

SECURE CHAT PROTOCOL AND BEST PRACTICES

PRIORITIZE SAFETY AND SECURITY- SAFTY CHECK

Digital services through online chat come with benefits and risks. Often, the risks are specific to use of the platform. We should work to minimize the risks related to using digital platforms by educating survivors about those risks. Before entering our chat, survivors will see a message about the risks of using an unsafe device that could be monitored. This will help them make informed choices about their use of the chat platform.

The first thing an advocate should do when starting a chat session is to do a safety check by asking, "Are you using a safe device?" Explain what this means if needed and recommend other options such as the use of another device or a call to the Support Line if they have concerns about the safety of their device.

The chat system we are utilizing will automatically close and delete the chat after 5 minutes of no communication on their part. It will also delete the chat when they close out of it.

MANDATORY REPORTING

There are challenges to notifying survivors of the Mandated Reporting law when using digital platforms. In a chat or text conversation, the staff member/volunteer, cannot anticipate a mandated report disclosure in the same way they might via in-person communication or via the phone. Therefore, after the safety check, staff/volunteers should send the Mandated Reporter message to inform the survivor and allow an opportunity for them to ask questions. In instances of disclosures of Child Abuse and Neglect, Vera House, Inc.'s Child Abuse Reporting Policy, and Vulnerable Persons Reporting Policy should be followed

PROTECT VICTIM/SURVIVOR CONFIDENTIALITY

The Vera House, Inc. Confidentiality Policy should be followed at all times. Without being face-to-face or hearing the person you are communicating with, it is that much easier for someone to pretend to be a victim/survivor. Staff/volunteers should use the same protocols for identifying the survivor as they do on the Support Line (gathering name and date of birth). Staff/volunteers should never answer questions through the chat about a victim/survivor, such as utilization of services, assigned advocate's name, and other personal information. If the conversation seems off, or the person is fishing for a lot of personal information, encourage them to call the Support Line when it is

safe. If an Advocate is assigned to the victim/survivor they can also reach out to them during business hours.

The information from the conversation that is "saved" is only the information we gather to create and complete a Crisis Call and Client Details in the Client Services Database. Do not screen shot/screen grab any part of a chat conversation. Do not attempt to save "evidence" of abuse from a chat conversation. Record information in the Client Services Database in the same manner you would for a Crisis Call.

MINIMIZE MISCOMMUNICATION

Building trust and rapport with a victim/survivor will be slower through a chat system than a Crisis Call. Without being able to see body language or hear tone of voice, staff/volunteers lack important cues that help assess and convey tone, mood, and emotion. When communicating through text or chat, staff/volunteers should be aware of how their words or tone may be misinterpreted. Check in with the victim/survivor to make sure you understand what they are conveying and that they are understanding you. Be cautious about using internet slang (lol, IMO, BRB, etc) as it may not be understood or misinterpreted.

If there has been a miscommunication, try to clear it up quickly and take responsibility for your part in that miscommunication. This will help to recover the victim's/survivor's trust and connection with the agency.

ABUSIVE AND INAPPROPRIATE CHATTERS

Web chats seem to be notorious for "trolling" behavior. This may include individuals who come onto chats with abusive or inappropriate motives. We value the safety and well-being of our staff/volunteers as much as we do our clients.

Sometimes, the chatter will start by pushing the boundaries by saying things that are questionable. Think of this like grooming. It's okay for staff/volunteers to question this communication and attempt to clarify the meaning. However, other times the communication is outright inappropriate or abusive. We have added a "Canned Message" that includes a warning that can be used by the staff/volunteer in the event that this occurs. If the inappropriate/abusive communication continues after the warning, the chat session should be ended, and note it in the database.

VICTIM/SURVIVOR EXPECTATIONS AND STAFF/VOLUNTEER BOUNDARIES

Communicating via digital platforms is different from a face-to-face conversation. The shift from one topic to another isn't always linear, and there may be long pauses within a conversation. Because of the nature of electronic messaging, victim/survivors may feel that they can pick up a conversation hours (or even days) later with the same staff member/volunteer. Staff/volunteers should let the victim/survivor know that if they stop communicating for 5 minutes, the chat box will close and the conversation will be deleted for safety purposes. The staff member/volunteer should not guarantee that they will be available to take the chat again if the victim/survivor returns to the chat platform. If the victim/survivor would like to communicate with the same staff member/volunteer regularly, offer to make an Advocacy Referral.

With all electronic communication with our clients, (chat, email, and agency cell phones) we should be clear about the times communication is available and when it is not. Keeping strict, appropriate boundaries around work and personal time is crucial for both the client and staff member's/volunteer's well-being. Please speak with your supervisor if you have questions or concerns around this.

SUPPORT FOR STAFF- IMPORTANCE OF SUPERVISION

Staff working chat hotlines may find they require more support and debriefing. Chat conversations are often longer in length than a phone hotline call and tend to have more numerous and graphic disclosures of abuse. Moreover, in a text conversation, the victim/survivor may choose not to continue a conversation, and stop communicating. This lack of closure can be difficult for staff/volunteers, particularly if it was a heavy conversation. Staff/volunteers should contact their supervisor or another appropriate support person following a difficult chat conversation to process. Supervisors should be checking in with staff/volunteers regularly during supervision.