

Place-based Community Service Organisations Collaboration

Family Services Virtually Enabled Group Sessions Framework

Purpose

The purpose of this framework document is to provide support and guidance to Community Service Organisations (CSOs) and their staff to deliver Virtually Enabled Group Sessions for Family Services. It addresses the planning, setup and conduct of virtually enabled group sessions.

This document has been developed by Deloitte in consultation with Bethany, Family Life and Upper Murray Family Care.

Context

COVID-19 has seen the massive and rapid uptake of teleconferencing. Organisations have had to shift to new virtual service delivery methods more quickly than the supporting policies and procedures can be developed.

While many clients of CSOs have been quick to adapt to these changes, if virtual service delivery is not undertaken correctly there are risks to the safety of all involved. This is particularly true for virtual group sessions where multiple people are in a session. As such extra consideration needs to be given to virtual meetings of this kind.

For the purpose of this document a virtually enabled group session is defined as any meeting, conducted via a digital program (that is, not physically face-to-face), that contains more than two clients (and typically up to 14 clients), it does not cover group sessions where some participants are physically present and others are virtually connected.

Framework

Planning

The following outline key considerations that should be considered when planning a Virtual Enabled group session:

1. Not everyone has the same access to technology, it is better to consider the minimum requirements for the session that doesn't prohibit people from participating while still allowing the session to function as intended, and does not jeopardise the safety of participants or facilitators.
2. There should be consideration of the group size. What works for a physical group session will not always work for a virtual session. It may be more beneficial to have a smaller group size instead.
3. Similarly, the session length may need to be reduced as clients may find it harder to focus at a screen for multiple hours. It may be more suitable to have 1-hour sessions but instead increase the frequency of these sessions.
4. It should be up to the facilitator, in line with organisational protocols, to determine the most appropriate platform to use. Personal information and consent to use online platforms can first be obtained via phone before deciding what platform would be best. A designated virtual informed consent process should be followed.
5. Facilitators should ensure that all individuals that will take part in the virtual group session have access to the platform that will be used and understand how to connect to the session.
6. Do not share website links or access credentials on publicly accessible websites or social media, instead send them privately only to individuals that will take part in the group session.
7. Consider the fact that people will act differently in virtual group sessions, and not all facial and body expressions can be seen over a virtual connection.
8. Group facilitators should ensure that they have secure access to all relevant participant notes prior to the commencement of the session and are able to refer and add to them throughout the session.
9. To help ensure the security of the session, ensure that the meeting link is only sent to the individuals that will be attending the group session. Additionally, also consider setting an access password to the session, or enabling a waiting room function, so that only authorised people can join the session.
10. CSO's need to be considerate that their staff who are facilitating the group sessions may find them more tiring than facilitating a physical in-person session. This should be taken into consideration when scheduling sessions.
11. There should be time scheduled following group sessions for facilitators to debrief and raise any issues that were encountered during the group session.
12. Develop online group agreement protocols for safety and respectful interactions between facilitator and participants. Participants will need to agree to these protocols before participating.

Conduct

The following outline key considerations that should be considered when conducting a Virtual Enabled group session:

1. As participants join the session be sure to verify their identity and confirm they are meant to be in the group. Also consider setting up a waiting room for the meeting so that they must be admitted by the facilitator.

2. If participants are joining via telephone, take note of sounds or visual notifications indicating that participants are joining the meeting, and ask any unknown participants to identify themselves. If unknown participants are unable to appropriately identify themselves, they should be disconnected by the meeting facilitator.
3. Participants should find a private area to connect to the session, where other people are not likely to hear them or the other people in the session talking. The facilitator should confirm this with all participants before starting the session.
4. If participants are not able to find a private area, they should use headphones to help maintain the privacy of others in the group.
5. All participants should be clearly identified, as being either client, facilitator or an accredited observer. To protect the privacy of staff and participants, only their first name should be visible on the platform.
6. Facilitators should use the blur background or artificial background functionality available on many digital platforms to help protect their privacy. If this is not possible ensure that there is no personal information visible in the background, such as family photos etc. Group participants should also be encouraged to do the same (i.e. blur background) unless the operational or safety requirements of the specific program require the environment to be sighted.
7. The facilitator should ensure that the recording functionality is switched off and disabled so that no participant can start recording the session without the others' consent. The session protocols may also explicitly state that any recording/photography by the participants or the facilitators is not permitted. In some cases, recording requirements (including prevention) may be determined by state or federal legislation.
8. Additionally, the private chat functionality should also be disabled. It may be more suitable to set this at an organisational level to prevent accidental activation of this function.
9. Encourage everyone to mute the microphone when not actively speaking, as it improves the meeting experience by eliminating unwanted background noises, such as keyboard typing sounds or audio feedback loops, and prevents accidentally broadcasting private or sensitive discussions that may be happening nearby.
10. Facilitators have the freedom to pause or end the session because of a change in environment, technology, or context.
11. If a facilitator notices a change in behaviour of a participant from one session to another, they should make a note of it on the individuals' file so that someone can follow up with the individual privately.
12. If sharing screen content for a meeting, it is best practice to share an individual application instead of a device's entire screen, and to close unused applications in the background. Alternatively, a web conferencing solution may be able to select only a section of a device's screen to share. However, if screen sharing is not required, either disable the functionality or limit its use to only the meeting facilitator.
13. Capabilities that record and automatically transcribe calls, subtitle videos or share files can create a risk of inadvertently sharing more content than intended. For this reason, all background applications that are not needed should be closed prior to the group session.

Technology Requirements

The following outlines additional minimum technology requirements and recommendations for a virtual enabled group session:

1. The chosen software platform must have a way of identifying the participants in the group session.
2. The software platform must allow for encrypted meetings to ensure the confidentiality of the group session.

3. The platform should allow the facilitator to control who comes into the virtual session and to remove anyone that should not be there.
4. The platform should allow for the facilitator to lock down certain functions such as meeting recording and the private chat functionality.
5. The platform should allow for various devices such as laptops, tablets or mobile devices to connect to it to ensure no one is prohibited from joining the session.
6. The platform should allow the facilitator to choose their display name to help ensure their privacy. Additionally, it should also allow for the background to be blurred or hidden.
7. When using a custom background, it should be as plain as possible to minimise the bandwidth drain.
8. The platform must be able to restrict who can join the meeting by using a password or conference pin. If the chosen platform allows it, also use a random meeting ID.
9. The platform should allow the group session to be set so that it will not start until the facilitator joins. Participants who join before the facilitator will be put in the waiting room
10. Staff behaviours and training should be developed so that they are utilising the platforms most effectively.
11. Platform choice should consider whether it will still be suitable in the future, and ideally a platform should be able to plug in to the overarching architecture of the organisation. Platforms change security settings regularly so changes in these settings need to be monitored and, if required, a new platform may need to be used.
12. The number of different platforms being used should be kept to a minimum, although some government departments and agencies may require a certain platform to be used.