



FAQs: Privacy Laws Impacting Survivors

Tennessee

This FAQ card provides attorneys and advocates with a starting point for researching common privacy issues that impact victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, and stalking, and includes citations to laws that affect victims' privacy rights. Depending on the facts of a specific case, such as a victim's age or occupation, there may be additional laws that expand or limit a victim's privacy. This card is intended as a summary of relevant laws and was last revised in August 2018. We do not guarantee that all relevant laws are included and the information provided does not constitute legal advice. If you are dealing with a privacy-related situation, we recommend that you contact a local attorney. If you need help finding an attorney, visit the ABA's Lawyer Referral Directory at https://www.americanbar.org/groups/legal_services/flh-home/flh-hire-a-lawyer/ or contact your state coalition. We encourage you to contact the VRLC with your privacy-related questions at privacyTA@victimrights.org or 503-274-5477.

1

What mandatory reporting laws should I be aware of in my jurisdiction? Tennessee law requires any person to report child abuse or vulnerable adult abuse to the Department of Children's Services or the Department of Human Services. Read the statutes below for definitions of abuse, reporting procedures, and exceptions to mandatory reporting obligations. Additionally, health care providers must report any injury inflicted by means of violence. Finally, mental health professionals must report instances where a patient has made an actual threat of serious bodily harm against a reasonably identifiable victim.

What must be reported?	Who is REQUIRED to report?			Citation
	Any person	Health care provider	Mental health professional	
Child abuse	✓	✓	✓	Tenn. Code Ann. §§ 37-1-403, 37-1-605
Abuse of a person who may be in need of protective services	✓	✓	✓	Tenn. Code Ann. § 71-6-103
Violence-inflicted injury		✓		Tenn. Code Ann. § 38-1-101
Patient is danger to others			✓	Tenn. Code Ann. § 33-3-210

2

If I am working in Indian Country or on federal property, what authorities should I consult to determine my mandatory reporting obligations?¹ Several laws govern mandatory reporting obligations in Indian Country² and on federal property. Tribal codes may require certain individuals to report child abuse and elder abuse to tribal officials, law enforcement, or tribal social services. Federal laws also address mandatory reporting. These laws apply to certain professionals who work in federal facilities or lands,³ or who suspect that child abuse has occurred or will occur in Indian Country.⁴ Additionally, state laws (discussed in Question 1), licensing regulations, and ethical obligations may require certain professionals to report abuse. Determining how these laws interact is complicated. Programs should contact attorneys and technical assistance providers for more information.⁵

3

May an advocate be present during a victim’s privileged communications with an attorney or mental health professional without waiving the victim’s right to keep those communications confidential? Tennessee law does not directly address this question. Tennessee recognizes several categories of privileged communications, including attorney and client,⁶ psychiatrist and patient,⁷ marital and family therapist and client,⁸ and licensed professional counselor and client.⁹ However, the law does not indicate whether privilege is waived where a third party is present during a privileged conversation to further a patient or client’s interests in legal or therapeutic services.¹⁰

4

May an interpreter be present during a victim’s privileged communications with an attorney or mental health professional without waiving the victim’s privilege to keep those communications confidential? Yes, where a court has appointed a qualified interpreter for a Deaf party or witness. Tennessee requires courts to appoint qualified interpreters to interpret civil, criminal, and administrative proceedings and preparations with the Deaf person’s attorney.¹¹ Any information that the interpreter gathers from the Deaf person pertaining to a pending proceeding remains privileged.¹² Regarding foreign language interpreters, Tennessee’s rules of ethics for court interpreters provide that when an attorney is not present, there is no attorney–client privilege, and the interpreter may be held to divulge any information gained.¹³ The rules direct court interpreters to “avoid any such situation.” This rule also applies to other types of privileged communications.

5

Are a victim’s privileged communications with an attorney or mental health professional protected from disclosure after the victim’s death? It depends. A victim’s communications with an attorney will remain privileged, because Tennessee law indicates that this privilege survives the death of the client.¹⁴ The mental health professional privilege is silent as to this issue.

6

Are communications between a victim and a prosecutor’s office or law enforcement agency confidential? No. Communications between a victim and employees of a law enforcement agency or prosecutor’s office are not confidential because the government has a duty to turn over exculpatory evidence to the defendant. Exculpatory evidence is information that tends to prove the defendant’s innocence and could include statements or personal records the victim gave to an advocate employed by a prosecutor’s office, law enforcement, or other government agency. By contrast, advocates with non-profit agencies typically are not subject to these rules, as they are not part of the prosecution team or a party to the criminal case.

7

When must school employees report gender-based violence against adult victims to the school’s Title IX Coordinator? An employee’s role determines when a report of gender-based violence, e.g., sexual assault, domestic violence, dating violence, or sexually motivated stalking, must be made to a Title IX Coordinator. Under Title IX, a “responsible employee” has a duty to report such violence if they “knew, or in the exercise of reasonable care should have known, about the harassment.” Responsible employees include anyone who has authority to address the violence; who has a duty to report other misconduct that violates school policy; or whom a student could reasonably believe has this authority or duty. In 2017, the Office for Civil Rights retracted the 2011 Dear Colleague Letter and companion guidance. The federal requirements for what a

responsible employee must disclose to a Title IX Coordinator are currently unclear. If an employee’s communication with the survivor are privileged, e.g., communications discussed in Question 3, they have no duty to report the violence unless other mandatory reporting obligations are in effect, e.g. reporting abuse of a minor or of an adult with a disability.

8

May law enforcement access an adult victim’s health information without the victim’s consent? It depends on the type of information that is requested. The chart below summarizes some of the common situations in which law enforcement (LE) may access health information *without* patient consent under Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) regulations.¹⁵ Additionally, health care providers may be required by law to report certain injuries to LE, as discussed in Question 1.

Scenario	What may be disclosed?	Limitations on what may be disclosed
Health care provider receives court order, court-ordered warrant, subpoena or summons issued by a judicial officer, or grand jury subpoena	Information authorized by the court order, court-ordered warrant, subpoena, or summons	Provider must limit the disclosure to the scope of the court order, warrant, subpoena, or summons
Provider receives administrative subpoena, summons, investigative demand, or other non-judicial process authorized by law	Information authorized by the administrative demand	LE must certify that the information requested is relevant, material, specific, and limited in scope, and that de-identified information could not reasonably be used
LE asks about a patient by name	The patient’s location in the health care facility and general medical condition	Information must not be released if the patient has opted out
LE requests information to identify or locate a suspect, fugitive, witness, or missing person	Name; address; birth date; SSN; blood type; injury; date and time of treatment; date and time of death; physical description	Provider cannot disclose information related to the patient’s DNA; dental records; or typing, samples, or analysis of body fluids or tissue
LE requests information about a crime victim who cannot consent due to incapacity or emergency	Information that LE states is needed to determine whether a crime has occurred	Information cannot be intended to be used against the victim; LE’s need must be immediate; disclosure must be in the victim’s best interests

9

How can I determine the privacy rights of minors and whether minors may legally consent to domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, or stalking services? The laws that govern a minor’s right to privacy and right to consent to services are varied and complex. A program may need to consult several different laws, including the jurisdiction’s laws regarding mandatory reporting (discussed in Question 1), emancipation, a minor’s right to consent to medical and mental health services, and a parent or guardian’s right to access a child’s medical, counseling, or other personal records. Contact your state coalition or the Victim Rights Law Center for more information on how to approach this question.

10

Does a victim whose private information or photographs have been posted online without consent have any civil legal remedies? Likely yes, but legal and practical success and the victim’s options will vary greatly depending on the facts of the case. Consult an attorney familiar with these issues before advising victims. Civil causes of action against the person who posted the content may include invasion of privacy,¹⁶ the tort of outrageous conduct,¹⁷ and unauthorized commercial use of the victim’s name, likeness, or photographs.¹⁸ If the website hosting the content has policies regarding harassment or sexually explicit content, the victim should use these policies to request removal. Additionally, if the victim took the photo, video, or other content at issue, the victim may submit a Digital Millennium Copyright Act notice requesting that the website remove it.

¹ We have included this information for all jurisdictions because it may aid professionals who work across state lines or in federal lands or facilities.

² Federal law defines “Indian Country” as all land within the limits of an Indian reservation under the jurisdiction of the U.S. government; all dependent Indian communities; and all Indian allotments still in trust. 18 U.S.C. § 1151.

³ Victims of Child Abuse Act: 42 U.S.C. § 13031 *et seq.* & 18 U.S.C. § 2258.

⁴ Indian Child Protection & Family Violence Prevention Act: 25 U.S.C. § 3201 *et seq.* & 18 U.S.C. § 1169.

⁵ A list of OWW technical assistance (TA) providers, including tribal TA providers, is available at <https://ta2ta.org/directory.html>.

⁶ Tenn. Code Ann. § 23-3-105.

⁷ Tenn. Code Ann. § 24-1-207.

⁸ Tenn. Code Ann. § 63-22-114.

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ This question does not address physician-patient privilege because Tennessee does not recognize this privilege. However, other laws, such as health information privacy laws and ethical duties of confidentiality, may protect the privacy of communications between patients and health care providers.

¹¹ Tenn. Code Ann. § 24-1-211(b).

¹² Tenn. Code Ann. § 24-1-211(f).

¹³ Tenn. Supreme Ct. Rule 41, Canon 5 cmt., <http://tncourts.gov/rules/supreme-court/41>.

¹⁴ Estate of Queener v. Helton, 119 S.W.3d 682, 685 (Tenn. Ct. App. 2003).

¹⁵ 45 C.F.R. § 164.512. The regulations define “law enforcement official” as “an officer or employee of any agency or authority of the United States, a State, a territory, a political subdivision of a State or territory, or an Indian tribe, who is empowered by law to: (1) Investigate or conduct an official inquiry into a potential violation of law; or (2) Prosecute or otherwise conduct a criminal, civil, or administrative proceeding arising from an alleged violation of law.” 45 C.F.R. § 164.103.

¹⁶ See Martin v. Senators, Inc., 418 S.W.2d 660, 662-63 (Tenn. 1967); Langford v. Vanderbilt Univ., 287 S.W.2d 32, 38 (Tenn. 1956); Beard v. Akzona, Inc., 517 F. Supp. 128, 131-32 (E.D. Tenn. 1981).

¹⁷ See Dunn v. Moto Photo, Inc., 828 S.W.2d 747 (Tenn. Ct. App. 1991).

¹⁸ Tenn. Code Ann. § 47-25-1105. Unauthorized use also constitutes a Class A misdemeanor.