need from the staff.

- Infants, children, and youth who have been exposed to domestic violence need clearly stated expectations, routines, and rituals.

When remote service adaptations are considered for some families, there are a number of remote monitoring options that should be considered. The options include:

- Program staff would be present with the children during remote access.
- Program staff would be present with the parent who has caused harm during remote access.
- Program staff would be present with the parent needing protection, regardless of their custodial status.
- Program staff and each parent would all be in remote locations.

### **Virtual Monitoring Considerations**

One option to make everyone feel like they're together is to use video. Virtual connections can help families feel more engaged because it allows people to see each other, which immediately humanizes the interaction. It also allows the monitor to gauge non-verbal cues which is much more difficult to do over the phone. However, virtual visitation may create risk or complications and these factors should be considered:

- It is more challenging to read body language and emotions that might be escalating while in a virtual context.
- It is difficult to intervene as quickly as when you are conducting an in-person visit.



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- It will be more difficult to monitor what is being shown and who is in view of the screen during a virtual visit. Think about how you will limit, manage, and mitigate this with the parent in advance of visits.

### Technology Considerations

There are many things to consider when choosing to use technology and understanding the potential benefits and risks. There are many platforms available, and programs want to be sure to choose one that ensures safety and confidentiality for survivors.

The following platform options have been recommended and vetted by the National Network to End Domestic Violence:

- <https://www.resourceconnect.com/>
- <https://www.gruveo.com/>
- <https://www.cyph.com/>

If using computer-based connections, understand computer and network privacy settings to limit what personal information can be accessed by people other than the user. .

- On the computer, view the privacy settings in the browser (usually found in the “Tools” menu) to disable tracking functions.
- Utilize a network connection link that doesn’t create access to your internal network. Ensure you have internal controls and firewalls in place.
- Be aware of public Wi-Fi connections and the risks associated with tracking or tracing when connecting to unsecured connections.



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It is important to remember that technology isn't the problem, the abuse and misuse of technology are what create risk. Here are some additional resources that may be helpful when thinking about remote work with survivors and their families:

- <https://www.techsafety.org/digital-services-toolkit>
- <https://www.techsafety.org/digital-services-during-public-health-crises>

### **Safe Exchange Services**

While providing safe exchange services may seem less complicated and risky than other types of services, the reality is that people who cause harm can take advantage of unsupervised visitation to potentially use children and/or obtain and pass information that can be harmful to both adult and child survivors.

Providers of safe exchange services are all well aware that providing this service in fact tends to be the most difficult, complicated, and challenging service they provide. This reality, coupled with programs facing a national health crisis and ever-changing restrictions, creates a new level of complexity for centers to determine. At a time of uncertainty, possible community-wide closures and health quarantines programs may not be certain if they can conduct an exchange and whether they will be able to ensure a safe return.

### **Safe Exchange Service Modification Considerations Continued**

- Limit the number of families entering the program at any one time.
- Create limited access to the facility to conduct exchanges in entry points of the facility only.





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- Facilitate transfers of children from two separate and distinct safe zones. Schedule one parent to arrive in one specific zone and the other parent to arrive in another safe and separate arrival zone.
    - Think about the level of staff needed to conduct this adaptation safely. For example, place staff teams of two people at each arrival zone, with the opportunity for constant direct staff communication and back-up staff communication systems such as walkie-talkies or cell phone talk and text.
    - Ensure there is a staff float position available to move between the separate parent arrival zones.
    - Ensure connection to an immediate law enforcement response if an emergency arises (e.g., on-site law enforcement availability, panic buttons, and cell emergency communication).
  - Limit items that are exchanged (e.g., backpacks, clothing, toys, etc...).
  - Create a safety plan with parents who need protection if either parent or the children get ill during their parenting time.

Supervised visitation and safe exchange programs address the complexities of domestic and sexual violence, stalking, and dating violence and provide the necessary safety, security, and resources to support victims of domestic violence and their children. These services are an essential component of the community safety net that supports survivors seeking safety for themselves and their children after separating from an abusive partner. As you think creatively about ways your program can temporarily restructure your service delivery, ensure that all creative solutions are still grounded in the OVW Supervised Visitation and Safe Exchange Guiding Principles and do not compromise the safety of adult victims and their children in any way.