



NNEDV

## Online Communication Tips for Advocates

“Digital Services” means using technology tools to provide services to survivors. Offering additional communication options is crucial to survivor-centered services, and it must be done with caution. Learn more about choosing technology and setting up digital services at [TechSafety.org](https://www.techsafety.org).

### Risks & Challenges of Digital Services

- All tools have risks, even older technologies like phones.
- Advocates should be able talk about relevant risks with survivors.

**Interception** of communication between an advocate and a survivor could pose a risk to a survivor’s privacy or safety. A survivor’s device may be monitored physically, through an online account, or with spyware.

The risk for impersonation, including by the abusive person, exists across all text-based platforms: text, messaging, chat, social media, and email. However, even a phone or video call could involve impersonation if a different advocate takes a follow-up call from a survivor. One strategy is for advocates to establish a method to verify identity, such as a code word or phrase.

Technology used for communication can pose challenges to survivor **privacy** and can undermine programs’ **confidentiality** obligations. For example, voice or video conversations may be overheard. Additionally, many tools collect, store, and possibly even share the personally identifying information of survivors. Default settings may store information about the conversation, or messages themselves, in devices, browsers, or accounts.

### Online Communication

The skills you already use in phone and in-person advocacy are the foundation for digital services.

**Safety and privacy checks** at the start of every conversation should include something basic like, “Are you worried that anyone else might have access to your device or our conversation?” If the survivor suspects monitoring, offer options. If they still want to continue, respect that wish. [Learn more about talking with survivors about safe ways to communicate.](#)

**Let survivors know what to expect** from digital services. Share your program’s practices about why or when a conversation would end, and what to expect if they reach out again. Tell survivors if there are any limits on the services you can provide with technology, including any limits on confidentiality.

As with more traditional services, **informed consent** is very important. Be sure to share information in plain language, and give survivors a chance to ask questions. Whether you seek verbal or written confirmation will depend on the practice at your program, though generally if you don’t require written consent on a phone call, you shouldn’t need one for chat, video, or text. You do need written consent when survivors ask you to share their personal information with someone outside your program. Read more about [Digital Written Consent](#).

Text and chat are mostly written words, which can make it more difficult to assess emotion and tone. Emojis, acronyms, and internet slang can have multiple meanings. **Check in often about meaning and tone.** Stop and clarify if there is any confusion.

**Active listening** is different when using chat or text. Adapt key skills to reflect, validate, educate, and clarify what the survivor is saying. Follow your program’s

practice about the use of internet slang, acronyms, and emojis. Focus on the survivor; don't try to multi-task.

Ideally each survivor should close the conversation on their end. Follow your program's practice if the survivor doesn't reply for a certain amount of time.

Text and chat conversations tend to last longer and may have more numerous and graphic disclosures. ***Strive for work-life balance and practice self-care***, including asking for supervision and debriefing specific to digital services.

### **Privacy Practices**

As a guideline, ***collect the least amount of information needed and keep it for the shortest time possible***. Do not collect more information than you would for a phone hotline call or in-person conversation. As always, don't become part of the chain of custody for evidence by saving documentation of abuse. Learn more about our [Evidence Collection App for Survivors](#).

Both advocates and survivors can increase privacy when text messaging by deleting message history, not saving each other in contacts, and not syncing information about services to cloud accounts.

During voice or video conversations, advocates should not be overheard by anyone else, and other people should not see survivors' information or written conversations. Learn more about [Working Remotely](#), [Mobile Advocacy](#), and [Digital Written Consent](#).

Talk with others at your program about planning ahead for challenging situations such as internet connection issues or system downtime, language access, situations where there is an immediate danger or a threat of harm to self or others, or what to do when a survivor stops responding.

## What Next?

1. Learn to use the tools your program has chosen by reading step-by-step instructions or watching videos.
2. **Practice having conversations** with other advocates. Get used to logging in and getting started, how to use options like canned messages, sharing links, responding to languages you don't speak or write, and how to transfer a conversation.
3. Practice using the tool as if you were the survivor, using different devices and browsers. Ask yourself: How would you help a survivor to use this tool?

As a field, we are learning how to weave these newer technologies into our advocacy work. We're all learning and evolving. Note and discuss what you're learning about best practices within your program and with your colleagues.

## Further Resources

Visit [TechSafety.org](https://www.techsafety.org) to learn more from our [Digital Services Toolkit](#), our [Survivors' Toolkit](#), and more. Also check out our [Tech Safety App](#) for basic tech safety information. [Contact us at the Safety Net Project](#).

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