



Victim Service Agencies & the Internet

Almost all victim service agencies have a website, social media page, or some kind of online presence. The goals of their online presence are to share information about their services, raise awareness about domestic violence and sexual violence with their community, and to make it easier for people to connect with the agency. While it can be necessary for programs to be online, there are some steps that can be taken to ensure that the safety and privacy of the individuals who reach out to them for information is protected.

Add a Safety Alert to Your Website

Many abusers monitor survivors' online activities, whether through looking over their shoulder, manually going through the internet browsing history, or via computer or cellphone monitoring software. Adding safety alert information on your website will remind survivors that their activities could be monitored or viewed by someone who has access to the device. Keep in mind that safety alerts will not prevent the abuser from seeing what the survivor is reading if monitoring software is installed or if the survivor doesn't erase the browsing history.

Create a Quick Escape Button

Some websites also have a quick escape button on the page of the site where the survivor can click any time to be redirected to an innocuous webpage. Quick escape buttons will only prevent immediate over-the-shoulder monitoring, such as when the abuser walks in and the survivor needs to quickly close a webpage. This button won't prevent the web browser from logging the webpage to the browsing history. Survivors can manually erase specific webpages from the browser history; deleting one page and related searches might be safer than clearing all history in case the abuser is suspicious about the entire browser history being deleted.

Include Information about Internet Safety

Thorough information about internet and technology safety on your website can be helpful for survivors. This information may help them figure out how they are being monitored and strategize for their safety more effectively. If survivors can communicate with you through your website or other online spaces, be upfront about the safety risks of using that particular email, site, or platform; what information might be retained on their end (if they send you an email, they will retain a copy of that email in their sent mail, for example); and what information you will collect from them. The more knowledge a survivor has, the more informed her/his decision will be.

Use a Web Form Instead of Email Addresses

Some survivors will want to email the program to ask for help or resources and will go to the agency's website for the contact information. Instead of listing the email addresses of your staff or a general email address, it is safer for agencies to have a web form where the survivor can post their message, which will be submitted as an email to the staff. A web form is safer because it doesn't leave a record of



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the email in the sender's email sent folder, which the abuser could find out by going through the survivor's email account. If the abusive individual is monitoring the computer with spyware, however, a web form will not conceal that a survivor has reached out for help. Web forms are also more convenient because staff names and emails aren't listed offering more privacy for staff.

For more information about safe email practices with survivors, see this [handout](#). [Link to spyware [handout](#).]

Limit Survivor Information Online

Advocates and programs should never share information about survivors without the direct permission of the survivor. Most programs cannot share identifying information about survivors without an informed, written, and time-limited release. Even when programs are implementing social media/online campaigns to raise awareness about domestic or sexual violence, if survivors information is being shared, it should only be done so with their direct permission and following federal and state confidentiality laws. Survivors should be informed of exactly what will be shared, who will potentially see the information, and possible consequences of sharing this information.

For more information on client confidentiality and privacy obligations, visit www.nnedv.org/tools.

Posting Pictures & Videos

Before you post any pictures or videos online, be sure to get informed consent from those in the pictures or videos. If you are hosting an event where you will be taking photographs or videos, allow those present to opt out. They can choose to remain out of frame or you can have a designated area for those who don't wish to have their image posted online. Don't forget that you should also get permission from staff, members of your board, presenters, and speakers; do not assume that because they work for your agency or was invited to speak publically for you, that they are willing to have their images posted online.

Offering Services Online

Many programs may be tempted to connect with survivors and provide services through online spaces, such as social media, forums, or chatting websites. Most of these websites are not built to offer secure, private, and confidential conversations. Additionally, using the internet to communicate adds another layer of safety risks and privacy planning that advocates and survivors must think through. While it might be possible to connect with survivors through these spaces, agencies must think through all the risks to privacy and safety that may exist, which may include general online privacy concerns or possible misuse by the abuser.



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Include Accurate Information

The internet is global. If you have information online that is specific to your area (county, state, region) make that clear. Some laws and processes (such as orders of protections) or services (such as state-wide hotlines) are state or county specific. Survivors who visit your site may be from across the country or even world and should be aware that some or all of the information provided might not be applicable to them. Agencies should also list area codes with their hotlines and phone numbers as well as office hours so survivors know when to contact for help.

Accessibility

Make your website more accessible for all viewers, including those with low vision or who are blind or are Deaf. Check that images on your website have alternative text descriptions (html alt text). For links, make sure there is concise and descriptive text within each link (and within the html title tag) that describes where the link takes a visitor. Doing so will ensure that someone who is accessing your site or page via a screen reader can listen to helpful and accurate information. If posting video or audio, include captions or transcripts so those who are hard-of-hearing or Deaf can also receive the information.