



## Assessing Organizational Readiness To Provide Advocacy & Services Online



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Survivors of sexual violence have been seeking help online for years and are now doing so in increasing numbers. This article discusses how organizations can prepare to advocate with and support survivors around the use of online services. It introduces safety, confidentiality and capacity issues that organizations should address when considering provision of online technical assistance or counseling.

Anti-sexual violence organizations have many reasons to be discussing and analyzing the ways online and Internet technologies can impact service provision and advocacy. For example:

1. Many survivors of sexual violence use online communication methods to facilitate healing and empowerment for themselves and other survivors. Survivors disclose experiences of date rape in emails to friends, write blogs (online informal journals) about recovering from an assault, and break the silence about childhood sexual abuse using chat rooms and other Internet modes. Some create websites and invite other survivors to upload healing art or to have real-time or bulletin board type discussions online.
2. Some anti-sexual assault and rape-crisis programs provide email or other informal online communication methods for survivors. Other organizations have received requests to create online support groups for survivors who are part of isolated or oppressed groups within their hometowns. Websites increasingly advertise counseling services and support. Just type "online counseling" into a search engine like Yahoo to see a plethora of psychologists, psychiatrists, and social workers (and scam artists) offering offline or online individual and group counseling, often for a fee.
3. New technologies rapidly emerge, potentially increasing our capacity to support survivors in traditionally underserved communities. Assistive technologies like screen readers, video relay services, and Braille PDAs have increased online access to resources and support for people with disabilities, a group that experiences high rates of repeated sexual violence. Adolescents might be more comfortable seeking help online and are another of the groups most often sexually assaulted.
4. Telephone, Internet and other technologies are merging, impacting how we need to safety plan with survivors. Some teenagers use web cameras and online chat websites (like AOL's AIM) to simultaneously text message, listen and view others. Emerging technologies like VoIP, a popular method of cheap long distance phone via the Internet, further blurs a user's sense between phone and online communication. All of these technologies are also increasingly used by sexual abusers who harass, deceive, monitor, and stalk survivors using online tools.

These and other reasons illustrate why our organizations need effective ways to educate survivors to risks and benefits of online help seeking. They help underscore why we must address safety, confidentiality/privilege, and capacity issues in policy and practice before providing technical assistance or other online support to survivors.

**Safety.** Some websites advertise that upon entering a password to their encrypted discussion tool, you will be in a *safe and secure* discussion space for survivors. In reality, your organization cannot ensure that any online advocacy or support vehicle you provide will be safe, confidential and secure for that survivor. Why? Organizations cannot remotely ensure the security or safety of the survivor's computer or PDA. So, if a perpetrator installs SpyWare on the survivor's computer, that perpetrator can then access screenshots of communications done on that computer.

This does not mean organizations should never communicate online with survivors. From decades of working with survivors, we have learned safety discussions must always be fluid and rooted in the survivor's own assessment of risks

and needs. For example, email communication is not secure and can be intercepted. Yet some survivors have asked local advocacy organizations to provide support via email. If your organization discusses safety and confidentiality risks with that survivor, and that survivor decides there is not danger from a perpetrator, then that survivor and your organization may mutually decide that email communication is one appropriate way of ongoing support for that individual.

Organizations considering providing online support should still consider all options to increase the confidentiality of their communications via encryption, authenticated passwords and other security steps so they can better respond to varied safety risks survivors experience.

**Privilege and confidentiality** issues must be addressed prior to online service provision. Anti-sexual violence organizations should develop a clear understanding of federal and state rules that govern electronic communications between an advocate and survivor, and the ways that these either support or modify the privilege afforded them by their state in traditional service settings. Additionally, an advocate's commitment to confidentiality is often an essential component of building trust. Advocates should learn confidentiality risks inherent to technologies so they can inform survivors about risks, and choose their organization's default or safer modes of communication.

**Capacity.** There are many organizational capacity issues that centers, coalitions and national organizations engaged in anti-sexual assault work must address. At a minimum, organizations should:

1. Assess technological and staff capacity to intentionally and thoughtfully develop new modes of service provision without negatively impacting core services.
2. Articulate and incorporate survivor-centered standards and ethics for online communication and service provision into your organizational practices and policies. Expect that existing organizational policies and practices, such as liability issues<sup>[1]</sup>, may not directly translate to online service provision.
3. Consider state-by-state provisions for working with minors and decide how your organization will screen for and address requests from minors for online services.
4. Understand the lack of empirical research about effective models of online service delivery, especially when counseling lacks visual or aural cues.<sup>[1]</sup> Be able to assess comfort levels of staff, volunteers, and survivors with online counseling approaches and tools. Provide ongoing training and know that some may not feel comfortable with newer technologies.
5. Provide upfront complete disclosures to service users about safety, confidentiality and capacity issues so they can make realistic and informed choices about use. Provide information about the technology, confidentiality and security limits of online service provision, including disparities in access to technology, varied internet speeds and intermittent internet service disconnections.

We must prepare to respond to the rapid evolution of communication technologies by developing our organizational capacity to support survivors in new and varied ways that still protect their rights to safety and confidentiality.

### **Suggested Resources:**

1. Domestic Violence Organizations Online: Risks, Ethical Dilemmas, and Liability Issues. (Jerry Finn, 2001) <http://www.vawnet.org/HelpAndSafety/TechnologySafety/RisksEthicsLiability.php>
2. Online Counseling: A Handbook for Mental Health Professionals. (Editors: Ron Kraus, Jason S. Zack, George Stricker, 2004)
3. The Practice of Internet Counseling. See section on "Standards For The Ethical Practice of Internet Counseling". (National Board of Certified Counselors, 2001) <http://www.nbcc.org/ethics/webethics.htm>
4. Suggested Principles for the Online Provision of Mental Health Services (International Society for Mental Health Online, version 3.11, Jan. 9, 2000). <http://www.ismho.org/suggestions.html>