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connecting resettlement experts

Delivering High-Quality Virtual and Information Services (VIS) to Newcomers

Virtual and information services (VIS) are increasingly becoming a part of service provision for newcomers as organizations find innovative ways to connect with clients via technology. The standards we describe below will provide you with guidance for the design, build, launch, and implementation of VIS programming for newcomer clients.

Introduction

In response to several factors—including the shift toward digital platforms prompted by COVID-19, ever-expanding advancements in technology, and newcomer populations that are more tech confident—many resettlement and integration service providers have been exploring innovative approaches to virtual service delivery. Some benefits of virtual service delivery include:

- Greater geographic reach, including access for clients who do not live near in-person services
- Removal of transportation barriers
- Reduced child care barriers

Virtual and information services (VIS) range from human-led virtual assistance—such as caseworkers who support clients via phone, email, text, or video call—to emerging tools like chatbots that respond to common questions. VIS also encompass websites, social media, videos, and other self-guided information services designed to empower clients.

- Opportunities for efficiency (e.g., ability to serve clients by language groups that don't have a high concentration in one area, faster response times on two-way communication)
- On-demand, multilingual content that allows clients to find information, instilling agency
- Asynchronous learning modules that give clients flexibility in their learning
- Reduced costs, in some cases

The steps below will help you deliver high-quality VIS to newcomers across the United States.

Evaluate VIS as a Delivery Model

Technology is an exciting tool that may appeal to funders and is an innovative way to reach clients and reduce barriers. This tool has the potential to add on-demand information to the services you provide, which promotes client agency and reduces costs. While all of these reasons support technology use in service delivery, this doesn't mean you should necessarily start a fully virtual program. In fact, most technology solutions and businesses fail because the solution isn't something people need or can use.[1]

Before you decide to develop a virtual program, take time to define the problem so you can work toward an appropriate solution. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) suggests the following prompts as a framework to create a **problem statement**[2]:

1. So, you know how (user groups) have (this **problem**) because (the reasons).
2. The **implications** are (all consequences if the problem goes unaddressed).
3. The **evidence** includes (all the statistics, descriptive data, and anecdotal evidence that quantify and support your claims above).

For example, a problem statement for a newcomer seeking integration support in a rural area might state:

1. So, you know how newcomers have moved away from city centers and cannot reach resettlement offices because offices are too far away.
2. The implications are newcomers cannot receive needed services and lack ongoing support for their integration.
3. The evidence includes the map of current resettlement offices and the map of immigrant populations.

Once you have a problem statement, you can start to **consider solutions** that may help. Virtual programs or technology solutions may be appropriate, but you need to **evaluate**:

- **How people currently address this problem.** If the current solution is not virtual, consider why. If the current solution is virtual, look at what you can learn from the existing model.
- **What existing technology and systems are in place.** What works, what doesn't, and what would need to be adapted for a virtual setting.
- **How much time is available to develop a solution to the problem.** Some virtual solutions may be quick to set up, but others may require more time.
- **What tradeoffs exist between an in-person program and virtual program to address the problem.** Safety, client reach, barriers, and budget are all important to consider.

After reviewing the above, you may realize a virtual program offering is a viable and optimal solution to explore. Keep an open mind as you move into the next phase of design and start to co-create the solution with various stakeholders.

Gather Stakeholder Input

Early in the design phase, identify stakeholders who will interact with the program and/or technology, and start to gather input to ensure the new proposed service meets their needs.

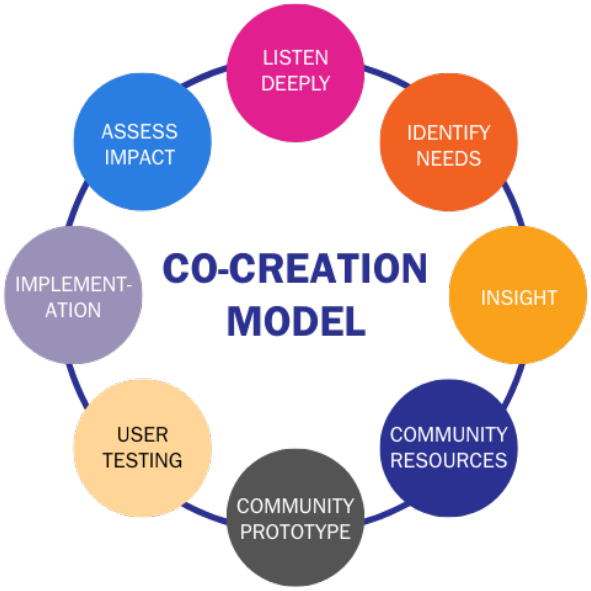
For a comprehensive overview of **stakeholder mapping** to ensure a project includes the right people, see Community Toolbox's Identifying and Analyzing Stakeholders and Their Assets.

Co-creation can help ensure that projects center clients and that the needs of various stakeholder

[1] United Nations Development Programme, *Start with the Need*, Digital Standards, https://www.undp.org/digital/standards/1-start-with-the-need

[2] United Nations Development Programme, *Problem Statement Canvas* https://drive.google.com/file/d/1TfXfqQcuRBeyo_14ZxvBxyzYCGdUEAiG/view

groups are balanced. For further support in **co-creation**, see Switchboard's The Eight Stages of Co-Creation and IDEO's Human-Centered Design Toolkit.



Potential stakeholder groups include the following:

Newcomers

Ask clients about needs, preferences, barriers, and concerns regarding VIS. Switchboard has produced a tool to help you collect relevant data: Client Technology Access and Barriers Survey. Listen deeply during this process.

Developing a **community protype** can help confirm your design reflects what newcomers have shared. Once the prototype is developed, **user testing with newcomers** will help you gain critical insights before launch. During this phase, confirm with newcomers that the solution meets their needs and is easy to use.

After implementation, **seek feedback** from clients to assess the impact of the technology and program. You can obtain client feedback through proactive methods like surveys, focus groups, co-creation workshops, and client councils. For ongoing, open-ended client feedback, email, suggestion forms, and post-service surveys can help programs gather important insights to continually understand program performance, assess impact, and make improvements, as needed. These feedback mechanisms should be clearly identified as part of client rights and responsibilities and/or incorporated into the technology interface.

Staff

As key users, staff must feel comfortable with the tech and be able to easily learn and use the platform. Focus groups and interviews are two common methods to gather input from staff members. This group can offer insight into workflows, flag potential difficulties, and raise important needs during user testing to help identify issues early in the process. Leaders should also encourage staff to share thoughts and feedback throughout the implementation of the virtual program, with a focus on continual improvement.

Funders

Funders often drive portions of a program build, as programs must align with funders' expectations for service quality, compliance, and reporting.

Internal Program Monitors

If your program will receive monitoring from internal sources, include the monitoring team members as stakeholders in this process. They should provide guidance on what data they want to review and, if applicable, how custom reports should appear.

Define the End User

At the outset of the program, it is important to define the **end user** or client to help guide the technology development and implementation. There are at least four specific points to investigate:

Language Needs

Identify the expected language(s) of users at the outset. Technology allows for multi-lingual interfaces but also requires additional time for building, translation, and testing. Knowing the main language needs of the expected users will help you define the project timeline and ensure the platform will meet their needs. **User acceptance testing** for languages other than English should be completed by native speakers of those languages.

General Literacy

The literacy levels of users will also inform technology development and content planning. If the majority of users can read and write in their native language or English, highly text-driven solutions may be appropriate. However, if expected users have lower levels of literacy, different solutions are needed, such

as speech-to-text options, audio for two-way communication, visual graphics, and video content.

Technology Access

Clients' technology access levels are another key factor. If users do not have laptops, smartphones, or other **devices**, a fully web-based platform will not meet their needs. In these cases, telephone or text-based communication may be more appropriate. Another solution is for programs to budget for smartphones, tablets, or other devices for clients.

With more newcomers living in rural areas, **Internet connectivity** may be a significant concern. Ten percent of the U.S. is not covered by 5G[3] and 14.5 million U.S. residents have no broadband access.[4] For those lacking connectivity, bandwidth-heavy offerings like live classes and video streaming may not be accessible and text-based communication and chatbots may be more appropriate. For more solutions, see Switchboard's post on affordable internet access.

Bandwidth is the amount of data that can be sent or received over an Internet connection within a certain amount of time.

Digital Literacy

If expected users have low digital literacy, early support will help improve their access to the platform and user experience. Assessing for ICT access, barriers and preferences can help collect relevant data to inform your decisions (see *Gather Stakeholder Input: Newcomers,* above).

If the data reveals users lack digital literacy, the following Switchboard resources can help build digital literacy into your program offerings:

- Three Steps to Help Empower Refugee and Immigrant Clients Through Digital Literacy
- An A La Carte Guide to Digital Literacy: Comparing Assessment and Curriculum Resources

Prioritize Protection and Safety

Clients may have protection and safety concerns that arise in a virtual setting that they may not face when receiving in-person services. For example, situations of abuse, domestic violence, and trafficking are harder to spot if interactions only occur by phone, text, or video call. Working through acute mental health issues can also be more challenging when the client and staff member are geographically separated.

Your organization should have policies in place to address any crises that may arise with clients or staff members. The Switchboard Critical Incident Response Toolkit can help you develop the policies needed to address these situations.

Since it is possible that any virtual interaction could turn into a crisis, staff should be trained to do the following at the beginning of each interaction:

- Ask who else is with the client at their location (e.g., spouse, children)
- Remind clients of confidentiality policies, with an emphasis on the limits of confidentiality
- Discuss plans to follow up if there are technology issues

In cases of **crisis**, if there is an imminent threat to safety, staff should request the client's current location to contact emergency services. If a mandated report is deemed necessary, staff should request the home address of the child or adult who is at risk. See these Switchboard resources to learn more:

- Psychological First Aid in Resettlement, Asylum and Integration Settings
- De-Escalation in Practice: Strategies for Supporting Newcomers Experiencing Crises
- Suicide Prevention and Safety Planning

Finally, your program should have a plain-language way of sharing information about **client rights and responsibilities, the grievance process, and your**

[3] Ericsson. (n.d.). *North America: A closer look – Ericsson Mobility Report*. https://www.ericsson.com/en/reports-and-papers/mobility-report/closer-look/north-america

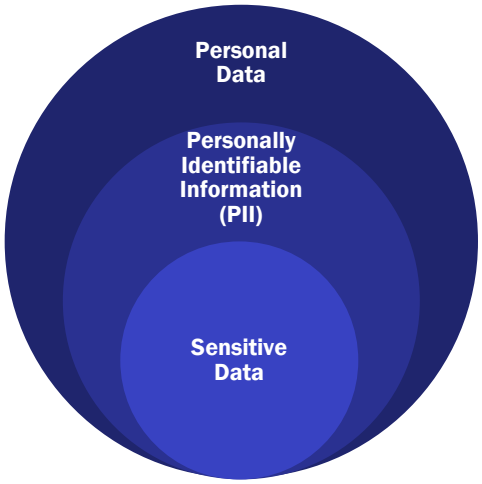
[4] Federal Communications Commission. (2021, January 19). *FCC Annual Broadband Deployment Report Shows Digital Divide is Rapidly Closing*. https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/DOC-369393A1.pdf

privacy policy. Staff members should review this information with participants and obtain their informed consent *before* services are provided. Keep in mind that in virtual settings, a client cannot walk into an office and ask to speak to someone if they have a concern. It is also easy to quickly agree to terms presented online without fully understanding them. This means you may need to give additional attention to rights and responsibilities and other important policies.

Plan for Data Needs

VIS programs frequently handle many types of data, including:

- **Personal data**: any information relating to an identified or identifiable person. Examples include location data and IP addresses.
- **Personally identifiable information (PII)**: data that can be used on its own or with other information to identify a person. Examples include names, addresses, phone numbers, and Social Security numbers.
- **Sensitive data**: a subset of PII that can potentially cause harm if disclosed. Examples include health records, immigration status, and biometric data.



Data Collection

When developing VIS programming, consider:

- **What information is being collected and for what purpose.** Only collect information if there is a legitimate need and the client consents. For example, your program should consider if it is necessary to collect a client's full address or if services could still be delivered effectively with only a zip code or county name.
- **How information is shared**, including documents. Provide a secure, encrypted process for clients to submit documentation. Discourage unsafe data transmission practices, like sending documents by text, and help clients understand why and how to protect their data.

If you are responsible for data collection, see Switchboard's eLearning course Planning for Data Collection and Quality Assurance.

Data Storage

In highly collaborative teams, open file sharing across cloud-based platforms can be an asset. However, those same platforms may not create a secure data storage environment. Organizations should take care to properly segment electronic files or platforms where data is held to ensure only those with an authorized "need to know" can access the data.

As part of the data storage plan, develop a policy for **how data is retained** and when it should be deleted. Check your grant documents to determine the data retention requirements for your programs. If there are future uses for your data, consider if individual-level data is needed or if aggregate data will suffice.

Data Sharing

Sharing data is easy in a virtual environment. Remember that it is essential to obtain a **client's explicit permission**, in writing, that states what data can be shared, for what purpose, and with whom. When sharing data, it is also important to transmit data through secure file sharing arrangements, encrypted email, or other appropriate options.

Third-party Data Processing

Whenever a third-party organization or company will handle, store, or process client data, it is best practice to complete a **risk assessment** prior to engaging. For example, you should assess the company that provides the online case management software that stores your client data and documents. A risk assessment can help identify vulnerabilities or deficiencies that may expose client data to unauthorized parties.

Plan for Operational Needs

Direct Financial Assistance

Direct assistance payments need procedures to request and deliver funds and receive a client signature to acknowledge receipt of payment. You should also consider the speed at which this financial assistance can be provided if a client is in crisis.

Staff Working Remotely

The flexibility of remote work may facilitate working from locations other than home, which raises questions about data privacy and protection. For example, should staff work from coffee shops? Such locations may remove the client's right to privacy, as others may hear or see the virtual interaction. What about working from bedrooms, or rooms where family members are visible? Seeing staff's personal spaces may be uncomfortable for both clients and staff. Provide guidance on appropriate locations where staff can work.

When working outside of an office, staff may have easier access to their personal computers and cell phones. Using personal equipment for work may result in client data being saved outside of organization-controlled systems and open that data up to privacy breaches. You should ensure staff have the equipment needed to perform work remotely and are up to date on best practices for data protection and client privacy.

Document the Build

Documentation of the technology build is essential for short-term functionality and long-term sustainability. This important step cannot be skipped, as it:

- Enables future developers and team members to understand how your system works and helps with continuity during staff transitions
- Improves compliance by tracking data flows, user permissions, and security protocols
- Facilitates quality assurance (QA) to improve functionality and fix bugs
- Makes scaling, modification, and integration of the technology easier

Types of documentation to consider include:

- **System documentation** to help software engineers and other stakeholders understand the underlying parts that create the system. This includes product requirements, user experience design principles, diagrams of the software architecture, system configuration, and maintenance guidance.
- **End user documentation,** which includes help guides, training materials, and diagrams to help users understand workflows. This type of documentation can also include a System Administrators' Guide that outlines user roles, administrative functions, and troubleshooting.

Conclusion

As services for newcomers continue to evolve and include increasingly virtual service delivery, organizations should consider the virtual and information services (VIS) standards and steps discussed in this guide for each design and build. Using the best practices outlined above will improve consistency among virtual programs, strengthen services to clients, and reduce unnecessary risks.

To learn more about Switchboard, visit www.SwitchboardTA.org.

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