

This guide is for managers or workers in frontline services who have responsibility for or contribute to content on their organisation's social media pages or accounts.

Many domestic violence and sexual assault services have social media pages or accounts that they use to communicate with their community. In some cases, a Facebook page or a Twitter account is easier to update than a website, which tends to stay static. However, there are a wide range of issues to consider beyond just creating an account and posting content. Some of these concerns include:

- Because social media is inherently a public space, how can an organisation protect the privacy and safety of survivors who reach out via social media?
- How should an organisation manage trolls or abusers' rights group who may attack or post intolerable content on their social media page?
- Can an organisation limit their staff's personal use of social media?
- What guidance should an organisation provide to survivors living in refuge on her and her children's social media use?
- What can an organisation do when survivors' social media use threatens the confidentiality or privacy of a refuge?

Most social media advice is for mainstream users, and not necessarily for organisations that may be communicating with survivors of abuse or who have refuge residents needing to stay in contact with friends and family via social media. Nor does the general advice apply to domestic violence/sexual assault workers who are trying to maintain boundaries between their personal and professional lives.

To navigate these unique issues, this guide is intended to help your organisation think through issues when developing your social media policy. This guide includes specific recommendations on (1) your organisation's use of social media, (2) workers' use of social media, and (3) survivor's use of social media.

## INTRODUCTION: YOUR POLICY SHOULD SUPPORT YOUR MISSION AND GOALS

Before drafting any policy, it is important to look at your organisation's communication goals and mission. Most domestic violence/sexual assault organisations are survivor-centred and their mission is to empower survivors. Policies should support individual's self-determination and not hinder her autonomy. When creating your policy, it is important to refer to your organisation's goals and mission to ensure that your policy doesn't diverge from them.

In general, your policy needs to:

- **Be specific and not overarching.** Specific policies are easier to follow and interpret, while policies that are too broad are hard to implement.
- **Mitigate risks.** Policies should respect survivor privacy, adhere to social media participation guidelines, and reflect your organisations' legal, ethical, and confidentiality obligations.
- **Follow your mission and values.** Most domestic violence agencies and rape crisis centres promote victim-centred services and value survivor self-determination. Policies should keep in line with those values.
- **Support your overall communication goals.** The main reason many organisations are on social media is to engage with others and promote their work. For example, you might choose to use social media to raise awareness about your services; increase dialogue between your organisation and others (stakeholders, supporters, community members, funders, survivors, etc.); or add your organisation's voice and opinions about issues to these spaces.

## POLICY FOR ORGANISATION'S USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

### What to post

What you post in social media reflects your organisation and is your voice in these spaces. What you post should be guided by and support your communication goals. Some organisations use social media pages to showcase their services and activities. In that case, their policy may specify that they only post content on activities their organisation supports or is involved in. Some organisations may view their social media pages as a platform to engage with others on broader anti-violence issues. In this case, they may post articles, videos, or events that are broader than the services or work their agency provides.

### Responding to opposing views

Responding to opposing views, negative and harmful rants, or blatant inaccuracies are issues that many organisations struggle with. It is important to have a policy beforehand, so you can address it with confidence and clarity. Having a clear purpose for why you use social media will help you develop policies around responding to opposing or negative views. The policy should reflect your organisation's strategy, grounded in your mission, vision, and media goals.

For example, if your communication goal is to increase dialogue on the issue of domestic violence, but you don't allow personal attacks, you may allow a nasty rant about how domestic violence occurs because women don't obey their husbands (and respond with educational information about domestic violence). Whereas if someone commented that women should just obey husbands and tagged a specific person, you may remove that comment.

### Have content guidelines

In addition to policies that address opposing views, your organisation should have guidelines that address unacceptable content on your social media pages. In general, posts or comments that include personally identifying information should not be allowed. You may also want to exclude comments or posts that are blatantly inaccurate, harassing, or meant to cause harm. If you

remove posts or comments, you should have clear guidance around why and how. Inform users of the organisation's rules for engagement. You may even consider informing the person whose comments or posts you removed why you did so and remind them of your content guidelines.

## Social media engagement

Some organisations see social media as spaces where everyone is encouraged to have a conversation about domestic violence or sexual assault. As part of that goal, their policy may be to not delete comments that are controversial but instead offer accurate information instead.

Some organisations see their social media presence as an extension of their organisation's voice. In this case, their policy might include not allowing any comments or posts that disagree with their views or disagree with what they post themselves.

## "Friending," "liking," or "following" others

Some organisations may want a set of criteria to determine who they "friend," "like," or "follow" on social media. For example, you may want to "follow" a group that is anti-feminist and pro-domestic violence or sexual assault because you want to know what they are saying. However, it could be interpreted that you agree with those values. Having a set of criteria will help you explain why you "friend" or do not friend certain groups or individuals.

Tip: If your agency uses social media to raise awareness and therefore wants to accept all "friend" or "follow" requests, it is important that you're constantly reviewing the information on your site to ensure that it's appropriate for a broad audience.

## Posting about survivors

Social media, by its very nature, is public and can quickly become personal. Never post about specific survivors or incidences of non-public domestic violence/sexual violence as this may reveal the identity of the survivor and violate her confidentiality.

Be purposeful and strategic when posting information about private events, such as the date and time of meetings. This information may inadvertently inform abusers or stalkers where victims may be at a certain time or invite opposing groups to crash private events.

## Posting about staff

Develop policies on when it's permitted to post pictures or videos of staff, conference attendees, or speakers on social media sites. Aim to obtain permission from individuals or, if that's not possible, offer clear and upfront notice and allow people to choose not to be in the picture or video.

## Survivors posting on organisation's social media

Survivors may reach out for help or tell their stories on organisation's social media pages. You need a policy on how to engage with individuals to protect their privacy.

Some organisations feel that allowing survivors to share their stories can be empowering, while others worry that survivors sharing personal information on a public page might compromise survivor safety and privacy. Wherever your organisation falls on this continuum, having clear

guidelines around acceptable and unacceptable content will help determine what comments/posts to keep or remove. If your content guideline excludes personally identifying information and a survivor posts a very personal story, you should have a process to remove the post or ask them to remove the post. Inform the person posting the reasons for your concerns, or refer them to the guidelines for more information.

## Social media monitoring and oversight

The time it takes to manage a social media presence depends on how active you want your social media presence to be and how much oversight you want over your social media accounts.

Some organisations have a very strict policy on what transpires on their pages, which means they need staff to monitor comments and posts. Many organisations don't have the capacity to spend a significant amount of time cultivating and engaging with social media followers. Your policy should reflect the level of social media engagement that is appropriate for your organisation. For example, if you don't have staff to monitor every post and comment, you may decide to turn off that feature or have a loose policy on what others say on your page. Think through the time it takes and the number of staff you have available when creating policies.

## Using social media as a platform to provide advocacy/support to survivors

Most social media sites do not have appropriate safety and privacy mechanisms to ensure a safe and protected space for agencies to provide direct support to survivors. We strongly discourage using social media platforms as methods of providing individualized services to survivors. If a social media platform is used to engage with survivors, be very thoughtful and cautious about privacy and safety. Provide upfront notice and information about privacy risks. You may even want to shop around for platforms that give you more privacy and security.

# POLICY FOR WORKERS' USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

In general, organisations should limit policies around workers' personal use of social media. Except in certain specific instances, what workers do on their own time with their own social media is outside the boundaries of what their employer can enforce. Below are some exceptions:

## Workers "friending," "following," and communicating with survivors

Agencies can have policies around Board and staff personal use of social media as it relates to engaging with survivors receiving services from your organisation. Workers should not "friend" or "follow" survivors they are working with unless they have consent from the survivor. Workers should not "friend" or "follow" survivors to check up on a survivor.

In addition, they should not talk about survivors they are working with either by name or by relating an incident involving the survivor on their personal social media page. Doing so could violate the privacy of the survivor and could reveal to the abuser that the survivor is working with a domestic violence/sexual assault worker.

## Workers' social media use as it relates to the organisation

Some organisations may want policies in place around employees' interactions with the organisation or other professional colleagues through social networks. However, these policies

should follow the organisation's general HR policies and procedures. Some organisations have policies that apply if staff list the organisation as their place of employment, and provide certain guidelines about what they can and cannot post; if they do not list the organisation as their employer, the guidelines do not apply.

### Using social media during work hours

Policies around staff's use of personal social media during work hours should follow the organisation's general guidelines regarding staff checking personal email and personal mobile phones during work hours.

If your organisation has a policy that stipulates staff are not allowed to access personal social media accounts during work hours, keep in mind that some social media services require staff to log into their personal social media account in order to access the organisation's social media page, and policies should consider this issue as well.

## POLICY FOR SURVIVORS' USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Some organisations – particularly refuges – have concerns around their residents' use of social media. While they may have concerns over the privacy of the refuge, it is also important that agencies balance this concern with allowing a survivor to access her support networks and not furthering her isolation. Organisations should ensure that survivors are aware of safety and privacy risks and strategies around using social media safely, but should not create policies that impede autonomy and limit access to an individual's support network.

### Allow social media in refuges and support services

For many survivors, being able to communicate with friends and family can be empowering and can help them feel safe and secure. For some, communicating with the abuser via social media may be safer than having a face-to-face meeting. Refuges and support services should not ban personal use of social media as a method of controlling what survivors share or who they communicate with.

### What survivors post

What survivors post should not concern the organisation, unless it jeopardizes the agency or others' confidentiality or safety; in which case, education about respecting the confidentiality and safety of the refuge or organisation and others should be an ongoing process.

### Educate about social media safety

Organisations should include social media education, so survivors are better equipped to make informed decisions about their use of social media, including potential privacy and potential legal risks when sharing too much information on social media sites. This education can be part of a safety planning process or general information that is shared with survivors. Include the survivor's children or family members in these conversations.