



Guidance for Minnesota's Government-based and Community-based Advocates

April 1, 2020

COVID-19 has rapidly changed the landscape in which we all do our work. The Minnesota Alliance on Crime, the Minnesota Coalition Against Sexual Assault, and Violence Free Minnesota believe it is more important than ever that our member programs work together to ensure the safety and stability of victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, trafficking, and general crime. Victim/witness programs and community-based advocacy programs are up and running across the state. However, COVID-19 has forced many of us to make changes to the ways we provide services. This is why it is so critical that community-based and victim/witness advocates are talking to and collaborating with each other.

This collaborative document will provide general information and guidance for both victim/witness and community-based victim service agencies in Minnesota.

What You Should Know

Victim/witness advocates: Many victim/witness advocates are currently working remotely. This means they may not have access to services, such as Order for Protection filing, in their county courthouse. (Please keep in mind that many victim/witness advocates, by agency policy, cannot file OFPs.)

However, victim/witness advocates are still receiving information about court cases and are making victim notifications. Many court hearings are being cancelled or continued. If hearings are continued, some are being given a new date while others are being added to a long list to be given a new court date once the courts return to business as usual.

Some defendants are making requests for sentence modifications so that they can go home on electronic home monitoring or some other alternative to incarceration. Other defendants who were supposed to report to jail to begin serving a sentence are being told not to report and victim/witness advocates are notifying victims of this. Some defendants who are filing motions for bail modifications are asking to be released on their personal recognizance or a reduction in



bail to what they can afford so they can be released. Victim/witness advocates are still in communication with the prosecutors and information systems that they normally work with in order to obtain court information and communicate that information to victims.

Victim/witness advocates are continuing other non-court related work, such as assisting with reparations applications, requests for restitution, identifying resources, providing technical assistance to our criminal justice partners, and following up on other victim requests.

Community-based advocates: All emergency/crisis services provided by community-based programs - crisis response services, emergency shelter, and 24/7 crisis lines - are operational. Most programs have begun providing as many services as possible remotely.

Emergency shelters are open. Shelters are working to create new COVID-19 specific protocols and policies for shelter intake and the isolation of symptomatic or COVID-19 positive residents as safely as possible. A dedicated contact at the Minnesota Department of Health is assisting shelters with this.

Community-based advocates continue to assist with writing and filing protective orders, although more of this assistance is happening over the phone/remotely than is typical. Community-based advocates will continue to attend hearings in-person or remotely, depending on what the judge allows. Community-based advocates are working with victim/survivors in community, providing support, advocating for services, and responding to needs.

Community-based advocates are working to continue hospital-based advocacy but have limited in-person access. This creates barriers for those advocating at sexual assault exams and for survivors in emergency room settings. Hospitals that currently allow non-medical professionals access are typically allowing advocates that same access, though often with new protocols. However, most hospitals have closed access to non-medical professionals. In those hospitals, advocates are offering remote services to victim/survivors through phone, tele-conferencing, or other electronic means. However, we are not aware of any medical facilities that have discontinued their usual sexual assault nurse examiner response.

Many programs are also attempting to provide supportive services for victims/survivors in new and innovative ways, for example: holding support groups over phone/video. Prevention and community education programs are currently on hold for most, if not all, programs.



Recommendations for All

Connect with your counterpart victim/witness or community-based program if you haven't done so already. Find out how their work is changing in the current environment and share any changes to services or programming in your agency as well. Are there new opportunities for collaboration in the current rapidly changing environment? If you don't already have open communication between your two agencies, what would it take to start building that relationship right now?

As every courthouse is handling access to information and hearings differently, it is important for victim/witness advocates to share whatever information they can about courthouse and hearing access and to work jointly with community-based advocates to problem solve cases.

Advocates should work jointly to request that county government websites provide the most accurate and up-to-date information so victim/survivors who are not connecting with advocacy can get information. Advocates should also work together to ensure that any community-level COVID-19 hotlines include referrals to local domestic and sexual violence programs, along with Day One and [RapeHelpMN](#).

Suggestions for Victim/Witness Advocates

If you are no longer working in the office, consider changing your voicemail message to make callers aware that you are working remotely. Include the phone number(s) for your local DV and SA program(s), as well as the phone number for Day One and [RapeHelpMN](#). Reach out to local community-based advocates; they are resources and may be able to assist you in your work. Utilize and strengthen your existing multidisciplinary teams.

Suggestions for Community-Based Advocates

Over-communicate the various ways that people can seek services and/or support your program. Include this information on your website and on your voicemail. Set up auto-replies to your emails that include this information. Put this information out on social media. Reach out to your local government-based advocates; they are resources and may be able to assist you in your work. Utilize and strengthen your existing multidisciplinary team networks.



If You Need Assistance in Collaborating with Your Counterpart Program

Start with a simple conversation: How's it going at your program? Are you busier than normal? What are you seeing as particular challenges right now? Is there anything I/we can do to help?

Ask your counterpart what services they are currently providing. What has changed since COVID-19? Are they working remotely or in the office/shelter? How are they communicating with victims? What creative or innovative solutions are they trying out?

Consider mapping out the two agencies' various roles during this challenging time. [This is a sample of mapping](#) that the Saint Paul City Attorney's Office and the St. Paul and Ramsey County Intervention Project created several years ago that you may want to use as an example.

Talking face-to-face is often the best option, but it's not possible right now. Do you have the ability to hold a video chat using a platform such as [Zoom](#)? If you do not and are a MAC member, please contact Danielle Kluz at danielle@mnallianceoncrime.org. MAC is currently offering their member programs the use of their Zoom account for the purpose of collaborative meetings with their counterparts. Violence Free Minnesota has compiled a list of possible tech solutions for remote collaboration on their Member Program site, under the "COVID-19 Work-Tech Resources" page. <https://www.vfmn.org/member-resources> [password: 1978]

Well established lines of communication and mutually beneficial victim-centered relationships between victim/witness and community-based advocates depend on a clear understanding of the distinct roles and confidentiality differences between the two. Our attached "cheat sheet" delineates what these differences are. If you have additional questions, please reach out to Danielle Kluz at MAC or Nikki Engel at VFMN.

If you are having extra challenges with collaborating, contact Julia Tindell at MAC at julia@mnallianceoncrime.org. Julia is trained in facilitating conversations and may be able to remotely assist with planning and facilitating a collaborative conversation via Zoom.

Please don't hesitate to reach out to MNCASA, MAC, or VFMN for support around any of these issues.