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Should we use cell phones for hotline calls?

By Toby Shulruff, Safety Net, NNEDV

Cell phones are a great convenience for volunteers and staff who are working hotline shifts, especially overnight or through weekends. They allow advocates to still run errands or walk their dogs while remaining on call. However, cell phones have some drawbacks, including the possibilities of diminished privacy or unreliability. Let's walk through some of the important considerations that coalitions can share with local programs – also for phone technologies other than cell phones. Many, if not most, local programs face challenges to recruiting volunteers. One way to encourage folks to take shifts is by allowing them to use a cell phone for the shift, so they are not stuck at home watching a phone that may or may not ring. Increasingly, folks are not even using traditional land line phones, and may only have a cell phone. Both of these factors make cell phones an attractive alternative for hotline calls – but there are also risks that should be considered.

Some years ago, we regularly told folks that cell phone conversations could be easily intercepted. This is still true for calls made in “analog” mode, which is basically like using your cell phone as a walkie-talkie – the sound waves of your voice travel through the air to the nearest tower. Today, your phone is most likely to be in analog mode in rural areas, where you would notice your battery charge draining really fast. Most cell phone calls today happen in “digital” mode – in which the sound of your voice is turned into 1's and 0's – digital bits of information which are then sent through the air. These calls are much more secure (not 100%, but close). However, the risks associated with these calls are really very simple – privacy and reliability.

Calls placed or answered in public places like a grocery store, mall or park, are not very private. Calls made in a moving vehicle (besides being a driving hazard) could be dropped if you went through a tunnel, a bend in the road or other spot without coverage. Even calls made while walking around a building can be “dropped” due to thick walls, basements or other obstructions. Cell phones also have a built in caller ID function, meaning that a survivor's number might turn up on an advocate's phone or billing record. Conversely, there is also the risk that an advocate's cell number might turn up on a survivor's (or worse, prank caller's) caller ID. Some potential solutions include using the phone like a pager to get a number, and return

the call from a land line and/or informing the survivor (after assessing safety) of the potential privacy issue and let her/him decide how they want to proceed. Beyond cell phones, there are several other old and new technologies that we routinely use, which also have some safety and privacy concerns, including:

- **Cordless land lines** – older and cheaper cordless phones which operate in analog mode, also jeopardizing the privacy of conversations.
- **TTY machines** – can produce a printed record or electronic memory of conversations, and have a risk of impersonation.
- **Answering services, relay operators and interpreters** – might legally be considered “third parties,” or might not understand the importance of maintaining confidentiality, which might endanger survivors’ privacy and safety.
- **Toll free billing records** – your 800 lines may keep a record of callers’ numbers, information which you want to ensure is disposed of properly.
- **Email** – if you offer an email address on your website, or another organization offers your email (say a referral website) – survivors might contact you by email – which is not a secure or confidential form of communication. Some potential solutions to these issues include providing corded land lines (simple “old-school” phones), examining 800 billing records and creating a policy for their disposal, making contracts or agreements with third parties to protect privacy and becoming more familiar with TTY, relay and other technologies for communication with the deaf community.

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