

MIAMI INCLUSION ALLIANCE

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It is now August and we still find ourselves in a public health crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic. Public health officials are continuing to recommend *social distancing* to slow the spread of infection. Because of these recommendations, technology such as video calls and web chats have become useful tools to connect with victim/survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault, in particular, those victims that are persons with disabilities. This has replaced much of the in person delivery of services we have always used in the past.

BUT, after using technology to connect for the last four months, we are recognizing that it must be used cautiously and with victims/survivors at the center of our evaluation of its effectiveness. We must figure out how balance access with privacy and safety.

The National Network to End Domestic Violence Safety Net Project, an expert in survivor safety and privacy, has created a list of key risks that must be addressed in order to ensure victim safety when communicating remotely. The mitigation of these risks must become front and center, now, more than ever before.

Risk 1- Personal Safety: Communication via text, email, and online chat leaves a trail that could reveal the survivor is seeking help, as well as other details that could compromise safety. For example, video call software may also automatically store call history.

Risk 2- Loss of Privacy: Beyond risks related to personal safety, a survivor may also have their privacy compromised by message threads. If someone sees these without their consent, the survivor loses control over their decision to disclose the abuse.

Risk 3- Confidentiality: When advocates use mobile devices to communicate with survivors, conversation threads and other related records include personally identifying information. Fortunately, the Project has also created best practices principles that programs can adopt to address these risks.

Programs must choose platforms that promote safety, work with victims to select devices that protect their privacy and create protocols that make safety a priority.

They must minimize miscommunication by using video chat when possible and using written confirmation of what they are conveying.

They must protect victim privacy by collecting only a minimum amount of information.

They must provide quality digital services and always plan for the unexpected.

We do not know yet, when we will return to the old models of providing services. It is possible that digital services will stay in our protocols. It is time to begin serious discussions on how successful we have been so far and what we can do to make improvements.

I will keep you updated.

