

# Telecounseling 101

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In 2017, PCAR coordinated a pilot project with five local rape crisis centers to measure the effectiveness of using telecounseling with survivors. While there were some issues with the platform we used, as well as different levels of satisfaction among counselors and clients, we learned that telecounseling *can* work with survivors.

Below are some answers to questions you may have if you choose to utilize telecounseling:

## **What telecounseling platform should we use?**

We recommend using [doxy.me](https://doxy.me) – which is a free and secure platform. There is no software to download, and it works via an internet browser and is available on desktops, tablets, and smartphones. This is *not* the same platform we utilized during the pilot project.

## **Why would we want to use telecounseling?**

Telecounseling is a tool that can help improve access and continuity of care for survivors. Engaging in counseling services from a distance can reduce travel costs for both clients and centers and provide an alternative option for clients who have scheduling challenges or are unable to travel. If discussed in advance with clients, telecounseling can be used in the event of inclement weather or during other emergencies.

## **Who can use telecounseling?**

We recommend using telecounseling for clients or significant others ages 14 and above. As long as clients have access to the required technology, they can use it. We recommend doing a test session with a client to make sure the technology works.

## **What should we do if the technology stops working mid-session?**

You should prepare a back-up plan with clients in advance. Make sure you have the client's phone number and confirm that it is okay to call that number if you lose connection.

## **What is being done to address confidentiality issues?**

[doxy.me](https://doxy.me) is a secure and encrypted platform that is HIPAA compliant. We have done extensive research to ensure client's personal information is safely secured. Counselors will be advised that best practice is to ask clients at the beginning of each session to inform them of their location and if anyone else is nearby that may be able to hear their conversation. If clients are worried about partners or family members sitting in the room off camera without the client's consent, counselors will be advised to create a code phrase that informs the counselor to end the session in a discreet way. Clients will be asked to not record the session either via audio or video.

## **What is done to address liability and safety issues (i.e., a client says they are going to self-harm and then disconnects the call, or actually does self-harm in front of the counselor)?**

Before clients can use telecounseling, they should meet with their counselor to discuss this method of counseling in-depth and sign an informed consent form. Part of the informed consent form states that if

a life threatening medical emergency were to occur, a counselor has the right to disclose information related to the medical emergency. In this situation, a counselor would call 911 and give the address of the client's location. In regards to self-harming behaviors, the informed consent form also explains that the center is governed by laws of the state with regard to counseling, mandated reporting, and confidentiality. Each center should already be explaining the limits to confidentiality during intake, including exceptions to confidentiality being made if a client is a threat to themselves or others. If self-harming behaviors were to occur during the session, counselors would follow the same protocol they have at their centers by contacting the appropriate authorities. During intake, or over the course of the counseling relationship, if the counselor feels telecounseling is not in the client's best interests (due to self-harming behaviors or for other reasons), they may make the decision for the client to continue in-person services.

**Can we provide telecounseling services to a client in another state?**

No. It is illegal for licensed professionals (i.e. LSW, LCP) to practice when a client is in another state (without advanced permission from the licensing board of that state). The laws are unclear if unlicensed counseling professionals are able to do so. Due to mandated reporting laws in PA and sexual assault counselor's confidentiality statute, it is not in a client's best interest to receive services while they are in another state.