



## Anti-Violence Program's Guide: Email

Most anti-violence programs use email daily in either their work, communicating with program participants directly or coordinating services with other community programs. There are privacy risks associated with email communications and the following recommendations address the security of email communications.

### Emailing with Program Participants

Do not restrict emailing with program participants, as a general practice even though email communication has risks, declining to email with participants is not the solution. Let the program participant determine the means of communication that can best accommodate their ability, access and needs.

If a program participant contacts your program through email, your response should be to:

- Include information about the risks related to email communication and discuss email safety and privacy with the program participant, and discuss how they can delete the messages they have sent and received if they choose to and how to clear out their deleted folder if they choose to.
- Ask if there are safer ways that you can communicate. For some, it may be the only method available to get help, but for others a phone or video call or in person meeting may be safer.
- If email communications continue, check in periodically to see if email is still a safe and preferred method of communicating.

Do not store participants' names and email addresses in email address books. Most email programs will autofill the rest of the address for you after you type the first few letters of the name. To prevent sending emails to the wrong person, make sure to double check the address before hitting send.

If you print out an email exchange, pursuant to your program's privacy policies, you can shred the copy of the email conversation when appropriate to do so. Also, under the program's privacy policies, when the appropriate time under the applicable privacy laws has elapsed and the program participant's records are to be destroyed, electronic messages such as emails need to also be destroyed including purging the "sent" and "deleted" folders as well.

### Emailing Co-workers about Program Participants

Internal communication about participants should be limited to necessary communications as the emails become part of the program participant's record at the agency. Before emailing a co-worker about a



program participant, consider other options such as discussing the matter with your colleague in person or over the phone.

## Emailing Outside Parties about Participant

The program's privacy policies should address when an employee communicates via email with third parties to convey confidential information about a program participant. The privacy laws that apply to the program must be followed and more information about these obligations can be found in the [BCSTH Legal Toolkit](#). In addition, the potential risks related to email communication should be considered even when the program has permission from the program participant to release information to a third party via email communications. Only communicate with a third party about the specific information that the program participant has consented to share. Programs must have a written and time-limited release from the program participant before sharing any information.

As part of the release process, ensure that the program participants are fully informed of the email process and the related security risks of doing so, so that they can make an informed decision. Anti-violence workers should be prepared to discuss their agency's process to ensure that email communications are secure, and any potential risks such as – you cannot control what the recipient does with the email once they receive it and that they may send a reply to you in an unencrypted format.

## Secure Email

Email products are available that offer secure encrypted email but there are drawbacks to some of these products. The majority of the email products (even many of those marketed as encrypted) have access to the content of the emails sent and received by account holders. If the companies can access the content, then the communication may not be regarded as truly private or secure.

A stronger email protection is "zero knowledge encryption," which makes the data being sent back and forth unreadable to the software company that hosts the email. It is important to know that while this kind of security adequately protects program participant's data (as long as [spyware](#) is not on the device), it also complicates the program's process of sending and receiving email, so staff will need training on how to use "zero knowledge encryption" software.



## Sample Email Disclaimer Language

Being creative in your use of a disclaimer language may help get the message across that email communications are not secure. The language below can be included in emails with a program participant as part of the informed consent process.

Communications between [agency name] and program participants are protected by British Columbia/Canadian [privacy law]. [Agency name] does not reveal or share participant communications without a program participant's written permission except where required to do so by mandated reporting. However, we want to make sure you are aware of the privacy risks related to email communication:

- Email is not a secure way to communicate.
- Emails can be easily seen by other people without your knowledge or consent. Because of that, please limit the personally identifying information you send in emails to only what is necessary.
- [Agency name] staff can talk to you about ways to increase your privacy and safety online.

If your agency has any questions or needs guidance on implementing email securely and digital services, please contact BCSTH's Technology Safety Project at [rhannon@bcsth.ca](mailto:rhannon@bcsth.ca)

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Adapted for Canada from and in cooperation with the Safety Net Technology Project at the National Network to End Domestic Violence, United States