

Tips: Protecting Survivor Privacy in Rural Areas



A VRLC Privacy TA
Projects Resource

Victim Rights Law Center

The Victim Rights Law Center provides free, comprehensive legal services for sexual assault victims with legal issues in Massachusetts and Oregon. We also provide national support to attorneys and other victim service providers with civil legal services and confidentiality questions through OVW-funded technical assistance and training. You can contact the VRLC privacy TA team at PrivacyTA@victimrights.org.

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Introduction

Protecting survivor privacy can be challenging in any context, but the challenges are compounded when serving survivors of sexual assault, dating and domestic violence, and stalking in rural communities. In rural areas, where often everyone knows everyone else—from their car to their life story—keeping information private can be especially difficult. We have gathered tips from practitioners working with rural survivors and offer some of our own to help you overcome privacy hurdles.

1. How to Maintain Confidentiality in a Close-Knit Community

In most rural communities, everybody knows everybody else: If a survivor parks their car outside of an office clearly marked as providing services for victims of domestic or dating violence, sexual assault, or stalking, or an advocate is seen meeting with someone, it is easy to assume that the survivor is receiving services. This is problematic, because many survivors do not want the rest of the community to know they are receiving services and therefore may not seek them. Here are some tips for maintaining confidentiality in rural communities.

Tips:

- **Offer a neutral meeting location.** Find a space that is not associated with your program where you can conduct intake, counseling, or support groups—ideally in a nearby community where the survivor does not know the staff or volunteers who work there. This space might be a multi-purpose location, such as a place of worship, health clinic, library, or community center, with private, sound-proof meeting spaces. If this isn't possible, try to secure a place that is near a neutral location—for instance, perhaps someone could park at a mini-mall, and walk through the mall to get to the location. If the survivor is comfortable with the idea, you could also suggest meeting in the lobby of a building with security guards.
- **Have a plan in place if the survivor is recognized by a community member.** If a survivor is spotted entering or leaving the crisis center, suggest that they could explain that they were dropping off donations, asking about volunteer opportunities, or getting information for a friend.
- **Be careful about what information you share.** In a small community, even if you are careful about not using someone's name, details can still be identifying. For instance, seeking donations for twin infants on Facebook may be enough information to reveal who you're talking about. Avoid

sharing information that could directly or indirectly identify the survivor you are serving.

2. How to Let Victims Know About Your Services While Protecting Their Information

Rural populations are often spread out over a large area. Some survivors are isolated and may not know about your services or have a discreet way to access them. For these victims, you may need to use innovative methods to get information out and accessible in the languages and formats most relevant to the community. Here are some tips on how to increase awareness of the services your program provides and how to access them, while maintaining the safety and confidentiality of survivors.

Tips:

- **Set up outreach initiatives to advertise your services in high-visibility, neutral locations.** Print out flyers or business cards with important information and phone numbers and put them in high-visibility locations, like the courthouse, library, medical and veterinarian offices, community center, post office, hair salons, food stamp offices, local bars and restaurants, organizations (such as the Lyons Club or Rotary International) and (with permission) newspaper boxes. Look into the cost and feasibility of including fliers in utility or other monthly bills. Consider including your information in many other publications, in addition to your agency's newsletter, to get the word out more safely. For instance, ask local businesses if you can include a paragraph about your services in their weekly or monthly newsletters.
- **Consider using non-print media.** If there is a local radio or TV station, consider making regular appearances to talk about the need for awareness and services. If you have the budget for it, consider using short ads on local radio or TV stations explaining your services. Be careful of using social media advertising—if you are considering using ads on a social media platform, be sure to thoroughly review the platform's privacy policy and to make sure survivors' privacy will be protected. Their ability to target ads to specific audiences based on internet searches can create safety risks for survivors.
- **Identify individuals who can help you educate the community about your services.** Form relationships with local justice, medical, mental health, and social services providers, benevolent organizations, teachers, and others who can pass on your information to people seeking help.

Consider connecting with (and promoting your services through) other community agencies, such as food banks, organizations serving people experiencing homelessness, community action programs, and so forth. Make sure that these organizations understand what services you can provide, how to access them, and the level of confidentiality you can give to victims.

- **Form relationships in highly-visible parts of the community.** Identify other individuals in your community who can reach survivors. For instance, there are programs that train hairstylists on the dynamics of domestic violence and sexual assault. These programs teach stylists how to recognize signs of abuse, and how to discuss these issues with suspected victims. Other potential point people in the community may include grocers, librarians, restaurant workers, post office and other public employees, food bank, and meals-on-wheels staff and volunteers, firefighters, veterinarians and animal hospitals, or bank tellers.

3. How to Get from Here to There

When you provide victim services in rural areas you are often on the road so much that it can get in the way of providing effective assistance. While it is helpful to create ways for survivors to travel with you, this practice can also lead to privacy concerns. Here are some tips for dealing with the reality of a large service area.

Tips:

- **Consider pre-paid credit cards for local purchases.** Setting up cost-saving relationships with local companies—for instance, cab companies or gas stations—can help survivors access your services. However, be careful: if your agency only serves survivors or survivors are the only ones getting discounted cab rides or a certain type of gas card, it can quickly become clear they are receiving your services. Consider distributing prepaid credit cards instead.
- **If survivors can't come to you, can you safely go to them?** Sometimes a survivor can't, or won't, travel. In these cases, having a staff vehicle or agency-owned vehicle can be invaluable. However, be aware that your car can become an identifier that your agency is providing services to someone in the community. Take steps to maintain privacy once you arrive in town (see point 1 Above). Some organizations use volunteer-based transportation programs—typically for people with disabilities—to extend services to those experiencing

domestic and sexual violence. You may need to consider who those volunteers are and what they know about the individuals they are transporting. Having mobile advocacy stations, or satellite locations from where you can provide confidential services, can also help reduce commuting time.

4. How to Transport Files Securely

When people you work with are spread many miles apart and in remote locations, it may seem fine to leave their files in the car. But is this smart? You are legally and ethically obligated to keep those files safe—and a car is not safe when you're not in it. Here are some tips for keeping files safe:

Tips:

- **Never leave files alone in the car.**
- **Protect survivors' names when removing documents from the office.** Keep files with personal information covered when carrying them outside the office. A briefcase, tote bag with a zipper, or envelope are all great options.
- **Be mindful of what you have to bring, and what can be kept in your office or in another secure location.** Confidential files—like medical records, psychological records, or alcohol treatment records—usually do not need to make the journey with you.
- **Think about what can be stored electronically.** Key files may be scanned and kept in secure electronic locations. If you keep files on a flash drive or other transportable device, you must have practices in place to minimize any chance of misplacing or losing it, such as by attaching it to your key chain or wearing it unattended. Require that every electronic device with survivors' personally identifying information has multiple and secure layers of encryption. Consider whether to prohibit the use of public Wifi to access survivors' personally identifying information. Have policies that govern the use of electronic devices for work purposes outside the office.

5. How to Obtain Written Releases Under VAWA

Under the Violence Against Women Act, all releases of information must be in writing. They must also be time limited and executed only with informed consent. But when someone you serve is in a remote location and needs help

immediately, or you are communicating with survivors remotely only, the practicalities of a written release can be daunting. Here are some tips for securing a VAWA-compliant release.

Tips:

- **Identify methods for obtaining the signature remotely.** If the survivor has access to a smartphone, there are free software programs available to sign PDFs, such as Adobe Reader or SignNow. If the survivor has access to a printer, or if the documents were mailed, another option is to sign the hard copy, take a picture, and email or text it back. If the survivor does not have the ability to download software on their phone, suggest that the survivor send a text stating to whom they are giving informed consent and why, along with the date and an expiration on the consent. You can then print the texts and attach them to a Release of Information form.
- **Be smart about technology.** Whenever technology is being used, safety is paramount. Images on the phone and emails of correspondence or texts should be deleted for maximum privacy. For example, if a survivor deletes a photo of a signed release it may be saved in their “deleted photos” for a week before it is permanently deleted. If using a shared or public computer, such as at the library or at a motel, the survivor should clear the history, delete any downloaded documents, and empty the computer’s “recycle bin” (this is usually stored on the desktop). The National Network to End Domestic Violence Technology Safety program has a number of useful tools for survivors looking to create a technology safety plan.

Conclusion

While these are five of the most significant issues with maintaining confidentiality in rural communities, there are many more privacy issues that can surface during your work with a survivor. Please contact the VRLC privacy TA team at PrivacyTA@victimrights.org for any help with providing confidential services for survivors of gender-based violence.

