

Clinical Social Work Virtual Communication Policy and Best Software Recommendations

FINAL REPORT

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Introduction: COVID-19 and its impact on Social Work Services

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to have a significant impact on individuals, families, groups, and communities. With the current public health directives advising against direct patient care in non-urgent situations, it is essential for social work professionals to exercise all efforts possible to maintain the safety of clients and staff while also ensuring that there is no disruption in service or any breakdown in patient care. Therefore, electronic social work service which has been gaining popularity, has become the only option to ensure continued and safe patient care. As explained in the *Newfoundland and Labrador Association of Social Workers* website,

*“Electronic social work services is defined by the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) Model Regulatory Standards for Technology and Social Work Practice as the use of computers (including the internet, social media, online chat, text, and email) and other electronic means (such as smartphones, landline telephones, and video technology) to (a) provide information to the public, (b) deliver social work services to **clients**, (c) communicate with **clients**, (d) manage confidential information and case records, (e) store and access information about **clients**, and (f) arrange payment for professional services”.*

This section will look at what the current literature which is available have to say about the advantages and disadvantages of virtual communication; what the standards and considerations social workers should ensure when engaging in virtual social work practice; the cyber-security risks raised by virtual social work practice and how to mitigate it; and the steps that social workers need to take in order to ensure effective video conferencing with patients and families.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Virtual Communication

In addition to virtual social work practice becoming a necessity in the current climate, there are also many advantages that comes with it that can be considered for possibly making it a permanent option where possible. Some of the advantages that are suggested in the article titled, “Advantages and Disadvantages of Virtual Communication”, by Jack (2017) include:

- **Convenience:** People or employees can interact with each other from wherever they are without meeting up in person. This reduces frustration that comes from rushing, bad weather, traffic etc.

- **Saves Time and Money:** There is no need for a physical meeting to communicate. Different virtual communication software's allows you to pass across information from wherever you are. This eventually saves time and money.
- **Promotes Flexibility:** This is essential for busy people who are struggling with work and life balance, for example working parents. Virtual communication helps them work from wherever they are, communicate expeditiously, and submit projects on time.
- **Increases Productivity:** When time is saved, convenience is maximized, therefore the best talent is harnessed and flexibility is attained. All these factors increase productivity. Employees become more effective and efficient as well.
- **Easily Contacting Colleagues:** Employees are able to consult each other very easily and fast. There is no need to move from your desk to the other. This saves time too. That is one of the advantages of virtual communication which you can enjoy when connecting with your colleagues.
- **Reduce Need for More Office Space:** Virtual communication eliminates the need to create space for employees who can work from home or wherever they are.
- **Reduce Boredom:** Working from the same place every day contributes to inefficiency among employees. If you can work on a project from anywhere else apart from the office, the change of environment is good for your body and mind, thus reducing boredom.
- **Easily Keeping a Record:** The last advantage of virtual communication is that you only need to click a button and you get to record video calls and audio calls. Your phone keeps a record of instant messages. This is unlike face to face communication where inaccuracies and miscommunication can occur with word of mouth.

The disadvantages of virtual practice which is mentioned by Jack (2017) includes:

- **Technical Problems:** Virtual communication relies on software's, machines, and the internet, which can malfunction at any time. This affects ongoing and scheduled virtual communication endeavors.
- **Absence of Non-verbal Communication:** Some virtual communication techniques, like voice calls do not accommodate faces of people. Therefore, it is easy to mistake a sarcastic comment for a genuine one, unless you are very keen. This causes miscommunication.

- **Some Functions Require Face-to-face Communication:** Interacting virtually does not solve all communication needs, for instance during crisis. That is why face-to-face conversations will never get outdated.

Jack (2017) shows that even though there are some disadvantages with virtual practice, there seems to be more advantages with it. Therefore, continuation of virtual social work practice where it is possible to do so should be considered by CASW and by employers. The next section talks about the standards and consideration that social workers engaging in virtual social work practice should watch for in order to ensure that virtual social work practice is grounded in the values, ethics, and principles of the social work profession.

Standards and Considerations for Social Workers engaging in Virtual Social Work Practice

Evely & Powell (2012) explains eight standards that social workers engaging in virtual social work practice should follow in the explanatory document titled, “Standards for Technology use in Social Work Practice”, found on the *Newfoundland and Labrador Association of Social Workers* website. The standards highlighted in the document are informed by the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) Code of Ethics (2005), the CASW Guidelines for Ethical Practice (2005), the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) and the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) Standards for Technology and Social Work Practice (2005), the New Brunswick Association of Social Workers (NBASW) Standards for the Use of Technology in Social Work Practice (2010), and relevant social work and professional literature (Evely & Powell, 2012). Below is a look into seven of the standards that the article talks about which are relevant for clinical social workers to abide by when engaging in virtual social work practice.

Standard 1: Ensure that technology use in social work practice is grounded in the values, ethics, and principles of the social work profession which include: 1) Respect for the Inherent Dignity and Worth of Persons, 2) Pursuit of Social Justice, 3) Service to Humanity, 4) Integrity in Professional Practice, 5) Confidentiality in Professional Practice, and 6) Competence in Professional Practice (Evely & Powell, 2012). Some of the major professional practice issues that social workers engaging in virtual social work practice will face include privacy and confidentiality, informed consent, and dual and multiple relationships. Therefore, a reflection on

each of the values outlined in the CASW Code of Ethics (2005) is important in resolving ethical conflicts that relate to technology in social work practice.

Standard 2: Social workers will need to enhance their knowledge, skills, and abilities in the use of technology to ensure competent and ethical practice. This is in keeping with Value 6: Competence in Professional Practice, of the CASW Code of Ethics (2005) which states: “social workers strive to maintain and increase their professional knowledge and skill (p.8). Also, the CASW Code of Ethics (2005) outlines that “social workers demonstrate due care for client’s interests and safety by limiting professional practice to areas of demonstrated competence” (p.8). Therefore, social workers who use electronic mediums in the provision of clinical services should only do so once they have the necessary education, skill and competency in the technology and the practice (Evely & Powell, 2012). In addition, although technology can enhance service delivery social workers need to assess the effectiveness and appropriateness of technology mediums and only use technologies that are in the best interests of clients and are in keeping with culturally sensitive practice (Evely & Powell, 2012).

Standard 3: As part of the informed consent process, social workers need to inform clients about the technologies that are being used in the delivery of social work services, including the inherent risks and opportunities associated with it. Some of the specific issues that may need to be addressed include privacy, confidentiality, and risk management strategies. As outlined in the CASW Guidelines for Ethical Practice (2005): “social workers need to take precautions to ensure and maintain the confidentiality of information transmitted to other parties through the use of computers, electronic mail, facsimile machines, telephone answering machines, and other electronic technology. In addition, social workers need to inform clients of the limits to confidentiality that may apply to these forms of communication” (p. 7). Furthermore, social workers need to incorporate risk management strategies and inform clients of precautions that are being taken to minimize potential breaches such as encrypted e-mails, firewalls, and passwords (Evely & Powell, 2012).

Standard 4: Social workers need to document all electronic communications in keeping with agency/organizational policies, ethical standards, and best practice guidelines (Evely & Powell, 2012). Some of the areas that social workers need to be aware of when it comes to documentation and electronic communication is email, phone, and text messages from clients. According to Zur

(2010) phone messages, text messages, and e-mails that have clinical or other significance should be considered part of the clinical record. In addition, when electronic modes of communication are used in practice, it is important that social workers include policies around documentation of electronic communications within the informed consent process. It is important that clients have a clear understanding of how this information is being recorded; allowing them to make decision about what information is communicated electronically (Evely & Powell, 2012).

Standard 5: Social workers have a responsibility to be aware of inter-jurisdictional issues when providing therapy or social work services using electronic technologies. It is important that social workers have an understanding of any regulatory requirements before providing services to clients outside of the province/country in which the social worker resides. It is the responsibility of the social worker to consult with the social work regulatory bodies in the jurisdictions of the client and social worker (Evely & Powell, 2012).

Standard 6: Social workers who use technological approaches to conduct social work research or to gather information/research to inform practice need to do so in a manner that ensures ethical credibility (Evely & Powell, 2012). It is imperative for social workers to validate the credibility of a resource before incorporating it into practice or referring client to the internet site. The NASW/ASWB (2005) outlines some steps that social workers can take when considering research from on-line resources: 1) Establish and verify authorship, 2) Verify the credentials and competencies of the researchers, 3) Explore the validity and limitation of the research, and 4) Consider the accuracy of the reported findings or results.

Standard 7: Social workers need to ensure clear and appropriate boundaries as it pertains to the use of technology in practice. This can include informing clients that communication through emails or phone would not be possible after the service has ended.

In addition to these standards, some other considerations that the Ontario College of Social Worker and Social Service Workers brings up in the news article, “TOP 10 CONSIDERATIONS FOR USING COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY IN PRACTICE”, that social workers engaging in virtual social work practice should reflect on include:

- Are you able to engage meaningfully with your clients using communication technology? Some clients may not be familiar with some communication technologies and/or may feel more comfortable meeting in person.
- Have you developed a communication technology policy that outlines the extent, nature and limitations of service provision?
- Have you communicated clear boundaries with your clients about how communication technology will be used in practice? For example, are your clients aware of:
 - Why communication technology is being used to provide service, and whether it will be used for administrative or clinical purposes, or both?
 - When messages will be checked, and when or whether they will receive a response from you?
 - The fact that messages received through communication technology may become part of their client record?

These standards and considerations provide social workers with the guidance and support in relation to the use of communication technology in practice. The major themes that are echoed in the standards and considerations are following with the values and principles that guide professional social work practice which includes: 1) Respect for the Inherent Dignity and Worth of Persons, 2) Pursuit of Social Justice, 3) Service to Humanity, 4) Integrity in Professional Practice, 5) Confidentiality in Professional Practice, and 6) Competence in Professional Practice. Social workers can ensure this in virtual social work practice by ensuring that they are competent and informed, are clear and transparent with clients about the limits of confidentiality, and set and practice appropriate boundaries.

The Cybersecurity Risks raised by COVID-19

In addition to following the standards, social workers also need to be cognizant of and mitigate the risks associated with virtual social work practice from home. The CASW website has an article which talks about the heightened cyber security risks COVID-19 raises. Some of the ways that the article suggests remote work increases data loss and privacy breaches include:

- Employees will use computers or devices that are less protected than office-issued equipment, or that operate entirely outside the umbrella of the company’s cybersecurity measures (e.g. firewalls; virus protection; login access controls) (BMS Canada, 2020).
- Employees will rely on unsecured Wi-Fi connections in public spaces (coffee shops, public libraries, etc.) that are more susceptible to attack than secure office connections (BMS Canada, 2020).

According to the “Transitioning to tele-practice” article found on *Nova Scotia College of Social Workers* website, there have been several reports that programs are being “hacked” and meetings are being interrupted since COVID-19. Therefore, social workers need to be conscious and thinking about security. Some of the suggestions that the website presents that social workers can practice to mitigate the risks include: using secure internet connection rather than public/free Wi-Fi, ensuring security settings are on when setting up meetings or sessions with clients, ensuring there are passwords protecting entrance to the conversation, ensuring administrative controls on sharing screens, and other functions that allow you as the administrator to control access to who can enter the meeting (NSCSW, 2020). In addition, it is also imperative for social workers working from home to maintain confidentiality by using password protected computers and not allowing other members of household to have access to the computer. As well as having high security virus and malware protection software’s.

There are a variety of virtual social work software’s available online. It is important that agencies and social workers do their research to determine the security standards in the platform and see what meets their general needs. It is important to keep in mind that any web platform can theoretically be hacked or compromised. Therefore, as previously mentioned it is always essential for social workers to raise the risks to clients to gain consent to their use in an informed manner (NSCSW, 2020).

Steps to take to ensure effective video conferencing with Patients and Families

The 13-part video series developed by Northwest Regional Telehealth Resource Center which is aimed at helping care providers prepare for using telehealth videoconferencing has some important suggestions that social workers engaging in virtual practice can implement. The presenter for this series of tutorials, Jonathan Neufeld, PhD, Clinical Director at UMTRC, is a psychologist who has worked with clients both in person and via video and shares his expertise

throughout this 13-part series. Some of the suggestions for the preliminary's before the clinical encounter provided in the video which are especially beneficial for social workers engaging in virtual practice through video call include:

- **The layout of the room** and making sure the provider conveys the proper image to the client. Some suggestions Neufeld (2015) gives of this in the tutorial is facing the side with windows, and not having windows behind you. Another suggestion is keeping the background you have simple rather than complex.
- The idea that beyond the picture, the **sound** is truly critical. The tutorial discusses the need for and techniques of ensuring the outgoing sound is the best possible. Some of the suggestions include: having a quiet room that absorbs sound and where there is only a single source of sound. The distance of the microphone is also essential, keeping the microphone as close to you and as far away from any other sources of sound. Lastly, Neufeld (2015) shares how headphones is something to avoid since it takes away from the clinical rapport with the patient.
- **Provider placement** before the camera or the angles involved in appearing at one's best, to project a professional and appropriate image to the client is also essential. Some of the suggestions to ensure this include: making sure the camera aligns with your eye or your forehead level. This will allow the video call to look more like a conversation rather than having the camera up too high or too low where the client is forced to look down or look up at you. In addition, making sure the camera is set up in a way that your hand gestures can be seen is also essential as a clinician who is trying to build rapport with the patient.
- Lastly, is the importance of **regular testing of the connection** in order to avoid a last-minute panic if there is a technology problem that appears just when the patient encounter is scheduled to start. This can also include going over and familiarizing oneself with the functions of the video call platform. Furthermore, it is essential to have a backup plan set with the patient if the call gets dropped.

In addition to the technical aspects, some of the strategies for physical and professional presentation that can maximize the impression that is given to the patient which the video toolkit suggests are:

- **Practitioner Setup:** Firstly, having a protocol established where you have written policies and procedures to share with the patient is essential before establishing the call. In addition, using the self-monitoring window to ensure your alignment before the camera is also essential before getting on the call.
- **Policy and Protocol:** Ensure to be doing the same things that you would be doing if it was an in-person meeting, not letting the virtual aspect throw you off. Some of the suggestions to ensure this include: modelling comfort and engagement just like you usually would if it was an in-person meeting. This will ensure the client that you are just talking normally like you would if it was an in-person session. In addition, ensuring all the technical aspects are done when the call is first established, this way you are not interrupting the client when they are talking about something that is very important to them. You can also ask patient for feedback at the end of the session to hear their thoughts and feelings about the virtual meeting. Lastly, ensuring that documentation at the end of the visit is just like it would be if it was a normal visit, making sure to not focus too much on the technical aspects of the call in the documentation.
- **Video Etiquette:** Some other strategies to ensure the conversation goes smoothly include: service provider making sure to use the mute button when necessary. In addition having no distraction off screen, not having any other activity going on off screen so that you can stay focused on the patient in front of you. Lastly, talking at a slower rate is also essential to ensure a smooth interaction as this will allow the patient to jump in if they have to.
- **Engaging the client on Video:** Some insights into patient engagement and tactics for ensuring the patient/client fully participates in the process which the toolkit provides includes: expressing as much as you can possibly do through the video, this includes adding some gestures, expressions, varying your voice etc. Examples include: hand gestures, nodding instead of verbal agreements.
- **Working with Family or Group through Video:** Some of the strategies the toolkit suggests to ensure an effective and smooth family or group video call includes: ensuring the members in the group are placed in a way that replicates in-person room environment. This would mean clients and family are arranged in a loop, a semi-circle, or around a table. This would allow the family members to be able to see each other and also ensure that everyone is on camera. Another thing would be setting guidelines for the interaction.

Setting a structure for what will be discussed and ensuring only one person is talking at a time. Maintaining or enhancing the structure that you are used to with the in-person meeting will help to ensure that you are able to work effectively over video with the group.

In addition some other strategies that you can suggest to the patient before the virtual visit can include asking them to try and get someone who is not as emotionally involved to take care of the technology. This will allow the patient to be totally present for the virtual session. Moreover, making sure the technical person has all the numbers ready in case the session gets dropped. Lastly, making sure all devices are charged and programs are updated (Dufour, 2020).

Moving Forward

While virtual communication and virtual practice has been gaining popularity in the recent decade, COVID-19 has made it the only option for continued patient care for many social workers. With the implementation of virtual social work practice, social workers are able to ensure there is no disruption in service or any breakdown in patient care, as well as maintain client and staff safety. In addition, the implementation of virtual practice has also highlighted the many advantages that this kind of practice has on both workers and clients due to the convenience and flexibility it provides.

This literature review has introduced the standards and considerations social workers should ensure when engaging in virtual social work practice; the cyber-security risks raised by virtual social work practice and how to mitigate it; and the steps that social workers need to take in order to ensure effective video conferencing with patients and families. With the implementation of the strategies provided in this literature review, social workers will be able to ensure that they are providing the best social work practice which is grounded in in the values, ethics, and principles of the social work profession. The next section will compare three of the best rated video conferencing software's that social workers can use for communication with patients/families, staff meetings, and for large groups.

Best Communication Tools Recommendations for Hospital Social Work Practice

This section is intended to compare three of the best rated video conferencing software's which are: Lifesize, Zoom, and Microsoft Teams. The comparison will look into what makes each of these software's stand out from its competitors, the cons of each software, and the pricing plan each software offers which will be best for large organizations like the hospital.

1. Lifesize



Lifesize is a communication software that specializes in video and audio conferencing. Currently, it is the only video conferencing product that offers 4K UHD video conferencing resolution. This video quality is supported by an IBM-powered cloud network, ensuring a stable, consistent, and reliable connection for the duration of your meetings.

What makes Lifesize stand out from its competitors?

High-quality video conferencing

- Rated best-in-class for video, audio and content-sharing clarity.
- The world's first 4K video conferencing solution.
- Lifesize utilizes the IBM cloud infrastructure to deliver consistent and reliable connections even when broadcasting in high resolution.

Secure Communication

- Lifesize uses best-of-breed data centers with independent third-party security and privacy certifications to ensure the most secure and reliable foundation possible for its users.
- Also Lifesize provides all paid and free subscription customers with true end-to-end encryption and authentication for both meeting room systems and remote participants. This prevents potential eavesdroppers – including telecom providers, Internet providers, and even the provider of the communication service – from being able to access the cryptographic keys needed to decrypt the conversation.

User Friendly and Convenient

- It is very easy to install and simple to share meeting links with other participants.
- If using a browser, it can be used without having to install the app.
- It is compatible on all devices.
- It is simple to navigate while on the call.

Integrates with existing applications, video solutions, and conferencing hardware

- Lifesize seamlessly integrates with third-party conference room equipment, collaboration tools, and scheduling apps such as Google Calendar.
- Calendar integrations make it easy to send Lifesize meeting invitations directly from your Microsoft or Google calendar.
- Lifesize integrated with Microsoft and so is perfect for enterprises that have standardized on Microsoft tools for their email, calendar and real-time communication solutions.

Some other benefits of Lifesize which makes it stand out from many of its competitors include:

- Unlimited audio-only calls for users and guests in more than 60 countries.
- Consistent experience across all devices.
- Manufactures connected devices and/or accessories.
- Persistent group chat in a meeting room.

Cons

The major cons with Lifesize is the lack of technical support and difficulty cancelling subscription some users have shared they have faced.

Pricing:

Lifesize has an “Enterprise” plan for large organizations which includes:

Unlimited meetings; Host up to 300 participants; Meet for up to 24 hours; Premium support which includes: online support, chat support, phone support, and email support; Unlimited meeting recording; and live streaming of 1,000 viewer events

Pricing for large organization varies depending on the organization.

2. Zoom



Zoom is one of the leading video conferencing software apps in the market. It is a cloud-based service that you can use to conduct virtual meetings with others. You can start or join a Zoom meeting without signing in or needing a password, thus making it a very user friendly software.

What makes Zoom stand out from its competitors?

Convenience

- While there are millions of other options, what makes zoom one of the most popular ones is the convenience it provides for its users.
- Zoom is a product made for user satisfaction – that’s the founding ground of the company. Their product is completely customer-driven and that’s why it can sell itself.
- The application offers a natural and easy-to-use conferencing tool that makes it easier to start or join meetings from any location.
- You don’t need a log-in ID or a password to use Zoom.

Ideal for Large Scale Virtual Meetings

- Due to zoom’s popularity it is definitely ideal for conducting large scale meetings, since majority of the population know how to navigate through zoom.
- It supports up to 1,000 participants for every video conference and can provide up to 49 HD videos on screen.

Cons

Although Zoom is definitely becoming more and more popular each day, many journalists and researchers have found a lot of risks associated with the app.

- Zoom has been under scrutiny for its unclear privacy policies and data leaks.

- Zoom does not use end-to-end encryption, thus allowing telecom providers, Internet providers, and even the provider of the communication service to have access the cryptographic keys needed to decrypt the conversation.
- “Zoombombing” is also a serious problem associated with zoom. Zoombombing happens when uninvited individuals intrudes any video conferencing and cause disruption. This is due to the ease at which any individual can log into a meeting. This often happens in large scale meetings.

Pricing

Price for large organizations like hospital is \$27/month/per host, which includes the following:

Unlimited number of meetings; Meeting duration limit of 24 hrs; User management; Admin feature controls; Custom Personal Meeting ID; 500 participants; Unlimited Cloud Storage; Bundle discounts on Webinars and Zoom Rooms; Dedicated phone support etc.

3. Microsoft Teams



Microsoft Teams provides full video conferencing services as well as other tools to foster collaboration among employees. What truly makes this service appealing is its integration with other Microsoft Office applications such as Word, Excel and Outlook. Among the key features are meeting notes, webinar recordings, polls and surveys, screen sharing, and whiteboards. Considering everything you get access to, this is one of the most affordable video conferencing services.

What makes Microsoft Teams stand out from its competitors?

Microsoft Teams Pricing

- Unlike with stand-alone services, you aren't just paying for a video conferencing platform. You purchase a Microsoft Office 365 subscription that includes Microsoft Teams as well as other Microsoft programs.

- Office 365 Business Essentials which include Microsoft Teams starts at just \$5 per user a month.

Collaboration

- In Teams you can access, share, and edit Word docs, PowerPoint, and Excel files in real time.
- Team members can use whiteboards to foster collaboration and jot down important points with the built-in note-taking tool.

Some other benefits of Microsoft Teams which makes it stand out from its competitors include:

- The ability to have a private chat with one person or a group message with everyone in your department.
- The live captions it provides.
- The different background effects it provides for users.

Cons

- One downside to Microsoft Teams is that you can't conduct video conferences from a web browser. There is a web app, but to host or join a video meeting, you need to be on either the desktop or mobile app.
- Another potential negative is that reaching someone at Microsoft for support, especially by phone, can be difficult. Since Microsoft supports so many programs, finding a representative who can provide help specifically for Microsoft Teams can be trying.
- Less convenient if you don't frequently work with Microsoft products
- Also, it may not be the most user-friendly software since you need to be on the app to join meeting on phone. As well, the Hyper-organized tabs and channels can feel overwhelming.

Pricing

The Microsoft 365 Business Basic plan is offered at \$6.40 a month per user. What is included in the plan is:

- Host email with a 50 GB mailbox and custom email domain address.
- Create a hub for teamwork to connect your teams with Microsoft Teams.

- Access web versions of Office apps: Outlook, Word, Excel, PowerPoint, OneNote (plus Access and Publisher for PC only).
- Store and share files with 1 TB of OneDrive cloud storage per user.
- Host online meetings and video conferencing for up to 250 users.
- Get help anytime with around-the-clock phone and web support from Microsoft.

Summary of the Comparison

The comparison has shown what makes each of these different video conferencing platforms stand out, the cons of each, and the pricing details. In the next section, I will be using what I have learned from conducting this research as well as my own experience having used each of these platforms to make suggestions on which one I believe is the best for 1) communication with patients and families, 2) communication among staff, and 3) large group meetings.

The best communication tools for communication with family/patients, staff communication, and large group communication

1. Best Software for communication with Patients and Families: Based on the environmental scan, the following standards are strongly advised to ensure that it's suitable for communicating with patients and families:

-**Secure Communication:** Although no software can give 100% guarantee on secure communication, it is essential to use a software that provides the best security since confidential information is being shared in patient interactions.

- **User Friendly and Convenient:** User friendliness and convenience is another area that a communication software should have since patients and families may not be tech savvy. Therefore, it is essential for a software to provide ease of usage.

- **High-quality video and audio connection:** Lastly, it is essential to have a software that provides the highest quality video and audio connection when communicating with patients and families. This is because having a smooth and high quality experience will make patients and families feel as if they are in an in-person meeting, thus allowing them to be comfortable and engage without any connection drawbacks.



Therefore, the software that meets all of these standards and can be used for communication with patients and families is Lifesize. The most secure connection, convenience, and high quality video and audio connection Lifesize is equipped with enables social workers to provide the best virtual care for patients.

2. Best Software for Staff Communication: Important standards for communication should allow staff to collaborate, present ideas, and information all in one place.



Therefore, the best software which allows for this is Microsoft Teams. Microsoft Teams allows team members to have access, share, and edit PowerPoint, and Excel files in real time. It also allows teams to enhance staff meetings by having whiteboards which team members can all write on during the meeting and also the built in note taking tool will allow to jot down important points from meeting. Lastly, the private chat feature will allow workers to message each other individually or have a messaging group to quickly share information.

3. Best Software for Large Group Communication (Ex: Town hall):

All three of the platforms are equally great for large groups.

- Lifesize can host up to 300 participants at one time, or live stream 1000 viewer events.
- Zoom can host up to 1000 participants in the Zoom Enterprise plus Plan.
- Microsoft team although with the current configuration can only host up to 250. Microsoft is working on increasing the limit to 1000 but that feature is work in progress.

Now that the comparison between the software's has been made, the next section will provide some specific policies social workers should abide by when communication with patients/families through these platforms.

Policies to Abide by for Virtual Social Work Practice

Ensuring that technology use in social work practice is grounded in the values, ethics, and principles of the social work profession which include: 1) Respect for the Inherent Dignity and Worth of Persons, 2) Pursuit of Social Justice, 3) Service to Humanity, 4) Integrity in Professional Practice, 5) Confidentiality in Professional Practice, and 6) Competence in Professional Practice is essential. Some of the major professional practice issues that social workers engaging in virtual social work practice will face include privacy and confidentiality, informed consent, and dual and multiple relationships. Therefore, a reflection on each of the values outlined in the CASW Code of Ethics (2005) is important in resolving ethical conflicts that relate to technology in social work practice.

Some of the policies social workers engaging in virtual communication should abide by are:

- **Social workers will need to enhance their knowledge, skills, and abilities in the use of the virtual platform they are using for communication with patient/families in order to ensure they are competent, and that they conduct an ethical practice.** This means social workers should only start using a virtual platforms such as Microsoft Teams or Lifesize once they have gained the necessary education, skill and competency in the technology and the practice. This is in keeping with Value 6: Competence in Professional Practice, of the CASW Code of Ethics (2005) which states: “social workers strive to maintain and increase their professional knowledge and skill” and
- **Social workers need to assess the effectiveness and appropriateness of technology mediums and only use technologies that are in the best interests of clients** and are in keeping with culturally sensitive practice. For example, if a client does not feel comfortable communicating through video, social worker should offer alternative mediums such as telephone or e-mail.
- **Social workers need to ensure and maintain the confidentiality of information when engaging in virtual social work practice.** As outlined in the CASW Guidelines for Ethical Practice (2005): “social workers need to take precautions to ensure and maintain the confidentiality of information transmitted to other parties through the use of computers, electronic mail, facsimile machines, telephone answering machines, and other electronic technology. For example: social workers should try to ensure that they are in a private room

when communicating with patients/families through video or audio. If this is not possible using earphones while communicating is essential to ensure that other people in the room are not hearing what the patient/family is communicating. Furthermore, social workers need to incorporate risk management strategies and inform clients of precautions that are being taken to minimize potential breaches such as encrypted e-mails, firewalls, and passwords.

- In addition to taking all precautions to maintain confidentiality, as part of the informed consent process, **social workers need to inform clients about the inherent risks and limits to confidentiality that may arise through virtual communication.** For example, letting patients know that although measures are taken to ensure most secure forms of communication tool is being used, there still lies the risk of hacking/network breaches. Also, letting patients know if there is anyone else in the room with the social workers when virtual practice is taking place (Ex: Colleagues, or other members of household, if virtual practice happens from home).
- **Clear boundaries should be communicated with patients about how communication technology will be used in practice.** For example: why communication technology is being used to provide service, and whether it will be used for administrative or clinical purposes, or both; when messages will be checked, and when or whether they will receive a response from you; the fact that messages received through communication technology may become part of their client record; and informing clients that communication through emails or phone would not be possible after the service has ended.
- Lastly, **a communication technology policy that outlines the extent, nature and limitations of service provision should be developed and shared with patients** via email or through call before starting the virtual practice with patients.

Ensuring that social work practice follows these policies when engaging in virtual practice with patients/families is essential in providing high quality social work interventions that aligns with the values and principles of the profession.

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