



Anti-Violence Program's Guide: Phone Communications

This information sheet is for staff who need to communicate with program participants over a telephone. To ensure privacy and safety, please consider the following when using phones to communicate with women, children and youth the program is supporting.

Calling Program Participants

Before calling program participants, establish if and when it is safe for you to call. Some participants may have abusers who are monitoring phone calls, so allow the program participant to determine the call time and process.

Leaving Voicemail Messages

If possible, talk to program participants beforehand about the practice of leaving voicemail messages. Discuss what type of information and details to leave in voicemail messages. Work with program participants to help choose message options that best fit their safety and privacy concerns.

If you have not been able to discuss safety issues before leaving a message with the participant, leave a vague non-identifiable message. For example, you might include your name, but not your organization's name or even your phone number. Your message could be: "Hello, this is [your full name]. I am returning your call. You can call me back to get information between the hours of 9-5, Monday through Friday. Look forward to speaking to you."

TIP: Do not be too vague or you might cause confusion. For example, leaving a message like this: "Hi, it's [your first name]. Call me back when you have a moment," could be too vague. If she was not expecting you to call her, she might ignore it or be concerned that someone whose name she does not recognize has her number.



Dropped Calls

Because calls may disconnect or the program participant may need to hang-up quickly for safety reasons, determine up-front what protocol works best. Will you call them back or wait for the participant to make the call to you? This is particularly important for crisis line calls. If you do not collect their phone number, let the caller know that you cannot call them, but they can call back at any time 24/7.

Using Caller ID

Most phone carriers will allow you to prevent a phone number from showing up on the caller ID (or caller number display) of the person receiving your call. Most anti-violence organizations already do this as a default, but if you are calling participants from a mobile phone or a phone that does not list your number as “private” when you call someone, be sure to make your number private. Some phones have settings where you can turn off the caller number display and all telecommunication providers offer options to make caller number displays private. Because it is slightly different for each phone and telephone provider, you can research how to do this via a simple Google search before placing the call. Every now and then, test to make sure your number is still private. Sometimes, when phone systems are updated or changed, some features on your phone could be affected.

Some devices will reject calls with private numbers. If the person you are calling is using that feature, you may have to unblock your blocked number before calling. If possible, talk to the person you are calling about the potential safety risks of calling with a non-private number.

Some agencies, particularly those that are under a larger social service agency, may have a different organization associated with their phone number. Instead of the caller ID showing up as “domestic violence program” or “sexual assault centre,” it will provide the social service agency name such, YWCA, Unites Way or Salvation Army for example which may address some of these privacy concerns but should be discussed with the people you are supporting so they are informed.

Collecting Caller's Information

Some organizations collect identifying information about the people who call. Review your program’s privacy and confidentiality policies to make sure that you are collecting, storing, and sharing program participants’ personal information (including their phone numbers) appropriately under the appropriate privacy laws. The [BCSTH Legal Toolkit](#) also discusses this topic starting at page 61.



Many telecommunications providers offer their customers access to call logs and other information through online accounts or billing records. When determining your policies around participant privacy and data collection and access to information, the program may want to limit who can access these accounts and consider adopting a policy that reflects that the organization does not keep the personally identifiable details of participants in the program phone records.

Some phone systems (VoIP and some telecommunications providers) offer the ability to translate voicemail messages into email or text messages. If you want to take advantage of this feature, keep in mind that you also need to take into account email and text messaging safety and privacy concerns in addition to concerns about voicemail. While it may be harder for someone to intercept or accidentally forward a voicemail message, it could be easier to intercept a text message on a staff member's personal mobile phone or to forward inadvertently an email that has a voicemail message attached.

If your agency has any questions or needs guidance on how to adopt policies regarding phone communications, please contact BCSTH's Technology Safety Project at rhiannon@bcsth.ca.

© 2020 BC Society of Transition Houses, Technology Safety Project.

Adapted for Canada from and in cooperation with the Safety Net Technology Project at the National Network to End Domestic Violence, United States