Frontline Services' Best Practice Guide: Communicating with Survivors via Phone

This guide is for workers who need to communicate with survivors over the phone. To ensure privacy and safety, here are some best practices when using phones to communicate with survivors.

1. Calling survivors

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

2. Leaving voicemail messages

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

If you have not been able to discuss safety issues before leaving a message with the survivor, leave a vague message. For example, you might decide to include your name, the reason you are calling, but not your organizational name or even your phone number. Your message could be: "Hello, this is [your name]. I'm returning your call from this morning. [If it's vague enough, include about what.] You were asking for some information. You can call me back between the hours of 9-5, Monday through Friday at this number [your phone number]."

> Tip: Don't be too vague though, or you might just confuse the survivor. For example, leaving a message like this: "Hi, it's [your name]. Call me back when you have a moment," could be too vague. If she wasn't expecting you to call her, she might ignore it or worry that someone she doesn't know has her number.

3. Dropped calls

Because calls may drop out or the survivor may need to hang-up quickly for safety reasons, determine up-front what protocol works best for the survivor. Will you call them back or wait for the survivor to make the call? This is particularly important for hotline calls. If you don't collect their phone number, let the caller know that you can't call them, but they can call back at any time.

4. Using Caller ID

Most phone carriers will allow you to prevent your number from showing up on the caller ID (or caller number display) of the person receiving your call. Most frontline organisations already do this as a default, but if you are calling survivors from a mobile phone or a phone that doesn't list

your number as "private" when you ring someone, be sure to make your number private. (Some phones have settings where you can turn off the caller number display and all telecommunications providers also offer options to make caller number displays private. Google instructions on how to do so, it is slightly different for each phone and telephone provider.) Every now and then, test to make sure your number is still private. Sometimes, when phone systems update or change, 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, will have a different organization associated with their phone number. Instead of the caller ID showing up as "domestic violence shelter" or "rape crisis centre," it will say "Salvation Army" or something else.

5. Collecting caller's information

Some organisations collect identifying information about the people who call. How you collect, keep, and store information could impact survivors' safety and privacy. Review your privacy and confidentiality policies to make sure that you are collecting, storing, and sharing survivors' personal information (including their phone numbers) appropriately.

Many telecommunications providers offer their customers access to call logs and other information through online accounts or billing records. When determining your policies around survivor privacy and data collection, don't forget to take these types of access into consideration. You may want to limit who can access these accounts. When receiving bills, you may want a policy that states your organisations does not keep the details of those 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 is much easier to intercept a text message on a worker's personal mobile phone or to forward an email that has a voicemail message attached.