



Use of Digital Services Technology to Support Program Participants During a Public Health Crisis

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Prioritize personal safety, safety planning and informed consent as part of the use of digital services technology.
- Programs should consider supporting, if financially possible, agency owned devices and accounts to enhance private and secure remote communications.
- Resources are available to help Program's to research and assess their readiness and then to implement digital services technology to support women, children and youth responding to violence.

Introduction

During a public health crisis, such as the current COVID-19 pandemic, when [public health officials recommend “social distancing”](#) to slow the spread of infection, providing support services to women and their children experiencing domestic violence via technology may be useful and necessary to connect with women, children and youth.

When considering a program's use of technology, the safety and privacy of women, youth and children must be at the centre of decision-making. This is true in ordinary times and is even more important in a public health crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, where in-person supports are limited by the health emergency.

The urgent nature of public health crises may lead programs to consider providing digital services in an urgent manner; however, a strategic approach to using technology will benefit the program and the women, children and youth they support. Programs could consider trial or temporary digital service contracts during the health emergency and then re-assess once the emergency has ended. Note, some digital companies offer free or reduced service rates during the public health emergency but the costs then increase after a period of time. The terms of the contract should be reviewed carefully before contracting with a vendor even for a temporary service.



Considerations: Safety and Privacy

The safety and privacy of women, children and youth programs are working with remain an essential consideration. Communicating with program participants through technology comes with benefits and potential risks. Prior to starting any type of digital services within your organization, the following are key considerations.

- 1. Safety:** Communication via text, email, video call and online chat functions leaves a digital trail that if accessed could potentially increase risk to a program participant's safety and reveal that they are seeking help, as well as personally identifiable information. For example, some video call software automatically stores the call history, records the call and collects the personal information and location of the participant. If this information is accessed it could undermine the woman's safety and reveal confidential communications.

As part of **Safety Planning**, the risks and benefits of communicating through technology should be discussed. For example, if a perpetrator has access to a woman's laptop, computer or phone through a shared password and finds out that she is communicating with an anti-violence worker online from home, will the risk to her or her children's safety increase?

As part **Safety Planning**, strategize how to respond to a breach of the technology platform, whether it is intentional or inadvertent. For example, consider that the perpetrator could come home during a call and later see the program's phone number on the detailed wireless usage log of the shared phone bill allowing the perpetrator to determine the source of the call. Depending on what type of telecommunication your program chooses (web chat/text, video call or phone), workers will need to build in safety planning steps that reflect the technology such as:

- The worker may need to establish a password or "safety word" to ensure that the worker is speaking to her client.
 - Discussing what steps to take if the session is disconnected abruptly.
 - Strategizing how to respond if the perpetrator comes into the room while the conversation is happening.
- 2. Informed Consent:** The program's use of digital communication services should be included in the program's informed consent forms. The program needs to research the services being used and provide the program participant information about any potential risks to her confidential information and privacy as required by [BC's Personal Information Protection Act](#). For example, a participant may have their privacy and confidential information compromised by message threads left on an anti-violence worker's personal cell phone that are not secured. If someone accidentally or intentionally



sees these messages without the participants' consent, the woman's private information has been breached without her consent.

Considerations: Program Owned vs. Use of Personal Devices

The [Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada](#) recommends that organizations offer agency owned devices and accounts if programs are delivering digital services. This allows for better staff coordination across shifts and can increase privacy and safety measures for the women and the programs.

If Programs do use an anti-violence worker's personal cell phone for work communications it may increase privacy risks if the phone is used for personal and work purposes and if evidence is stored on the phone, such as photographs, the phone may be subpoenaed in court proceedings as it holds potentially relevant information.

Resources Regarding Digital Services & Anti-Violence Programs

What Are Digital Services?

"Digital services" describes the use of technology-based tools such as web chat and text, video calls and cell phones to provide support services to participants of anti-violence programs. Many anti-violence programs have already been considering how to expand their digital support services to supplement in-person and hotline support services and the COVID-19 outbreak has hastened that review.

The BCSTH Digital Services Toolkit offers information for anti-violence agencies who are exploring digital support services for women, youth and children experiencing violence. The information in this toolkit has been adapted for Canada, specifically, British Columbia, from and in cooperation with the [Safety Net Technology Project](#) at the [National Network to End Domestic Violence](#), United States. The [BCSTH Digital Services Toolkit](#) includes the following:

- [Digital Services Communication Platforms: Comparison Chart for BC's Anti-Violence Programs](#)
- [Assessing Readiness for Digital Services: Worksheet](#)
- [Is a Bring Your Own Device \(BYOD\) Program the Right Choice for Your Organization? Privacy and Security Risks of a BYOD Program](#)
- [Selecting a Digital Services Vendor: Checklist](#)
- [Anti-Violence Program Guide to Phone Communication](#)
- [Anti-Violence Program's Guide for Mobile Phone Use](#)



- [Anti-Violence Program's Guide for Texting](#)
- [Anti-Violence Program's Guide for Using Email](#)
- [Anti-Violence Program's Guide for Web Chat](#)
- [Anti-Violence Program's Guide for Video Communication](#)

The [BCSTH Technology Safety Project](#) has also developed [BCSTH's PEACE Program Use of Technology Policy Guide](#) and [BCSTH Use of Technology Policy Template for Transition Housing Supports Programs](#) for programs to use and adapt for their own policies and procedures.

During public health emergencies, programs can adjust how they operate when faced with the necessity to work remotely to meet the needs of women, children and youth while also understanding the risks of digital service provision. By analysing the digital service platforms available, programs can determine what meets their needs to support women, children and youth to safety plan while building trust together in challenging circumstances. Given the reality that support practices and services may potentially be fundamentally altered by the extraordinary COVID-19 circumstances, this information and analysis is timely for today and for circumstances beyond the pandemic.

If your program has any questions or needs further guidance on how to implement digital services, please contact BCSTH's Technology Safety Project at rhiannon@bcsth.ca

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