



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

With search engines offering an abundance of information, it has become increasingly difficult for shelter locations to remain confidential. Programs can take steps to hide their confidential shelter address, 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. Shelter location may be shared with the police in the event of an emergency, maintenance and utility companies, cab drivers who bring survivors to shelters, and survivors themselves. For example, utility companies or other companies that have the physical address of the shelter may share or sell address information with others companies, advertisers, or information brokers. It's important to know the privacy policies of those companies and learn with whom they may share your location.

Once your location is sold or given away, it can be used to inform business listing services (such as YP/ Yellowpages, DexKnows, Superpages, etc.). This information, in turn, is used by online mapping services (such as Google Maps or Bing Places) to tell their users where a business is located. Online business listing services get data from a variety of sources:

- Local business listing services such as Localeze, Acxiom, Infogroup, Citysearch, Superpages, Yellowpages and more.
- Other online location “crowdsourcing” such as Yelp and even Facebook Pages.
- Users of online maps and directories manually updating the listing, which may include posting photos or reviews.

Confidential shelter addresses can also be revealed online through websites that share directory information for local social services or other service providers' websites that list resources available for clients.

Cross-funding shelter facilities can also inadvertently cause their location to be publicly revealed. If funded homelessness or substance abuse recovery services are provided in a shelter, and that shelter's address is given as the service location in reports, then that address can become a public record and may be indexed on websites that direct people towards those services.

How to Lessen the Risk of Shelter Location Disclosure

To ensure that your confidential location stays confidential, share that address with as few people as possible. Preventing your location information from being shared is a lot easier to manage than removing the information once it's online.

- 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. Have taxi or ride-hailing service drivers drop survivors off at a nearby location instead of directly at the shelter.
- 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. (While you can [opt out of receiving junk mail](#) through DMAChoice, this will not remove the address from whatever database the companies sending the junk mail obtained it from.)

How to Get Your Shelter Location Off the Internet

If your shelter address is found online, you can request that the online listing services remove it. 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 deleted or the address hidden.

[Know the difference](#) between a search result and a search engine business listing (such as on Google Maps or Bing Places). For example, if you put your shelter name in the Google search engine, and you see links that take you to a website with your confidential shelter location, you need to contact the website owner to remove your confidential address. However, if it comes up in Google Maps, then you can claim and verify your business with Google as described below.

Listing Management Services

The number of listings platforms has increased dramatically in recent years, and it may be difficult to find all platforms on which your information is online. The mechanisms to access that information have expanded as well, with the popularity of smart speakers such as Amazon Alexa or Google Home. Social media apps [such as Instagram](#) and crowdsourced review sites [such as Yelp](#) now have their own map functionality to help users locate businesses.

Given this, you may find it easier and more reliable to use listing management software through which you can update many online listings – both search engine mapping services and local-business listing database – at once. [Yext](#) is probably the best-known (and the only one through which you can claim a MapQuest listing), but there are many other [listing management options](#) as well.

Manual Address Removal

If you wish to remove your address manually, below are steps for a few of the major online business listings:

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| <p>Google Maps</p> | <p>To edit your Google Maps listing, you will need to claim and verify your business, if you have not already done so. Note that at the bottom of that page, there is some information about instant verification methods, which will speed up the process. These will require you to prove ownership of your website using Search Console. If you cannot use instant verification methods, you can still use the regular ones; the verification process will just be slower. Once you have verified your business, you can change or remove the address. If you opt to change it, you cannot change it to a P.O. Box or virtual address, but you can change it to, for instance, an administrative or other public office address.</p> |
| <p>Bing</p> | <p>To edit or remove your listing from Bing’s maps, you will need to claim and verify the listing and then hide your address or change it to a public-facing address. You can claim and verify it by logging into Bing Places. It may be helpful to do this process with Google first, as Bing Places will then allow you to instantly sync your Bing Places data with your Google Business data. It takes 1-2 weeks for edits to process. It is not advisable to delete the business listing, as this will <i>not</i> remove it from Bing results, only from your Bing Places dashboard.</p> |
| <p>Apple Maps and DuckDuckGo</p> | <p>To edit or remove your listing from Apple Maps, you will need to claim and verify the listing and then hide your address or change it to a public-facing address. You can claim and verify it by logging into Apple Business Register. Edits that you make via Apple Business Register will also be reflected in map search results on privacy-focused browser DuckDuckGo.</p> |
| <p>Yelp</p> | <p>You can claim or create a business Yelp page through Yelp for Business. Yelp has detailed guidance for updating business information. It requires a full address for most businesses, so</p> |

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| | <p>you may want to use an administrative address. All updates to Yelp pages, even those submitted by the business themselves, must be approved by Yelp moderators.</p> |
| Yahoo | <p>Yahoo no longer has its own mapping service, but users can still use it to search for businesses. You can contact Yahoo about account-related issues using this form. You will need your Yahoo ID, login email or phone number, or account recovery email or phone number. The only ways to claim your business with Yahoo and manage your own updates, rather than needing to request support from Yahoo, are to purchase a Yext or Localworks plan that includes Yahoo.</p> |
| MapQuest | <p>You can contact MapQuest about business listings using this form, which allows you to write a description of the issue. Click “Submit” at the bottom, and the MapQuest team will be in touch with you. The only way to claim your business with MapQuest and manage your own updates, rather than needing to request support from the MapQuest team, is to purchase a Yext plan that includes MapQuest.</p> |

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. Search for the physical address of your shelter. Make sure to only do this when your browser is in “incognito” or “private” mode to avoid the address becoming associated with your personal search history. To learn more about private browsing options, review our [Browser Privacy Settings resource](#).

- c. 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 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.

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Supported by US DOJ-OVW Grant #15JOVW-21-GK-02216-MUMU. Opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed are the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the U.S. Department of Justice.
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