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Project: 101049100: Protection of victims of gender-based violence - response to pandemic challenges – RISKFREE

DELIVERABLE 2.5

PROTOCOL FOR ON-LINE COUNSELLING



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Introduction

This Protocol for online counseling was developed within the project "Protection of victims of gender-based violence – response to pandemic challenges (RISKFREE)" financed by the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values program (CERV) of the European Commission and which is being implemented from 15 April 2022 to 14 April 2024. The project is implemented in partnership with organizations from four other countries: The Union of Women Associations of Heraklion - UWAH (Greece), Association for Nonviolent Communication - DNK (Slovenia), Fenestra (Slovakia) and the Women for Women Together Against Violence Association - NANE (Hungary). The purpose of the project is to contribute to the improvement of the protection of women from gender-based violence (GBV) by examining the phenomenon of an increased level of risk for women survivors of violence in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Along with research, as part of the project, a risk assessment protocol and methodology will be developed to ensure the continuity of service provision to women who survived violence during the pandemic. The capacities of practitioners who provide support to women survivors of violence will be further improved through their participation in trainings on risk assessment methodology that will be conducted by members of partner organizations in their respective countries. Finally, public awareness campaigns will be conducted in all countries involved in the project with the aim of promoting zero tolerance towards gender-based violence against women and informing women how to seek help.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought many significant changes to our daily functioning. Taking in consideration limitations in our work with women survivors of violence due to restrictions imposed by the pandemic we had to find alternative ways of providing support. For that purpose, we adjusted our work in the form of conducting online counseling or remote counseling.

Online counseling or remote counseling and support is a customized counseling and support program for women who have survived violence and sought help from a Counseling Center run by a women's organization.

This protocol applies to:

- The work of counselors who manage clients' cases and provide them with advice, support and help with practicalities
- The work of external associates, psychologists and lawyers who provide professional counseling and with whom clients come into contact thanks to the afore mentioned counselors. Counselors, in agreement with the clients, arrange consultation dates with a psychologist or a lawyer and define communication channels in accordance with the client's possibilities and needs.

The goal of this document is to further build the capacity of project partners and external collaborators in adapting their work to the conditions of the Covid-19 pandemic or any similar emergency situation, in order to maintain our work's continuity and accessibility for GBV survivors who turn to us for help due to the violence they have experienced. Furthermore, the help and support provided remotely needs to be safe with safety of women being a top priority. For that purpose, in this document we gathered relevant information on devices and equipment for communication, space of counseling, as well as applications that can be used for conducting counseling. The document also refers to other



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technical and security issues in the process of counseling, as well as the protection of both sides involved in the online counseling process and counselling competencies in an online setting.

Devices and equipment for communication

For online counseling, it is important to use official devices whenever possible. All devices used for counseling must be regularly updated so that the applications used are compatible with new operating systems. For this, it is necessary to use newer devices that support this option. Apart from that, the device used for remote counselling should also use adequate anti-virus protection and software.

We know from experience that women who turn to us for help often do not have the possibility to use smartphones or computers, so talking to them is done via a landline or mobile phone. Some of our clients are older and have poor command of technology, so we exclusively communicate with them via landline or mobile phone. With those clients we kept using these communication channels in the agreed time slots.

If private devices are used for counseling, it is important:

- To not save client data (private information, messages) on the device
- To lock devices with a code
- To not share devices with family members or other people

Equipment required for online counseling:

- Device (computer, laptop, or smartphone) which allows for video calls, ideally with built-in camera
- Camera (if not already built in the computer)
- Headphones, to increase the confidentiality of the content
- A smartphone (with a camera)
- Stable internet connection

Space for counseling

It is optimal to organize conversations/counseling from official premises when possible. If this is not possible due to health reasons and counseling is carried out in a private space (from the counsellor's home), it is necessary:

- to provide a designated space where there are no other people, thus guaranteeing the privacy of the conversation;
- to ensure an uninterrupted conversation that will not be interrupted by the entrance of other household members;
- to use headphones to additionally protect the client's privacy during the counseling session;
- in the case of a video call, to protect our own private space by placing a background, and to reduce the environment's details to a minimum so as not to disturb the counseling process;



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- to keep all counseling information in a protected document to which none of the other household members have access, and to transfer all information to a business device as soon as possible.

Applications for conducting counseling

A video call is the closest substitute to in person counseling because it provides the next most significant interpersonal contact and should be used whenever possible.

It is necessary to make the clients aware of the risks related to data protection when using a public wi-fi network, and advise them to use a private internet connection whenever possible. If it is only possible to use a public Wi-Fi network, it must be a network protected by a password.

Here we offer a list of the applications we use in our work and their characteristics:

Zoom

- Enables one-on-one or group video call;
- allows message exchange (only) within a call;
- end to end encryption (a method of secure communication that prevents third parties from accessing data while it's transferred from one end system or device to another) needs to be requested;
- there is a free and a paid version, the free one has a call duration limit of 40 minutes;
- does require most users to install the application and create an account to access the meeting. However, in such a case, it is necessary to download a file for connecting to the meeting, which needs to be taken into consideration when assessing the safety of women in relation to the device they use for remote counseling (e.g., a home PC the abusive partner has access to).
- More data on Using Zoom: Safety, Privacy, and Confidentiality Considerations <https://www.techsafety.org/using-zoom>

Skype

- Enables one-on-one or group video call;
- enables message exchange;
- offers end to end encryption only when selecting "private conversation" option;
- does not require creating an account and installing the application for some browsers, does not require entering a phone number, only a name (which can also be a pseudonym)
- there is a free and a paid version;
- risks related to the level of security and personal data protection cannot be ruled out;
- More data on using Skype and security: <https://support.skype.com/en/skype/all/privacy-security/privacy-settings/>

Viber

- Enables one-on-one or group video call;
- enables message exchange;
- end to end encryption is available automatically;
- requires creating an account and installing the application;



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- free application;
- there is no independent audit of message security
- more data on using Viber and security: <https://www.viber.com/en/security/>

WhatsApp

- Enables one-on-one or group video call;
- enables message exchange;
- end to end encryption is available automatically;
- requires creating an account and installing the application;
- free application;
- risks related to the level of security and personal data protection cannot be ruled out;
- more on using WhatsApp and security: <https://faq.whatsapp.com/> and <https://www.whatsapp.com/privacy>

MS Teams

- enables one-on-one or group video call;
- does not require creating an account or downloading and using the application, women can connect via a browser using the link sent by the counsellor, which can be easier for women who are not tech savvy or who find it safer not to have an app installed in their phone or device they use;
- uses MS Windows encryption and extra end-to-end encryption of one-on-one calls can be set up in privacy settings;
- the paid version, if used by a counselling center, uses more advanced protection;
- more on using MS Teams and security: <https://learn.microsoft.com/en-us/microsoftteams/teams-security-guide>

The choice of a particular online or video call application should be based not only on the woman's possibilities or needs, but should be first and foremost informed by risk assessment conducted with her in order to determine the risks online counselling may pose to her in the context of power and control exercised by her abusive partner and its specific dynamic.

Before the start of counseling, it is necessary to figure out how the chosen application works so that we can provide the clients with the necessary instructions for use. For instance, we can create screen shots of the whole process of connecting and setting up the chosen app on various devices and use it to compile a brief and understandable set-up manual if needed.

For security reasons, it is recommended to use applications that do not require installing the application on the device, creating an account or entering personal data. This especially applies to situations in which the client is a woman who is still in potential danger, since the abuser could monitor her activities on the internet.



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Confidentiality and personal data protection

During a pandemic or a similar crisis that makes face-to-face contact difficult or impossible, a counselling center may need to deal with women who have never come to the counselling center in person and need help and support. In such case, special consideration must be given to confidentiality and personal data protection in the context of online counselling.

Women's support services need, therefore, to develop a confidentiality and personal data waiver for the purposes of online counselling, as well as agree on the safest way for the woman to read it and express her consent with the confidentiality and personal data protection. The particular choice of how to go through this process with a client in a way that is safe may depend on the possibilities and the situation of individual women. Women's support services should develop clear guidelines for this procedure.

Preparing for counseling

Online counseling should be agreed with the client in advance. This agreement is made by the case manager, the counselor who arranges the appointment. It would be preferable for the first interview to take place in person. If this is not possible, the interview can be conducted over the phone or via some other communication platform.

It is important to explain to the client that online counseling is arranged separately, and that she can contact us by phone for any additional problems and needs.

The client's safety is of utmost importance; therefore, it is necessary to check with her whether the conditions for carrying out a safe conversation are in place, either while she is at her house or at another location. If these conditions are met, other details can be agreed upon.

At the preliminary interview, it is necessary to check:

- via which application the client is able to and wants to access counseling (video or audio call), then proceed to explain the advantages and disadvantages of each option and inform her, if necessary, how to access the application;
- it is important to inform client to use a safer computer, if abuser had or has access to client's computer, he might be monitoring her computer activities;
- whether the client has a stable internet connection;
- whether the client has secured a safe space from which she can attend counseling;
- whether the client understands why we conduct online counseling.

In case a client suspects that the abuser can access her email or instant messaging (IM), advise her to consider creating additional email/IM accounts on a safer computer. It is important not to create or check this new email/IM from a computer the abuser could access, in case it is monitored.

In case the client is worried that someone will access her browsing history and thus see that a certain application has been accessed, we can help her to activate private mode/incognito tab/private window by clicking on the three dots/lines that are usually found in the upper right side of the browser. By clicking on that option, a new window to access the application will open up. This way there will be no record of her access to the chat link.



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If an online consultation will take place via application, certain technical difficulties may occur during the conversation, so it is necessary to agree on the following points with the client:

- If it is not possible to establish a connection via application, define other ways to get in touch (call or message the client, or wait for her to call);
- If during the counseling session the connection is interrupted, define the method in which contact will be re-established - via application, message or phone call;
- If the video communication is interrupted due to technical or other problems, define how the counseling session could continue (audio or by trying to establish a video connection again);
- Agree on a safety sign indicating the end of the conversation if the client's safety is threatened due to the entry of a third person into the client's or counselor's space;
- If client is concerned that someone is monitoring her computer, tablet, or mobile device, it would be safer, if possible, to use a different device that abuser hasn't had physical or remote access to in the past, and doesn't have access to
- For the client's safety, the conversation shall not be recorded by either party.

It is necessary to have the client's phone number at hand in case of an unplanned interruption of the conversation, regardless of which communication channel is used.

It is important to make sure that the client:

- is safe and alone in the space in which she participates in the counseling session;
- is reminded of the agreed safety sign to end the conversation in case of danger.

If another person will be present with the client at the time of counseling, it is necessary to inform the counselor beforehand, and it is also necessary that all parties have consented to this. The counselor needs to inform the client if another person is present in her space during the counseling, and both parties need to agree to the participation of a third person in the counseling.

It is useful to have a checklist of the points mentioned above to look at before starting with the counseling session.

Counseling via email and chat

Email and chat services are specific written forms of online counseling to be considered at women's organizations to help victims of abuse, complementing but not substituting other forms. Their advantages and disadvantages shall be carefully taken into account in terms of security, time, rapport, and communication effectiveness.

Chat

Chat is a synchronous form of written conversation. Establishing a chat support service might be a reasonable response to the changing situation of women in abusive relationships during any public health crisis like the Covid-19 pandemic.¹ It offers an alternative platform for women who are locked in together with the abuser and cannot make calls but have private internet access. Counselors need

¹ <https://wave-network.org/covid-19-resources-for-womens-specialist-support-services-womens-organisations/>



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to have experience in other forms of counseling and get specific training about written support conversation and about its technical background.

Among the options for building up a chat platform, the most secure and effective way is to use browser-based chat services² and a platform directly available through the website of the women's organization. To ensure counselors' presence, the chat service is available in a dedicated time slot (for example, 2 hours a week as a start). Some platforms need registration while others do not; the optimal balance between accessibility and security shall always be considered. Without registration, some clients might enter the platform without engaging in actual communication. In any case, security is of utmost importance, and the risk of the abuser's intervention shall be minimized. A useful feature is a quick exit button, which allows for the client to close the page at any time while also deleting the site from her browsing history. It also serves the client's interest if the conversation record is automatically deleted from the system in a few hours. Before engaging in the chat exchange, the client shall be warned with a short note on the platform about security measures, including suggestions on how to avoid the abuser's control.

Chat support requires specific communication skills, given that it lacks visual clues and requires more time. The conversation unfolds slower, and there is a time delay between sending the message and receiving the answer. The counselor shall try to prevent overlapping messages. Also, a time limit (e.g., 60 mins) might seem necessary to facilitate effectivity. Given the high level of anonymity, the chat service is more accessible than other forms. For many, it is difficult to call a helpline, therefore writing anonymously about sensitive topics might be easier. Some counsellors saw a greater ratio of serious cases of violence reported in chat than in phone conversations. Chat support might however enable situations of identity abuse, where it is hard to check if the person is really a survivor. Establishing rapport, maintaining emotional connection, and giving reactions (including "active listening") all need to be expressed in writing. Therefore, it might be much more difficult compared to in-person counseling, especially in case of suicidal and crisis topics. The client might have poorer writing competencies and/or may use expressions specific to youth subculture. The counselor needs to pay attention to the possible misunderstandings which the use of written and informal language (as well as emojis) can create. Clear and straightforward communication, emotional bracketing and descriptive immediacy are the main suggested techniques.³

Email

Email support can be complementary to other, visual forms of counseling if they are not available for the client, or if she prefers not to talk (because of the proximity of the abuser, or of certain sensitive topics). The most important feature of emailing is the storage of messages in the system. It makes it easier to get back to the topic in case of a long-term support relationship consisting of several exchanges; however, it raises security concerns regarding the abuser's access to the client's privacy.

² <https://www.techsafety.org/chat-best-practices>

³ DIS.CO (Development of "at a distance" counseling skills for professionals in the field of counseling women victims of violence or abuse) (2018): Training Curriculum on Counseling at a Distance when working with women victims of Domestic or Sexual Violence or Abuse, pp.21.

<https://discoprojectcom.wordpress.com/>



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Most mail systems have basic security settings. In the response emails to the clients, the security steps suggested to avoid any type of online violence can be highlighted. Email also allows the direct sharing of relevant informational material, websites, detailed written explanations. This option is often unavailable in chat for security reasons, and such information can be lost during a helpline conversation if, for example, the caller does not write it down or misunderstands it.

Counseling via email entails similar challenges of written communication as in the case of chat services discussed above. The two main differences concern asynchronicity and message archiving. Contrary to both video calls and chat conversations, emailing is asynchronous: there is always a time lag between question and answer, which means less opportunity to realize a misunderstanding and react to it. However, clients typically use a more formal language compared to the chat. To increase effectivity both timewise and in quality, templates can be used for typical answer categories. Such sample responses written on the basis of recurring themes allow for quality assurance, so that the standard knowledge available on a given topic (e.g., child custody, divorce, the nature of the abusive relationship, different forms of violence, etc.), supplemented with personalized information, reaches the client much more quickly and efficiently.

For the purpose of email counseling, as well as sending or receiving links and documents, it may be safer for the client to create a separate email address that she will use only to communicate about her situation in relation to the violence she is experiencing. The e-mail address should be set up with a provider different from the one the client standardly uses and it should not contain the client's name or commonly known nickname(s), her date of birth or other data making it easy to recognize it is her email address.

Conversation stages

A model consisting of four phases forms the basis of our work. It can be used as a guide for understanding the specific areas covered by our intervention and its application. The four steps are:

1. Establishing familiarity and trust
2. Clarifying and defining the situation
3. Examining alternatives
4. Conclusion

Counselling competencies in an online setting

Online counseling, even in a synchronous video call format, can entail special challenges in terms of the support relationship. Support skills in in-person contact do not automatically translate into online therapeutic skills. Because of the format, boundary issues between the counsellor and the client might emerge. The flexibility of location and time means a loss in the counsellor's control; it might lead to communication in inappropriate locations or at odd times, for example when the counsellor is ill or on holiday, or in settings where the client is not alone. Having a look into the other's personal space via the camera, seeing the woman's family members might create a false sense of familiarity and involvement on both sides. The client might expect constant availability or she might misunderstand



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the nature of the relationship with the counsellor. The counsellor needs to pay attention to the time frames and boundaries in general.⁴

Sending links and documents

If the client is sent a link to establish a connection, it is recommended to use official devices, phone numbers and an official e-mail address. This way, personal protection of counselors is taken care of and professional boundaries are set. Self-care is one of the basic principles of providing services to women who have survived violence and it contributes to reducing cases of burnout in counselors.

If, during counseling, it is necessary for the client to submit certain documentation, it is recommended to use the official e-mail address of the organization or the official e-mail address of the counseling service, as well as to send a paper copy of the document to the organization's address.

Data on the client can only be collected on the condition that she has given her consent. At the first online consultation, it is possible to give consent orally. It is important that the client approves the recording of data for the whole duration of the consultation. If the client does not agree to data being collected, we only make note that the counseling took place, along with basic information about the service provided.

Storage of documents and contacts

Warn the client that, for her own safety, she does not store documents or our contact numbers on her own computer and/or mobile phone. It is recommended to open a personal web mail box (e.g., Google, Yahoo, etc.) which will be protected with a password that only she knows. It is recommended to send all documents and information to yourself by email. Also, store our contacts in the Contact tab of the web mail box.

End of counseling session

Finally, it is necessary to check with the client:

- whether she wants to delete the connection link that was sent to her from her search history, and inform her how to do it if necessary;
- whether she was satisfied with this type of service and whether she wants to continue counseling with the same application.

⁴<https://www.techsafety.org/text-best-practices>; DIS.CO (Development of "at a distance" counseling skills for professionals in the field of counseling women victims of violence or abuse) (2018): Training Curriculum on Counseling at a Distance when working with women victims of Domestic or Sexual Violence or Abuse, p.20; Julia Stoll, Jonas Adrian Müller and Manuel Trachsel: Ethical Issues in Online Psychotherapy: A Narrative Review. Front. Psychiatry, 11 February 2020, Sec. Psychological Therapies, Volume 10 - 2019. <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsy.2019.00993/full>; East Metro Youth Services (Canada): Online counselling: A review of the literature. Prepared by: Ilene Shiller, MSW, RSW. April 2009



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Instructions for deleting browsing history

We shall consider that the specific steps to delete browsing history might change over time. For up-to-date instructions the best is to consult a website, for example: https://harvard.service-now.com/ithelp?id=kb_article&sys_id=e934a5cf6fc9a204a3a79b9eae3ee4bf#firefox

- Chrome – Open Chrome on the computer. In the upper right corner, click More (three dots). Then click History and then History. Check the box of each item you want to remove from the browsing history, click Delete in the upper right corner, then confirm by clicking Remove.
- Microsoft Edge – Select Settings and more - Settings, Privacy, searches and services. In the Delete browsing data section, select the item Choose what to delete, and after selecting, click on Remove now.
- Mozilla Firefox – At the top of the Firefox window, click on the Tools menu and select Clear Recent History.
- Safari – click the bookmark icon, it looks like an open book, select the bookmarks tab, it looks like an open book, then click "History" at the top of the screen on a laptop or at the bottom of the screen on a mobile phone, click the "Delete" button, then choose one of the following options: last hour, today, today and yesterday or all time.

More information on Steps to Increasing Your Browser Privacy: In-Browser Settings on link <https://nnedv.org/resources/?mdocs-cat=mdocs-cat-8#>

Removing a Password from a Browser's Saved Password List

It is important to warn the client that by deleting the history, we do not also remove the passwords saved on the computer.

Instructions for removing a saved password from a browser:

- Chrome – Open the Chrome menu using the button on the far right of the browser toolbar (three lines). Choose the Settings menu option. Click the Show advanced settings. In the "Passwords and forms" section, click the Manage passwords link. In the Passwords dialog hover over the site whose password you'd like to remove and click the X that appears.
- Microsoft Edge – To delete individual passwords: Select the three-dot menu icon in the top-right corner. Select the Settings option from the dropdown menu. Select Profiles tab from the Settings menu in the left column. In the Profiles tab, click the Passwords option to view the saved passwords for your user profile. Under the Profiles/Passwords tab menu, you will find a list of your saved passwords under the Saved Passwords category. Select and remove the passwords you would like deleted.

To delete all saved passwords: Open the Tools menu. Select Internet Options. Click Content. Under AutoComplete, click Settings then click Delete AutoComplete history...

- Mozilla Firefox – Windows: Click the menu button and choose Preferences. Switch to the Security tab. Click on Saved Logins.... To eliminate all existing saved passwords, click Remove all. To eliminate specific saved passwords, locate the site within the Site column and click on it once to highlight it in blue. Then click the Remove button below.



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Mac OS X: In the menu bar, open the Firefox menu. Select Preferences. Switch to the Security tab. Click on Saved Passwords. To eliminate all existing saved passwords, click Remove all. To eliminate specific saved passwords, click View Saved Passwords and delete just those you want.

- Safari – Open the Safari menu. Select Preferences. Switch to the Autofill tab. Click the Edit button for Usernames and Passwords. Delete the entry that corresponds with weblogin.bu.edu.

More information on How to Remove a Saved Password from a Browser on link:
<https://www.bu.edu/tech/services/cccs/desktop/software/troubleshooting/removing-password-from-browsers-saved-password-list/>

If technical problems occur during counseling, it is necessary to check why they happened and eliminate any difficulties to prevent them from happening again. If this is not possible, consult with an expert or find alternative solutions for providing the service.

It is important to make sure that for the entire duration of each counseling session the client feels safe, and that the relationship between her and the counselor is stimulating and reliable. All the principles that are applied in the feminist practice of face-to-face counseling are also applied in online counseling and support.



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Short Step-by-Step Guide in switching program to providing Digital Service Platforms During COVID-19:

Step 1: Identify what need you are trying to meet and your capacity to provide the service

If your internet service is spotty or survivors are quarantined/sheltering at home with the abuser, a phone or text hotline might be more helpful. If your program serves people with disabilities, using a chat tool that isn't compatible with screen-readers could mean some survivors won't be able to access your services. It is important to know your community's needs and the tool's features.

Step 2: Determine your program's budget and staffing capacity to operate digital services

Your program should take into account any additional costs like increasing your program's internet bandwidth, providing extra layers of security to ensure confidentiality, any extra IT support that may be needed, and covering staff time to keep a chat, text, or video service running. It's also important to assess the technological capacity of the staff to implement the service.

Step 3: Decide what ways your program will communicate (video, chat, or text)

Video tools can help provide contextual cues that aren't available in chat or text, like body language and facial expression. They can also be used for support groups, following the same format as in-person support groups, being scheduled in advance for a set period of time.

Online Chat may be a practical tool for survivors who want to have quick conversations with someone, who may not have a strong internet bandwidth, or for when it may not be safe to have a conversation out loud.

Texting may be a great option for survivors, as long as they feel like it's a safe method to communicate. Threads may be saved on their phone, and could potentially identify that they are seeking help.

Phone Calls can be incredibly helpful for survivors, or for bystanders seeking support services for a family member or friend. They also offer more privacy if the person doesn't feel comfortable writing out their questions or concerns in ways that may later be seen by others.

Step 4: Assess the Tools

Is the tool designed in a way that aligns with the needs of your community, your staff's capacity to operate, and your confidentiality obligations? If you have IT staff, they should be able to help consider if the tool has end-to-end encryption, if data is stored and where, and risks to breaches and misuse.

Step 5: Implementation

- A. Test it and test it again. You'll need to test the software works to see how it works on different devices
- B. Check the settings and make sure they prioritize privacy
- C. Train staff
- D. Provide services



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Resources

Resources from NNEDV (National Network to End Domestic Violence) website

<https://nnedv.org/resources/?mdocs-cat=mdocs-cat-8#content>

<https://www.techsafety.org/digital-services-toolkit>

<https://www.techsafety.org/needs-assessment-2021>

<https://toolkit.sharecert.rs/sr/Learn/Issue/2>

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CENTAR ZA ŽENE ŽRTVE RATA - ROSA



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