



## Texting & Messaging with Survivors: Best Practices

NNEDV

Many victim service programs are using text messaging and other messaging platforms to communicate with survivors. In addition to in-person meetings, voice or video calls, and [online chat](#), messaging is another option programs can use to connect with survivors. Messaging can increase access for some survivors, keeping survivors engaged, and can be used to relay information or send reminders of important dates, particularly when the survivor isn't able to talk on the phone. Messaging or texting can also be an option for offering digital services, such as a hotline or ongoing advocacy. Read more about [Best Practice Principles for Digital Services](#).

### **Communicating with Survivors Using Messaging**

#### *Texting as an Additional Form of Communication*

When texting is used to as an additional form of communication, such as phone calls or face-to-face meetings, survivors and advocates usually use cell-based texting or messaging apps. The most common is to use the native texting service offered through the wireless phone carrier or messaging service specific to a type of smartphone, such as iMessages on iPhones. Some survivors and advocates may use apps such as Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, Signal, Snapchat, or others. These third-party apps need to be downloaded by both users in order to be used, but may be preferable by some survivors, because they feel safer using those apps or (depending on the app) it is more secure.

It is important to meet survivors where they are and not require survivors to use a specific communication tool to contact your agency. Once an advocate has spoken with a survivor, assessed the survivor's unique safety risk, and discussed device and app safety, both the survivor and advocate can then decide on which messaging platform best meets the survivor's risks and concerns.

#### *Texting/Messaging for Hotlines or Message-Based Advocacy Services*

If an agency is considering texting or messaging as the main method of providing services, such as a hotline or texting/messaging-based advocacy, the best type of

messaging service are platforms meant for companies to engage with clients regularly via text. While survivors may use SMS text messaging or another messaging service to connect to your hotline, it is best for your agency to use a dedicated texting service platform, where the message is received by the program on a computer rather than a cell phone.

Texting services that are not tied to one cell phone allows for programs to better manage staffing, hand off “messages/calls” during a shift change, and allow more than one staff member to respond to messages. Texting platforms can be customized to the needs of the agency, which may include sending standard disclaimer and other informative messages before or at the end of each text conversation. Platforms used for hotlines or message-based advocacy services should have strong privacy and security protocols, in order to increase privacy for survivors and minimize confidentiality violations for an agency. See our guide to [Choosing a Platform](#) for more information.

### **Minimize Interception**

When texting, both the sender and receiver has the history of the entire conversation thread, date and time, and perhaps even location; this amount of information could pose major risk for a survivor’s safety and privacy. A survivor’s family members, friends, roommates, or others might see those messages if they have access to the device. Message history can also be revealed if the abusive person is monitoring the phone through physical access, monitoring software on the phone, or backups online.

Best practice:

- Talk to survivors about how to increase privacy if there is a concern that the phone might be monitored. Strategies may include deleting the message history and not saving contact details such as the program or advocate’s name in the phone.
- Remind the survivor about cloud accounts such as iCloud or Google that may backup the messages or make them available on other devices.

- If there are concerns that the device or account may be monitored, offer other options for more secure communications.

### **Prevent Impersonation**

One concern when messaging with survivors is impersonation—someone else pretending to be the survivor. Someone other than the survivor could view or send messages either on the survivor’s device or on another device connected to the survivor’s account. This can be fairly easy to do, particularly if the survivor’s phone doesn’t have a passcode (or the abusive person knows the passcode).

Best practice:

- Establish a method to verify identity, which may include a previously agreed upon codeword or phrase.
- Check in regularly with the survivor to make sure messaging is still a safe method of communication.
- If either the advocate or survivor becomes uncomfortable with messaging, check in by other methods – over the phone or face-to-face.

### **Ensure Data Privacy**

Because texting can store a significant amount of information, it is essential that programs’ policies include keeping minimal information on the devices used to text. It is not recommended that advocates use personal cell phones to text with survivors. A personal cell phone can easily be accessed by the advocate’s family or friends. If someone other than the advocate saw a copy of the messaging history, this would not only invade the survivor’s privacy, it could potentially violate confidentiality.

Another reason programs should not keep copies of messages is that if they have it, they may be required to release it. How your program responds to legal requests will depend on your confidentiality obligations per federal and state laws. The less information you keep, the less information you will have to release if compelled.

## Best practice:

- Advocates should not use their personal phones to message with survivors. Use program-provided cell phones.
- Advocates should save as little information as possible on the phone, which includes not saving survivors' full name, phone number, or other contact information. (Since contact details are not saved, double check the phone number, especially if there is an "autofill" option, to prevent sending the message to the wrong person.) When the client-advocate relationship is over, delete all contact information from the phone.
- Messages should be deleted regularly from the phone. Just as your program would not record hotline calls or ongoing phone calls with survivors, similarly the history of a message conversation should not be saved.
- Review billing records and backups for any personally identifying information and delete those records. (Visit our Agency Use of Technology Toolkit for more information about [record retention and deletion](#).) Also, be aware of what information your phone company or messaging service will release about your account in response to legal requests.
- Do not offer to store or keep evidence for survivors. Discourage the sharing of pictures of abuse or forwarding abusive messages since advocates should not become part of the chain of custody for evidence. For more information about messaging evidence, see our [Legal Systems Toolkit](#).
- Some computer-based text messaging platforms (for text hotlines or message-based advocacy services) may offer to integrate detailed message conversations into your client database. Keeping this level of detail is not recommended.

## **Data Security for Hotlines or Messaging-Based Advocacy**

When using a messaging platform to offer a text hotline or a messaging-based advocacy service, it is critical that the messaging platform chosen uses a type of encryption that doesn't allow anyone, not even the platform vendor to see the data. This type of encryption is sometimes known as "zero-knowledge" or "no

knowledge” or “no view” encryption. With this type of encryption, your program holds the key to unscrambling the encrypted data and the company does not, which means that no one at the company can see any content shared between advocate and survivor accidentally or on purpose. In addition, if they were to receive a subpoena or court order, they would not be able to reveal any readable information because the data is encrypted.

Other types of messaging service or apps do not have this level of encryption. Text messaging services via a wireless phone carrier are generally not encrypted; iMessages or Android messaging is end-to-end encrypted but the messages can be accessible via the iCloud or Google account; and security protocols on third-party messaging apps vary widely. For example, WhatsApp and Signal have end-to-end encryption, making them more secure, but it doesn’t necessarily guarantee complete security and privacy. Moreover, asking survivors to download a separate messaging app and create an account to connect with a program may be an additional barrier.

Best practice:

- When offering texting hotline or message-based advocacy services, look for platforms that offer a level of encryption in which no one, not even the platform vendor, can view the data.
- If the company providing the texting platform doesn’t offer “zero knowledge,” “no knowledge” or “no view” encryption, ensure that your own lawyers negotiate contract language that includes strict penalties should breaches of your data occur. In addition, contract language should include that any breach of data should be disclosed to you immediately.
- Advocates should minimize sharing personally identifying information of survivors and others over the platform.
- It is best not to require survivors to download a specific app or service in order to access help. Provide alternatives for survivors to reach out for help.

## **Inform Survivors of their Rights and Choices**

Most programs have a process to inform survivors of their rights and options when accessing services. For example, programs might need to inform survivors of certain obligations, including mandatory reporting. Unlike a verbal conversation, where the advocate can interrupt a disclosure to let the survivor know that it may trigger a mandatory disclosure, in a messaging conversation, the advocate may receive the disclosure while messaging and not be able to interrupt and inform the survivor of their options.

If offering a text hotline, programs will need to determine how to inform survivors of their rights and choices during the conversation. Programs will need to also consider how to find balance between sharing necessary information and not overwhelming a survivor with too much information at initial contact.

Best practice:

- At the start of a messaging conversation, be prepared to initiate conversations with each survivor about messaging limitations, device safety, mandatory reporting requirements, and other issues commonly covered in voice calls.
- Prepare short and clear messages about these topics, but incorporate them into the conversation in a way that invites discussion or questions.

### **Set Survivor Expectations and Appropriate Staff Boundaries**

The nature of messaging means that survivors may think they can send a message at any time, including after hours. In an ongoing relationship, the survivor and advocate may be messaging regularly. Make sure the survivor is aware of when the advocate can be reachable and have clear expectations of when they will receive a response.

Best practice:

- Set boundaries about work hours and availability with advocates and survivors when using messaging. Sometimes an advocate might be able to respond quicker by message, but at other times, a phone call might best if the issue is urgent. Communicate this to survivors so they know how and when they'll get a response.

## **Provide Appropriate Support for Staff on Text Hotlines**

Staff working text hotlines might require more support and debriefing. Text hotlines tend to have more numerous and graphic disclosures of abuse. Moreover, in a text conversation, the survivor may just choose not to continue a conversation and stop communicating. This lack of closure could be difficult for some advocates, particularly if it was a heavy conversation. In some cases, text conversations may be longer in length than a phone hotline call, but with long breaks in between.

Best practice:

- Plan for adequate support for advocates working a text hotline.
- Plan for adequate staffing, and consider the fact that text conversations might be longer than a phone conversation and could require more than one advocate to continue the conversation.
- If long pauses in text conversations means that it's more efficient for an advocate to be on multiple text conversations at one time, ensure that advocates don't try to take on too many conversations at once.

## **Provide Quality Messaging Services**

Because messages are mostly written words, it can be easily misunderstood. It can also be more difficult for the advocate or survivor to assess for emotion and tone, leading to potential misunderstanding. In addition, the nature of messaging means that users can have two or more topics of discussion overlap, as one person responds to a previous message and the other moves on to another question or statement. Furthermore, slang or shortened words like "LOL" may not have the same meaning or connotation to the recipient.

Best practice:

- Check in regularly to make sure that both survivor and advocate understand one another.
- Using slang or shortened words are ok, but advocates should take the lead from survivors.
- Stop and clarify points or statements if there is any confusion.

## Plan Ahead

There will always be situations that impact digital services unrelated to speaking with survivors. This may include unexpected situations like natural disasters or emergencies. It will also include people who contact your service who aren't survivors, such as prank callers, abusive individuals, or callers with mental health crises including suicidal ideation unrelated to domestic violence or sexual assault issues.

Best practice:

- Identify unintended and unexpected scenarios that could impact your messaging service and plan accordingly.
- For inappropriate callers, some messaging platforms allow for conversations to be transferred to a supervisor. Draw on existing policies and procedures for inappropriate callers.
- Include messaging services in your program's emergency and disaster planning, and ensure that survivors attempting to reach out know when the service is unavailable and are offered alternative options.

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