

Reaching More Domestic Violence Program Clients

ideas

42



Automating outreach to inform Urban Justice Center clients about important group programming

When attendance at programs and services like workshops, events or support groups is low, it's easy to point to client interest or motivation as the driver. However, Urban Justice Center's Domestic Violence Project (DVP) identified an important factor playing a role in their low attendance problem: most staff were not effectively encouraging clients to attend the activities offered. DVP offers holistic services to survivors of intimate partner abuse and partnered with ideas42's NYC Behavioral Design Center to identify ways to support staff and help more clients learn about (and hopefully attend) beneficial services available to them. We worked with DVP to explore the challenges staff face, develop and user-test text message campaigns for clients and staff, and identify a text message platform that fits UJC's needs.

Summary

Urban Justice Center's Domestic Violence Project (DVP) offers comprehensive legal and advocacy services to survivors of intimate partner abuse. Attorneys at DVP represent clients in family and immigration matters. Advocates provide crisis counseling, safety planning, court accompaniment and other forms of case management assistance.

Although most of DVP's services are offered on a one-on-one basis with an advocate or attorney, they also offer important group activities: workshops, support groups, and events. These activities create opportunities for clients to build a sense of community and gain valuable information and support. While clients who participate in these activities report valuing them, attendance has been consistently low—before and during the pandemic. In some cases, low attendance can signal that clients aren't interested or don't value the service, but DVP had reason to believe that wasn't the case: in addition to client reports that they did value the activities, most of the clients who

often attended these activities interacted with the same few advocates. This trend suggests that some advocates were more effective than others at encouraging their clients to join the activities.

ideas42's NYC Behavioral Design Center partnered with Urban Justice Center's Domestic Violence Project to understand the barriers limiting some staff members' effectiveness in engaging clients in group activities. We also explored clients' interest in and ability to join these activities to inform our recommendations and DVP's future planning.

Highlights

- ▶ Workshops, support groups and events create opportunities for survivors of intimate partner abuse to build community and gain valuable support.
- ▶ Given their workload, it's difficult for staff to keep up with the task of notifying their clients of these activities.
- ▶ Automating outreach and reminders reduces the administrative workload on staff so they can focus on their most important responsibilities and ensures more clients hear about these opportunities.

What limits participation in activities?

We interviewed and surveyed advocates at DVP to understand their day-to-day responsibilities, challenges they face, their perspective on DVP activities, and their approach to speaking to clients about the activities. We learned two important insights about advocates' roles.

- ▶ First, advocates are bandwidth constrained. They can manage anywhere between 20 and 40 active clients and, on any given day, are helping a subset of those clients through crises, in addition to keeping up with case management for all their clients and preparing for workshops, support groups, and events.
- ▶ Second, we learned that the task of spreading the word about these activities is time-consuming, which only compounds the issue of advocate bandwidth. Since advocates do not meet with all their clients every week, whenever advocates are asked to publicize an upcoming activity, they need to make additional calls or send text messages to their clients. Advocates also reflected on how important it is to craft their messages about these activities carefully and tailor them to each client to make their messages easy to understand and clearly relevant to the clients.

Even when pressed for time, advocates are thoughtful in their approach to spreading the word about activities. In addition to spending time crafting the messages, many advocates we spoke to shared that they consider their clients' language preferences and schedule when deciding who to notify about an upcoming event. Advocates also prioritize reaching out to clients who they think will especially benefit from an activity, or who have mentioned being interested in a topic or type of group.

Our conversations with clients confirmed what we heard from advocates. Most clients have a strong language preference (Spanish or English) and are only interested in or able to join activities in that language. Scheduling conflicts were also an important barrier for clients. While these barriers might explain why individual clients might not show up for an activity, they don't explain the consistently low turnout. DVP offers most activities multiple times throughout the week (at times when they know many clients are available) and in English and Spanish, specifically to address these two barriers.

Instead, our interviews made it clear that low attendance was a result of clients' not knowing about these services. Some clients we spoke to knew about one or two of the activities while others were not aware DVP offered anything beyond legal services and advocate support. This insight aligned with what we heard from advocates: given other priorities on their plate and scarce time, advocates are never able to inform all their clients about activities.

Improving effectiveness through automation

We identified three ways to address the barriers advocates faced to disseminating information about group activities. DVP could:

- ▶ Free up advocates' time so they have the time to reach out to more clients

- ▶ Make it easier for advocates to disseminate information about activities to reduce the time required for advocates to do this consistently, or
- ▶ Reduce or eliminate the need for advocates to disseminate this information themselves

DVP felt the third option, which would eliminate a demand on their advocates' already-full plate while also helping more clients learn about and attend valuable services, was the best fit for their needs and goals. Given that clients were already accustomed to texting their advocates, we opted to set DVP up with a texting platform and service that would allow the program to send automated text message notifications and reminders about activities. To do this, we investigated text message platforms, including asking colleagues about experiences working with different platforms and interviewing vendors, and advised DVP on selecting one.

We developed text message templates and user-tested them with clients and staff. These templates were designed to let clients and staff know about upcoming activities, give clients an easy way to register for activities, and send clients reminders about activities they registered for. The templates included:

- ▶ **Client-facing notifications about activities:** These texts are intended to be delivered to clients at least one week before an activity is scheduled to take place. The messages prompt clients to respond if they want to sign up for the event. During user tests, clients suggested providing details such as the goals of the activity and/or the topics covered to help them decide whether to join. For example, this template includes space for a list of topics covered during a workshop:

Hi [name], DVP's [workshop name] is on [date] from [start time] to [end time] on Zoom. During this workshop, we will cover [topics]. Respond "Yes" to this message if you are interested in joining.

- ▶ **Sign up confirmation:** This confirmation text will go out to clients as soon as they respond to a notification.
- ▶ **Reminder text:** Clients shared that a week is often enough notice for them to be able to join activities, but that they may forget if they're notified or sign up earlier than that.
- ▶ **Day-of reminder:** Clients who participated in our diagnosis interviews and user tests highlighted how helpful day-of reminders are to them, and were glad to hear that DVP would be sending these.
- ▶ **Staff-facing text messages about activities:** We created text messages to let staff know about upcoming activities so they can (a) answer client questions about the activity and (b) encourage clients who would especially benefit from an activity to register and attend. We know clients trust DVP staff and will very likely reach out to them about the messages they receive, so it's important that staff know about the activities to be able to discuss them.

The goal of creating these templates is to reduce the work required to set up each campaign. DVP staff simply have to provide the key information required for the template—like the activity name, date, language and time—and the texting platform will do the rest, including sending text messages in each client's preferred language.

We also shared recommendations about how to roll out the text message system based on best practices and insights from our user testing, including:

- ▶ **Incorporating an onboarding to the platform during intake:** In addition to creating an opportunity for clients to opt-into and consent to receiving text messages, an orientation to the new system will give clients the opportunity to ask questions and become more comfortable receiving text messages. While none of the clients we user-tested with expressed discomfort with receiving texts, they acknowledged that seeing the sample messages made them especially interested in signing up because the notifications seemed useful.
- ▶ **Re-setting staff expectations:** Advocates were accustomed to bearing full responsibility for reaching out to clients about upcoming activities, even if they were not always able to do so. A major goal of this intervention was to reduce the load on advocates, which would require them to shift their mental model of their role. With the automated system, advocates will play a support role: answering questions and mentioning activities to clients for whom an activity seems valuable or relevant. This support role is incredibly valuable, since personalized invitations or suggestions about activities are more likely to encourage people to attend, especially when recommendations are tailored to a person's expressed needs or goals. For example, advocates can highlight benefits relevant to a particular client and, as appropriate, mention whether past clients of theirs enjoyed the activity or found it useful.
- ▶ **Iteration and improvement:** We encouraged DVP to continue to revise and improve the templates based on small tests and client feedback, as well as changing circumstances and activities offered. For example, they could try leveraging social proof strategies in future text messages, like mentioning "Last year x clients came with their kids, who all enjoyed it," and then check whether attendance increases and/or ask clients for feedback on the new messages.

Recommendations

While automating messaging should help increase client awareness about activities offered by the Domestic Violence Project—which is a necessary step in increasing the number of clients attending activities—these text messages may not be sufficient to encourage more clients to attend activities. We offered two other sets of recommendations to support DVP's efforts to encourage clients to attend beneficial activities.

The first set of recommendations were aimed at making it easy for advocates and attorneys to learn about and remember upcoming activities. We suggested three strategies:

1. **Planning activities ahead of time and creating a central resource with a master calendar and information about activities** that all staff can easily access and understand. Having a longer-term plan for activities available to staff will give them more time to become familiar with upcoming events and identify which clients to encourage to attend each one. It will be important to keep this calendar and descriptions up to date and periodically send staff reminders to check it.

- 2. Remind staff about activities and the benefits they could provide to clients.** Even though staff will be receiving text message notifications about upcoming activities, some may not always realize their clients could benefit from the activities. Thus, we recommended DVP continue a strategy already in place: talking about upcoming activities during supervisory and group meetings and making the intended audience for, and benefits of, each activity clear.
- 3. Make it easy for staff to share information about upcoming or relevant activities,** such as by creating a list of activities or flyers that staff can share with clients. This is important on two dimensions: first, if sharing information about activities with clients is easy, advocates are more likely to do so (if it feels like a hassle, they may put it off). Second, if the information is packaged in a shareable way, staff can give it to clients to take home with them. Clients can then read the flyer more carefully and decide later, and it serves as a tangible reminder.

Our second set of recommendations discussed creating new activities based on client needs and interests. An important step to increase the number of clients attending activities is ensuring that the activities DVP offers are appealing to them. We suggested strategies like asking clients for their ideas and interests and getting feedback from them. We also shared a list of ideas for new activities that clients and staff had offered during our conversations with them.

What's next?

Text message notifications and reminders alone won't address every potential behavioral problem that organizations offering activities face. For example, even when clients do know about a program or service, they may not be sure it's right for them, or hassles (real or perceived) may get in the way of attending. As automated text messages help more clients hear about upcoming activities, DVP will need to monitor attendance (and client feedback) in order to ensure that clients don't face these or other barriers to participating.

Urban Justice is now working with the chosen texting platform vendor to set up their text messaging system and they plan to launch these text messages in early 2022. As the year progresses, they will learn more about the impact of this intervention on client attendance and on advocates' workload. Once they have rolled out this system to publicize DVP activities, Urban Justice plans to expand its use for other purposes within the Domestic Violence Program and in other UJC programs.

Staff play a critical role in client well-being and success, and supporting them through behaviorally informed interventions that reduce their administrative workload and help them focus on their most important responsibilities can amplify organizations' potential for impact.

This work was generously supported by The New York Community Trust.