Social Media Policy Guidelines

Many programs, advocates and survivors use social media to connect with friends, family and colleagues. As an emerging technology and one fraught with many privacy risks, many programs are interested in creating policies that help address how their agency, staff, and survivors use social media. Because social media policies should be specific to the agencies' goals, use, and concerns, a general social media policy template can often be ineffective.

This guide is intended to help you think through the questions and issues you should consider when developing your social media policy. Keeping in mind that an organization's use of social media can differ dramatically from an advocates' use or a survivors' use, therefore this guide is divided along those lines.

Introduction: Your Policy Should Support Your Mission and Goals

Before drafting any policy, it is important to look over your organization's communication goals and mission. Most domestic violence/sexual assault organizations are survivor-centered and their work is meant to empower survivors. Policies should support survivor self-determination and not hinder their autonomy. While creating your policy, it is important to refer back to your organization's goals and mission to ensure that your policy doesn't diverge from them.

In general, your policy should include the following:

- 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 take into account your agency's legal and ethical confidentiality obligations.

- Follow your mission and values. Most domestic violence programs and rape crisis centers promote victim-centered services and value survivor self-determination. Policies should keep in line with those values.

- Support your overall communication goals. Social media can be used to raise awareness about an organization; increase dialogue between your organization and others (stakeholders, supporters, community members,

funders, survivors, etc.); or add your agency's voice and opinions about issues in these spaces.

Creating a Policy for Organization's Use of Social Media

What to post
What you post in social media is a reflection of your organization. It is your voice in these spaces. What you post should support your communication goals. Some organizations see their social media pages as a way to showcase their organization and activities. In that case, their policy may say that they only post activities that their organization supports or is involved in. Some organizations may see that their social media pages are 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 organization provides.

Responding to opposing views
Responding to opposing views, negative and harmful rants, or blatant inaccuracies are issues that many programs 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 agency's strategy, grounded in your mission, vision, and media goals.

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

"Friending," "liking," or "following" others
Some organizations may want a set of criteria to determine who they "friend," "like," or "follow" on social media. Think about the information that you share through social network and whether it's appropriate to share that with the person who wants to join your network. If your program 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.

Content guidelines
In addition to policies that address opposing views, your organization 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 organization'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.

Posting about survivors
Social media, by its very nature, is public and can quickly become personal. Organizations and staff should never post specific survivors or non-public domestic violence/sexual violence incidences as this may reveal the identity of the survivor and violate her/his confidentiality. Be purposeful and strategic when posting information about private events, such as date and time of support group. 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
Organizations should have policies on posting pictures or images of staff, conference attendees or speakers on their social media sites. Organizations should always have permission from individuals or, if that's not possible, offer clear and upfront notice about where a picture or video will be posted and allow people to choose not to be in the frame.

Survivors posting on agency social media
There should be policy to address how to engage with individuals to protect privacy and outline expectations about information sharing. Survivors will reach out for help or tell their stories on programs' social media pages. Some programs feel that allowing survivors to share their stories on their sites can be empowering, while others worry that survivors sharing personal information on a public page might cause serious problems for the survivor. Wherever your

organization 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 posted 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 presence to be and how much oversight you want over your social media accounts. Some organizations have a very strict policy on what transpires on their pages, which means they need staff to monitor comments and posts. Many programs don't have the capacity to have their staff spend a significant amount time cultivating and engaging with their social media followers. Your policy should reflect the level of media engagement that is appropriate for your circumstances. For example, if you don't have the staff monitor every post and comment, you may decide to turn off that feature or have a loose policy to managing 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 does not have safety and privacy mechanisms to ensure a safe and protected venue for programs to provide direct advocacy with 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.

Creating a Policy for Advocates' Use of Social Media

In general, organizations should have few policies around advocates' personal use. Except in certain specific instances, what advocates do on their own time with their own social media engagement is outside the boundaries of what programs can enforce.

Advocates engaging with survivors

Programs can have policies around Board and staff personal use of social media as it relates to engaging with survivors receiving services from your program. Advocates should not "friend" or "follow" survivors they are working with or 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 would violate the privacy of the survivor.

Advocates' social media use as it relates to the organization
Some organizations may want policies in place around employees' interactions with the program or other professional colleagues through social networks. However these policies should follow the organization's general HR policies and procedures. Some organizations have policies that instructs if staff list the organization as their place of employment, they have to follow certain guidelines about what they can and cannot post; if they do not list the organization as their employer, they have more freedom over what they say.

Using social media during work hours
Policies around staff's use of personal social media during work hours should follow the organization's general guidelines regarding staff checking personal email and personal cell phones during work hours. If you have a policy that stipulates staff is not allowed to access personal social media accounts during work hours, keep in mind that many social media accounts require staff to log into their personal social media account in order to access the organization's social media page, and policies should address this issue as well.

Creating a Policy for Survivors' Use of Social Media

The organization's role in survivors' use of social media should be limited to ensuring that the survivor is aware of safety and privacy risks and strategies around using social media. Programs should not create policies that impede autonomy and limit access to an individual's support network.

Allow social media in shelters or programs
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. We don't recommend that shelters or programs ban personal use of social media

as a method of controlling what survivors share, on their own personal pages or who they communicate with.

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

Education
Policies should incorporate education on social media privacy, safety, and potential legal consequences of their online activity. In general, programs should educate survivors on 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.