

# Tips for using Video Conferencing for Victim Services



## How the Technology Works

Video conferencing is the process of using the Internet to conduct real time video conversations. It allows two or more people to see and talk to each other on screen from multiple locations. There are two main approaches: (1) inexpensive or free web conferencing using built-in cameras and microphones on a computer, tablet, or smartphone, and (2) high quality video conferencing hardware such as free standing microphones, cameras, and networking equipment.

Downloading web-based software or using browser-supported video conferencing may be more affordable than free-standing video conferencing equipment. However, web-based software may provide lower video quality than more expensive hardware, such as systems by Cisco™, which require a hardwiring installation process. Limitations on the user's Internet bandwidth (the speed of the user's Internet) and the constant necessity for updating the software can also create challenges to effective use.

Despite possible limitations, web-based conference services are easily accessible and much more affordable. Some popular free and low cost (if upgraded) web conference services include:<sup>1</sup>

- Skype™ – one-to-one video and voice calls; voicemail; instant messaging; file sharing; screen sharing.
- Google Plus Hangouts™ – one-to-one or up to 10 person group video and voice calls; instant messaging; file sharing.
- Oovoo™ – one-to-one or up to 12 person group calls; video and instant messaging; file sharing.
- Facetime – one-to-one video calls (only available for Apple™ products).
- Gruveo™ – one-to-one secure, anonymous video calls using a web browser, without having to download software or registering for an account.
- Sorenson Communications provides free videophones and software to Deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals who require Video Relay Service to place and receive calls.

## How Are Local Programs Using It?

Videoconferencing can be appealing because it gives survivors an alternative way to meet with a provider or counselor. These meetings can be for specific medical care, legal services, or trauma-informed therapy. Additional benefits of using videoconferencing include increasing accessibility and allowing survivors to talk to advocates who have expertise in whatever service the survivor needs, such as being able to speak the same language or understand the survivor's cultural background. Using video conferencing can also save money and provide high quality counseling for those who are unable to travel to the program's location due to lack of transportation or because they live too far from the program. Video counseling also can be more personal than a phone call or email.

Programs are using video conferencing for many different purposes:

- **Meetings:** Many agencies are using video conferencing to communicate with staff who are not in the same location, provide trainings or presentations, conduct meetings with partners or other organizations, and interview job candidates who cannot meet in person.
- **Therapy:** A few local programs are beginning to use video conferencing to provide telemedicine/telemental-health sessions, which can be regular therapy or counseling sessions using telecommunication and may be used together with in-person communications.
- **Virtual Legal Consult:** Agencies have also begun using video conferencing to provide legal consultations as a starting point for survivors' recovery. This is a low-cost, money-saving opportunity for survivors to access legal assistance.

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<sup>1</sup> Manufacturers' websites: September 2013.

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## Things To Consider

While using video conferencing to communicate with survivors can be beneficial, there are also drawbacks that programs should take into consideration when using this technology.

### *Privacy, Security, and Safety*

First, and most importantly, the true security of any online communication is going to depend on the security of all computers/devices being used. Programs using video conferencing should take every step possible to maintain the security of their technology and work to ensure any community agency and survivor also using the service is informed of security needs and risks.

- If using video conferencing to communicate with a survivor who is not at a community agency, but instead using a personal or public computer, their computer/device could be monitored by the abuser, despite any end-to-end encryption that the service offers. Depending on the type of video conferencing used, it may be possible for someone to know who the survivor is speaking to, when the call was made, and even how long the call took simply by accessing the computer or device the survivor used. Advocates should talk to the survivor about computer/device safety and security. Check out Safety Net's handouts on spyware [link].
- If the program is unsure about the security of the service or the users' devices, be cautious about the kind of information being shared via these connections. Particularly if the survivor is worried that the device she/he is using may be compromised by monitoring software, limit what is being communicated or use a safer device. If security of the information being shared is a concern, use more secure methods of communicating, such as phone or in person.
- In addition to talking to survivors about their own computer security and safety, also discuss the safety of their surroundings when talking to advocates or counselors. Because video conferencing can be mobile, survivors can be anywhere: their home, a coffee shop, or at a friend's house. Even if their computer is secure, depending on where they are, their conversations could be overheard by anyone, including the abuser.
- Programs should ensure that all communication is secure and encrypted to protect the information being transmitted from being hacked or otherwise accessed. Programs should also make sure that logs of contacts and details of any calls are not saved on the computer/device.
- If working with other community agencies to help coordinate and connect survivors to services, the program should work with all other partners to ensure they will be implementing security practices to maintain confidentiality and privacy.
- Some video conferencing software allows the user to record the video and the audio. Programs should not use those features when communicating with survivors in any way. Doing so could be a privacy violation, opening the survivor up to confidentiality concerns and the program to liability risks. Online communication should be treated similarly to offline communication where, counseling sessions or meetings with survivors are not recorded except through minimal hand-written notes.
- Advocates should not use their personal Skype, Facetime, or other accounts to communicate with survivors. Create work accounts for the sole purpose of communicating with survivors to maintain proper communication and limit confidentiality concerns.

### *Building Trust Without In-Person Interactions*

Video conferencing cannot replace face-to-face communication. Some of the disadvantages include not being able to clearly read body language, see nonverbal cues, and create the intimacy and trust needed for a survivor to feel

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comfortable during a counseling session. Moreover, facial expressions, eye contact, and other cues may seem more apparent and be more important since users are looking directly at the other person's face.

Counselors and advocates should check in with the survivor regularly to see if communicating via video conferencing is comfortable and feels safe for the survivor. Survivors who are more used to communicating over video may feel more comfortable than someone who isn't familiar with this type of communication. Counselors and advocates can help survivors feel more comfortable by offering a range of ways to communicate, landline, cell phone, or only using the Instant Message chat function within a video program.

## *Technology Challenges*

If someone isn't comfortable using video communication technologies or a specific video conferencing service, getting online and setting it all up may be stressful and that may affect the session. Create handouts or tips on how clients can access the video conferencing service.

As stated above, the quality of the video conferencing will depend on the type of service used and the internet speed and bandwidth. Low quality services and slow internet speeds may make the video image choppy or prone to freezing, the audio or video portion may lag, or may cut off all together. If the client or the program does not have high-speed internet, the video may not work at all.

## *Legal Concerns*

Ensure that anyone providing counseling are properly trained and educated in the same fashion as with in-person counseling. Legal and ethical policies and procedures that apply to in-person counseling will also apply to video counseling. Licensed therapist and counselors need to make sure they are abiding by their individual requirements for ethical and private communications. While VAWA and FVPSA confidentiality requirements are far stronger than Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), if applicable, programs may also need to comply with HIPAA policies.

## **Additional Tips:**

- Both advocates and survivors should be aware of who is physically present nearby before beginning a video session.
- Use passwords on the computer or tablet so that others can't easily get into the device
- Don't set the web browser or application to save passwords or automatically log into the account.
- Always log out of the application or service when it is not in use.
- Before a session, check to make sure that the software or service is working. Update any software and trouble shoot any potential issues before beginning the actual session. (Note that updating software may sometimes require administrative level access to the computer or device.)
- To manage poor internet connections, use a combination of web conferencing, such as Skype™, for video and a land line or cell phone for audio. In the event that the internet fails, the audio connection will still remain. (Make sure to mute the microphone on the computer or device to reduce any echo or additional background noise.)