



# Video Communication: A Guide for Anti-Violence Organizations

## A Note on Language



In this toolkit, we will sometimes use the word woman/women and feminine pronouns for simplicity and to recognize the significant impact technology-facilitated violence has on women and girls. We recognize that TFGVB also impacts trans, non-binary, and Two-Spirit people. We hope that all people impacted by TFGVB will find these documents useful.

This guide is for anti-violence workers who need to communicate with survivors using video conferencing or video calls. Video conferencing is a digital tool anti-violence organizations can use to communicate with survivors who face barriers to accessing services or in a time of social distancing. For survivors who have disabilities, who cannot easily travel to the organization, who have scheduling or childcare issues, or who have language access barriers, video conferencing can add more personal interaction and provide additional options in the way they seek services. To ensure privacy and safety, here are some best practices when using video platforms to communicate with women, children, and youth.

## Video Conferencing Technology

There are two main approaches to video conferencing: web conferencing services and video conferencing hardware.

Web conferencing services include software, apps, and browser-based options that use built-in cameras and microphones on a computer, tablet, or smartphone. These options are often free or inexpensive and are readily available, but they may provide lower video quality. Some browser-based services offer a higher level of security and often do not require an account set up or download, which may be an important option for effectively communicating with survivors.

High-quality video conferencing hardware uses free-standing microphones, cameras, and networking equipment in a dedicated space, sometimes even a mobile conferencing lab. Video conferencing hardware is more expensive, requires an installation process, and may limit the locations a survivor can participate from.

A drawback to both approaches is that limited Internet bandwidth (the speed of the user's Internet) can create connection challenges. Low-quality services and slow Internet speeds may make the video image choppy or prone to freezing up, or the audio or video portion may lag or may cut off altogether. If the survivor or the organization does not have access to high-speed Internet, the video may not work at all. For options that rely on software, updates to a current version may complicate the process of connecting.

## Safety Planning and Supporting Women, Children, and Youth

Prior to beginning video conferencing, organizations need to consider possible increases in risk to safety when communicating through video. The true security of any video conferencing platform depends on the security of all computers/devices being used. Organizations using video conferencing should take every step possible to maintain the security of their technology and work to ensure everyone using the service is informed of security requirements. Organizations can amend their informed consent forms to include digital support services via video conferencing to inform the survivor fully of this communication method so they can choose whether to participate with video conferencing or not. See [WSC's Informed Consent for Digital Support Services Template](#).

If using video conferencing to communicate with a survivor, it is important to be aware that a perpetrator could monitor their [computer](#) or device. Depending on the type of video conferencing used, it may also 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. Support workers should speak with the survivor about computer/device safety and security. You can read more about [spyware](#) here.

If the organization is unsure about the security of the service or the survivors' devices, be cautious about the kind of information being shared. Most video conferencing platforms have a privacy and security policy that can be reviewed before using their service. Support workers and survivors can also discuss using more secure methods of communicating, such as phone or in-person meetings.

Some video conferencing software allows the user to record the video and audio. Organizations should generally not use these features when communicating with survivors. Doing so could create privacy risks for the survivor if the recording is stored in the cloud by the web-based provider. Best practice is to treat online communications similarly to in-person communications where conversations with survivors are not recorded except through minimal hand-written notes. Organizations should also make sure that the computer/device does not log contacts and details of any calls.

## Minimize Disruptions

If you are using digital services to communicate, your organization needs to set up a plan of action for disruptions or video call drops. To manage poor Internet connections, use a combination of web conferencing for video and a phone for audio. In the event that the Internet fails, the audio connection will remain.

Develop a plan of action if the survivor has to end the video or audio call abruptly. The plan should include whether the survivor has to call back or if the anti-violence worker will call back, how long they will wait before reconnecting, or the best way to follow up if they cannot return the call.

## Ensure Appropriate Staff Use

The convenience of videoconferencing means that survivors and support workers can be connected at any time. It is important to set boundaries of contact time to ensure that support workers can practice self-care. Likewise, if a video conversation is happening, support workers should make sure they are in a quiet, secluded place so that survivors' information is protected and not shared with or overheard by anyone else.

Anti-violence workers should not use their personal devices or accounts to communicate with survivors. Use organization-owned devices and create work accounts for the sole purpose of communicating with survivors to maintain proper communication and limit confidentiality concerns.

If working with other community agencies to coordinate and connect survivors to services through video conferencing, the organization should work to ensure they will all be implementing secure communication practices.

## Building Trust without In-Person Interactions

Video conferencing is different from face-to-face communication. While video does offer more visual and audio cues than phone, email, text, or chat conversation, more effort may still be needed to create the intimacy and trust needed for a survivor to feel comfortable.

Speak with women, children, and youth about the safety of their surroundings when videoconferencing. Since it can be mobile, survivors may be anywhere: their home, workplace, a school, a library, 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 perpetrator or someone they have not disclosed the violence to previously.

Check in with the survivor regularly to see if communicating via videoconferencing is still comfortable and feels safe. Women, children, and youth who are more used to communicating over video may feel more comfortable than someone who is not familiar with this type of communication. Offer other ways to communicate, including the audio-only option in the web conferencing service, a phone call, online chat, or in-person meeting.

Create handouts or tip sheets on how survivors can access the video conferencing service. Test the technology to make sure it works properly before meeting with survivors. This will help cut down on confusion and identify possible connection issues before the actual meeting.

## Accessible Technology and Communicating with Survivors

Video conferencing can be a great tool to reach survivors who may be remote or unable to leave their homes. The ability to still seek services and connect with someone can give women, children, and youth resources and support they may not have otherwise thought possible to access. If a survivor is located in a geographic region where Internet coverage is weak, video conferencing may not be the best method of connecting. If a survivor has a disability and uses assistive technology, their assistive tech may not be compatible with the video conferencing platform, or they may not be able to utilize all of the features the platform offers. If an interpreter service is needed, identify qualified interpreters for videoconferencing in advance and ensure that they know how to use the videoconferencing platform. Also check whether the platform has the capacity to have more than two people join a single video session. Do practice runs to test the video platform and plan for any issues that may come up or what to do if the video conferencing does not work.

To support your development of safe tech use policies, WSC has developed a [Use of Technology Policy Template Guide for Women's Shelters and Transition Houses](#) (PDF, in English only).

*Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence (TFGBV) is part of a continuum of violence that can be both online and in-person. If you or someone you know is experiencing TFGBV, you are not alone. You can use [sheltersafe.ca](#) to find a shelter/transition house near you to discuss options and create a [safety plan](#). You don't need to stay in a shelter to access free, confidential services and support.*

*Adapted for Canada with permission from NNEDV's Safety Net project, based on their resource [Organization's Guide to Video Communication](#).*

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