Anti-Violence Program's Guide: Video Communication

This guide is for anti-violence workers who need to communicate with program participants using video conferencing or video calls. To ensure privacy and safety, here are some best practices when using video platform to communicate with women, children and youth.

Video conferencing is a digital tool anti-violence programs can use to communicate with program participants who face barriers to accessing services or in a time of social distancing. For participants who have disabilities, who cannot easily travel to the agency, who have scheduling or childcare issues, or who have language access barriers, video conferencing can add more personal interaction and provide additional options in the way they seek services.

Video Conferencing Technology

There are two main approaches to video conferencing: web conferencing services and video conferencing hardware.

Web conferencing services include software, apps, and browser-based options that use built-in cameras and microphones on a computer, tablet, or smartphone. These options are often free or inexpensive and are readily available but web-based software may provide lower video quality. Other browser-based services offer a higher level of security and often do not require an account set up or download, which may be an important option for effectively communicating with program participants.

High-quality video conferencing hardware uses free-standing microphones, cameras, and networking equipment in a dedicated space, sometimes even a mobile conferencing lab. Video conferencing hardware is more expensive, requires an installation process, and may limit the locations a program participant can participate from.

A drawback to both approaches is that limited Internet bandwidth (the speed of the user's Internet) can create connection challenges. Low-quality services and slow internet speeds may make the video image choppy or prone to freezing up, the audio or video portion may lag or may cut off altogether. If the participant or the program does not have access to high-speed internet, the video may not work at all. For options that rely on software, updates to a current version may complicate the process of connecting.

Safety Planning and Supporting Women, Children and Youth

Prior to beginning video conferencing, programs need to consider possible increases in risk to safety when communicating through video. The true security of any video conferencing platform is going to depend on the security of all computers/devices being used. Programs using video conferencing should take every step possible to maintain the security of their technology and work to ensure everyone using the service is informed of security requirements. Programs can amend their informed consent forms to include digital support services via video conferencing in order to inform the participant fully of this communication method so they can choose whether to participate with video conferencing or not.

If using video conferencing to communicate with a program participant, it is important to be aware that a perpetrator could monitor their computer/device. Depending on the type of video conferencing used, it may also be possible for someone to know who the participant is speaking to when the call was made, and even how long the call took simply by accessing the computer or device the participant used. Support workers should talk to the program participant about computer/device safety and security. You can read more about spyware here.

If the agency is unsure about the security of the service or the users' devices, be cautious about the kind of information being shared. Most video conferencing platforms have a privacy and security policy that can be reviewed before using their service. Support workers and program participants can also discuss using more secure methods of communicating, such as phone or in-person meetings.

Some video conferencing software allows the user to record the video and the audio. Programs should generally not use those features when communicating with participants. Doing so could create privacy risks for the program participant if the recording is stored in the cloud by the web-based provider. Best practice is to treat online communications similarly to in-person communications where conversations with program participants are not recorded except through minimal hand-written notes. Programs should also make sure that the computer/device does not log contacts and details of any calls.

Minimise Disruptions

If programs are using digital services to communicate, the program needs to set up a plan of action for disruptions or video call drops. To manage poor internet connections, use a combination of web conferencing for video and a phone for audio. In the event that the internet fails, the audio connection will remain.

Develop a plan of action if the program participant has to end the video or audio call abruptly. The plan should include if the program participant has to call back or if the anti-violence worker will call back,

how long they will wait before reconnecting, or the best way to follow up if they cannot return to the call.

Ensure Appropriate Staff Use

The convenience of videoconferencing means that program participants and support workers can be connected at any time. It is important to set boundaries of contact time to ensure that support workers can practice self-care. Likewise, if a video conversation is happening, support workers should make sure they are in a quiet secluded place so that program participant's information is protected and not shared with or overheard by anyone else.

Anti-violence workers should not use their personal devices or accounts to communicate with program participants. Use program-owned devices, and create work accounts for the sole purpose of communicating with participants to maintain proper communication and limit confidentiality concerns.

If working with other community agencies to coordinate and connect participants to services through video conferencing, the program should work to ensure they will all be implementing secure communication practices.

Building Trust without In-Person Interactions

Video conferencing is different from face-to-face communication. While video does offer more visual and audio cues than phone, email, text or chat conversation, more effort may still be needed to create the intimacy and trust needed for a program participant to feel comfortable.

Talk with women, children and youth about the safety of their surroundings when videoconferencing. Since it can be mobile, program participants may be anywhere: their home, workplace, a school, a library, a coffee shop, or at a friend's house. Even if their computer is secure, depending on where they are, their conversations could be overheard by anyone, including the perpetrator or someone they have not disclosed the violence to previously.

Check-in with the program participant regularly to see if communicating via videoconferencing is still comfortable and feels safe. Women, children and youth who are more used to communicating over video may feel more comfortable than someone who is not familiar with this type of communication. Offer other ways to communicate, including the audio-only option in the web conferencing service, a phone call, online chat, or in-person meeting.

Create handouts or tips on how program participants can access the video conferencing service. Test the technology to make sure it works properly before meeting with participants. This will help cut down on confusion and identify possible connection issues before the actual meeting.

Accessible Technology and Communicating with Program Participants

Video conferencing can be a great tool to reach program participants who may be remote or unable to leave their homes particularly in the COVID-19 pandemic. The ability to still seek services and connect with someone can give women, children and youth resources and support they may not have otherwise thought possible to access. If a participant is located in a geographic region where internet coverage is weak, video conferencing may not be the best method of connecting. If a participant has a disability and uses assistive technology, their assistive tech may not be compatible with the video conferencing platform, or they may not be able to utilise all of the features the video conferencing program offers. If an interpreter service is needed, identify qualified interpreters for videoconferencing in advance and ensure that they can and know how to use the videoconferencing platform. Also check to see if the video platform has the capacity to have more than two people join a single video session. Do practice runs to test the video platform and plan for any issues that may come up or what to do if the video conferencing does not work.

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