



Choosing Platforms for Virtual Human Services Delivery

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Overview

Choosing and applying technology to provide virtual services has the potential to greatly affect the accessibility and effectiveness of human services programs for participants. With the shift to virtual service delivery due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many programs have been carefully weighing how to select virtual methods to connect to program participants. Based in part on semi-structured interviews with administrators and frontline workers in 18 human services programs and in large part on analysis of other stakeholder conversations, this brief provides a sample of key considerations for choosing and administering virtual platforms. It is important to note virtual human services are a growing and emerging field. This research is an early step to begin to capture preliminary lessons. As programs and communities get more experience, collect more data, and conduct more rigorous evaluations, learnings and practices will evolve. This brief attempts to document lessons learned to date, knowing some may have already evolved and will continue to do so.

Choosing a platform or platforms requires weighing various factors and trade-offs to determine how to best serve participants, including ensuring equitable access to effective services. These decisions have the potential to either mitigate or exacerbate existing inequities in program and system access and quality and participant outcomes, especially under-served populations including racial/ethnic minorities.

ASPE partnered with Mathematica to interview administrators and frontline workers in 18 purposively selected human services programs across the country, including Head Start, home visiting, child welfare, child support, domestic violence, Responsible Fatherhood, workforce, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), housing, elder services, Project Launch, and Community Services Block Grant programs.

In July–August 2020, the team conducted semi-structured interviews with a total of 56 respondents across these 18 programs and with federal and national informants with 11 organizations. In November–December 2020, the team held focus groups with a small sample of program participants. Findings are not representative of the entire country, these program areas, or the full time period of the pandemic.

Participants May Face Limitations and Barriers When Accessing Virtual Platforms

- Administering services via technology can affect equitable access to services, for example by **removing barriers** for some populations who might be more disconnected (e.g. participants with a lack of transportation) but can also potentially **reduce access** for others (e.g. participants in rural areas without broadband).
- **Data limits** and lack of **broadband**, especially for participants in rural areas and other areas that may have limited Internet access, may affect participants' ability to receive services, such as through videoconferencing, especially for participants who rely on phones to access online content, which can affect equitable access to quality services.

- Participants with only phones may not be able to access **video meetings**.
- **Prepaid cellular devices** may have caps on minutes and/or data use.
- Sharing of devices among **multiple users** in a household may limit access by any one person at any one time.
- **Internet bandwidth** may be limited, such as when accessing online documents or attending video calls, especially if other members of a household are online at the same time.
- **Community hotspots** may be inaccessible or in unsafe locations.

Specific Platform Features May Facilitate Service Delivery

- **Smartphones with video capability** can facilitate virtual face-to-face connection.
- **Polling features** can help gauge group perspectives and gather feedback.
- **Screen-sharing** functionality can facilitate multimedia content integration, document review, and demonstrations of how to access and participate in services.
- The ability to **record sessions** can help participants refer back to and access content and resources.
- **Chat features** can allow staff to answer questions and spur group conversations.
- **Translation and transcription** features can support participants with limited English proficiency or who are hard of hearing.
- **Call-in** abilities can provide access for participants who cannot connect to web-based meetings.
- **Breakout room** functionality can help promote small-group participation.

Some Participants or Services May Require Platform Features and Policies That Ensure Privacy, Security, and Confidentiality¹

- Text or message features may enable participants who cannot **safely speak** out loud to communicate with providers.
- Text-based platforms and strategies may increase risk of **impersonation**.
- Messaging services may have end-to-end encryption, but messages may be accessed through **another account or by a third party**.
- Accessing a **hotspot** in a communal space may place confidential participant information at risk of being overheard
- Platform features may allow others to **access** documentation of service use (e.g., call or message logs), potentially compromising participant safety, confidentiality, and personal information.
- Participants may require the ability to **securely access** online documentation and case files.
- Unwanted parties may be able to access and monitor participant information and program participation unless **security features**, such as changing passwords and creating new accounts with more limited access, are used.
- Staff **personal or program-issued mobile phones** may benefit from downloadable applications and related security features.

¹ Privacy, security, and confidentiality considerations were informed by various National Network to End Domestic Violence products, including but not limited to this toolkit: <https://www.techsafety.org/digital-services-toolkit>

Supports and Platform Features Can Help Participants Feel Comfortable and Confident Receiving Virtual Human Services

- The ability to connect with providers through **multiple platforms** may facilitate participants' ability to access and engage with services but asking participants to become familiar with and use multiple platforms and devices may increase burdens on them.
- **How-to guides and training sessions** can help participants acclimate to new platforms, especially by answering frequent questions.
- **Videoconferencing** may or may not be comfortable for individual participants.

Technology, Devices, and Policies Can Support Staff in Delivering Virtual Human Services

- Some agencies may wish to purchase technology that includes the ability to reach participants by **text messaging**.
- Without agency financial support, staff who use personal phones and devices for service delivery might be responsible for **data costs**.
- Technology features that allow staff to **log off** at the end of the day can help reduce burnout.
- Without agency-issued technology or masked numbers, such as Google Voice numbers, staff may have to rely on **personal phones and devices**.
- The ability for staff moderators to **mute participants** who have background noise can help increase focus and facilitate service delivery.
- **Staff technology training** can help prepare staff to troubleshoot participant technology issues.
- Accessing remote platforms, especially those containing sensitive and confidential documents, may require a **Virtual Private Network** for staff.

Conclusion

Ultimately, careful consideration of which combinations of technology and platforms advance participant outcomes can promote accessibility and effectiveness. Participants may benefit from streamlined service delivery or may appreciate a variety of options to connect with programs, which can help some participants overcome existing barriers to accessing services (e.g. lack of transportation, discomfort with privacy protections), potentially increasing service access and program outcome equity. Participants also may benefit from different platforms' ability to coordinate with one another and integrate communication and services if multiple platforms are employed. However, virtual services also risk exacerbating existing inequities, such as by reinforcing the "digital divide" and compounding access and service quality issues for historically marginalized or other under-served populations. Thus, it is important for programs to take careful, individualized approaches to integrating virtual human services. These decisions rely on program-, person- and service-specific considerations as well as other policy, regulatory, and technology considerations not discussed in this brief. The considerations highlighted here, among others, with regard to flexibility, accessibility, confidentiality, and comfort for participants and providers can be weighed and balanced to inform discussions on which platforms and features can best meet participant needs, especially during a crisis.