



A FIELD GUIDE FOR PROGRAM LEADERS AND SUPERVISORS

Running Peer Support Online, Safely

Boundaries, channels, response times, and crisis moments in digital contact

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Online is still peer support

Much of peer support now happens through messages, calls, and video. For many young people, that's where they're most comfortable reaching out.

The role doesn't change online. The risks do: blurred hours, personal devices, messages that arrive in the middle of the night, and crisis moments when you can't see where someone is. This guide covers how programs and supervisors can plan for them.

Same role. Different risks. Plan for both.



Secure channels, not personal phones

Online contact should run through a channel your organization provides and controls. Never through a peer's personal phone or accounts.

The organization controls accounts	It opens and closes access, so contact ends when a relationship or job ends.
Records stay with the program	Contact history doesn't leave when a peer leaves.
Supervisors see concerns, not conversations	Supervisors can see check-ins and flagged concerns without reading private conversations between peers and young people.
Peers can flag a concern	A peer can bring a concern to their supervisor from inside the channel.
Crisis help is within reach	Young people can reach crisis help from inside the channel.
Access is limited by role	People see only what their role requires.
It fits how young people communicate	If it's hard to use, young people will drift back to personal channels.

Which privacy laws apply, and what they require of a platform, depends on your organization, setting, and state. Decide with your attorney. This guide is general information, not legal advice.

Boundaries in digital contact

Digital contact feels casual. That's part of why it works, and part of why boundaries matter.

Hours	Contact happens during set hours, even though messages can arrive anytime.
Tone	Warm and real is good. Keep it professional enough that you'd be comfortable with a supervisor reading it.
Social media	Peers don't follow, friend, or message young people on personal social media.
Screenshots and sharing	Don't screenshot, forward, or share a young person's messages outside the program's records and rules.
Group chats	Avoid informal group chats with young people unless your program has set rules for them.
Personal details	Share lived experience with purpose. Don't share personal contact information.



Ready to turn these boundaries into written policy? Blueprints, step-by-step toolkits for program leaders, are at shareandsolve.app/#blueprints.

Response times

Young people need to know when they'll hear back. Peers need permission not to answer at 2 a.m.

1 Post the hours

Tell young people, in writing and out loud, when their peer is available.

2 Set a response time

Say how quickly they can expect a reply during those hours, and keep to it.

3 Make after-hours clear

Tell young people when their peer will respond, and where to get help right now if they can't wait.

4 Define urgent

Explain what counts as urgent, and that urgent means crisis resources, not waiting for the peer.

EXAMPLE (HYPOTHETICAL)

For example, a peer might tell a young person at their first meeting, and again when they check in: "I'm available during our program hours, and I'll reply then. If you need help right now, call or text 988, or text HOME to 741741. In an emergency, call 911."

Before the first online meeting

A little planning at the start makes hard moments easier later. Federal telehealth guidance for behavioral health offers a useful model that programs can adapt for peer contact.

Location	Know how you'll confirm where the young person is during a video or call. Federal guidance suggests confirming the address “where the patient is located at the time of the visit.” ¹
A nearby contact	Ask for “a family member, friend, or neighbor who is nearby and can offer help in the event of a crisis,” as your program's consent rules allow. ¹
Local resources	Know the local emergency and crisis services near the young person. ¹
If the connection drops	Agree in advance on what happens if a call or video cuts out. ¹
Privacy on their side	Suggest a private space and headphones, and avoiding public Wi-Fi. ²

¹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Telehealth.HHS.gov, “Creating an emergency plan for telebehavioral health” (updated September 18, 2024). telehealth.hhs.gov
² Telehealth.HHS.gov, “Protecting patients' privacy” (updated July 29, 2025). telehealth.hhs.gov

When a crisis happens online

Peers need a clear, practiced sequence for crisis moments online. This page is procedure, not clinical guidance.

1 Stay connected

If a young person says they are thinking about suicide or harming themselves or someone else, stay in contact if you can. Don't promise to keep it secret.

2 Share crisis resources

Give them the numbers below, and encourage them to reach out now.

3 Follow your protocol

Contact your supervisor, on-call, or clinical contact as your organization's escalation protocol requires.

4 If there's immediate danger

Call 911. If you don't know where the young person is, follow your protocol and tell responders what you do know.

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline

Call or text 988, or chat at 988lifeline.org. 24/7, free, and confidential.

Crisis Text Line

Text HOME to 741741. 24/7, free, and confidential.

Emergency

Call 911 if someone is in immediate danger.

Checked on each service's official website on September 25, 2026.

Plan ahead for a dropped connection, an unknown location, and mandated reporting duties, which vary by state. Your clinical leadership and attorney should shape these steps.

Minors, consent, and privacy

The rules for contacting young people online depend on their age, your state, your setting, and your funding. There isn't one answer that fits every program.

Consent

When a parent or guardian must agree to online contact varies by state and setting. Know your rules before contact begins.

What's private

Tell young people at the start what stays private, who can see messages and notes, and what would be shared with a parent or guardian.

Across state lines

A young person may be in another state during a session. Whether that changes any rules is a question for your attorney.

School settings

School-based programs may have additional privacy rules.

This page raises questions rather than answering them, on purpose. Work through them with your attorney before launching online contact.

Documenting online contact

When contact runs through a channel the program controls, it creates a record that stays with the program. Your program still decides what counts as documentation.

What to record	Contacts, check-ins, concerns, and follow-up, in the program's record, not only in a message thread.
Keep it factual	Brief notes about what happened and what's next.
Retention and deletion	Know how long messages and notes are kept, how deletion works, and who can request it, and check that this fits the rules that apply to your program.
Tell young people	Explain that contact through the program's channel is part of the program's records.
Reports	Because the record stays with the program, you can produce reports you can save and share with funders and your board.

Record-keeping rules vary by setting, funder, and state. Decide retention and deletion rules with your attorney.

Supervising online work

Online work is harder to see. Supervision has to be more intentional.

Review, don't surveil	Look at what your policies say supervisors review, such as caseloads, check-ins, and concerns. Supervision isn't reading every word.
Watch the hours	Ask peers in supervision whether they're answering outside set hours, and help them stop.
Talk about digital boundaries	Make online boundaries a regular supervision topic, not only when something goes wrong.
Practice the crisis sequence	Walk through the online crisis steps together, including a dropped connection.
Watch for isolation	Peers who work mostly online can feel cut off. Build in team contact.

Online safety checklist

Use this before launching online peer support, and review it once a year.

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- ☐ All contact runs through a secure channel the organization provides and controls, and supervisors can see concerns without reading private conversations
 - ☐ No peer uses a personal phone, account, or social media for contact
 - ☐ Contact hours and response times are posted and explained
 - ☐ Young people know when their peer will reply, and where to get help after hours
 - ☐ Peers know how to confirm location and a nearby contact, as your rules allow
 - ☐ The online crisis sequence is written, practiced, and approved by clinical leadership
 - ☐ Consent and privacy rules for minors have been reviewed with your attorney
 - ☐ Documentation, retention, and deletion rules are set
 - ☐ Online boundaries are a regular supervision topic
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ABOUT

Share+Solve and Peer Bridge

Share+Solve and Peer Bridge help organizations run their own youth peer support programs. They don't replace your peer supporters, your training, or your program. They give the work you already do a safe, supervised home.

Share+Solve

Where peers and young people connect: messaging, check-ins, goals, and meet-ups, with a one-tap 988 call button on the home screen.

Peer Bridge

Where supervisors see the whole program: caseloads, check-ins, escalations, and program-level reporting.

Private conversations between peers and young people stay between them. Your organization controls its program data, and deletion requests are handled through the platform.

Built by John Dellick, MBA, a nationally recognized peer support professional with nearly a decade in youth peer support and behavioral health.



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