

## Survivors of intimate violence seek help online: Implications of responding to increasing requests



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## Author's notes

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## Abstract

This article documents a one-year study of unsolicited email requests sent to Violence Against Women Online Resources ( <http://www.vaw.umn.edu> ), a website that delivers current information on intervention to stop violence against women. The purpose of this article is twofold: 1) it explores some of the implications of responding to requests from survivors online; and 2) it seeks to raise awareness about one particular website's increasing number of electronic help-seeking requests. The study sample consisted of 427 email requests sent to Violence Against Women Online Resources between October 1, 1999 and September 30, 2000. Survivors of intimate violence sent in 153 (35.8%) of the total requests. The author calls for a national discussion on responding to such requests and underscores the importance of developing a strategic plan to address the issue.

## The Internet as a viable tool for outreach

Women are flocking to the World Wide Web in record numbers. Women have surpassed men in online usage, representing a little over half of the total web population ([Rickert & Sacharow, 2000](#)). The Internet offers (at least the perception of, if not the reality) a time-saving means of finding information--no longer is it necessary to actually go to the library, scan newspapers, or consult telephone books or niche directories (i.e., women's directory or gay/lesbian directory) when seeking particular services. Instead, information seekers have learned to initiate searches by looking online and are thereby tapping into the vast breadth of resources that can be tailored to specific and personalized information requests. Because the Internet also offers the ability to create a seemingly anonymous presence, it is understandable why women who have survived intimate violence find the Internet an attractive alternative when seeking information.

It is important to note that not all women can afford the privilege of web access. In a study of 200,000 web users, 78% of American households with an income over \$75,000 had web access, compared to 21% of households with incomes less than \$15,000 ([Austen, 2000](#)). The digital

divide continues to segregate our country's citizens into "information-haves" and "have nots," leaving our nation's poor, a third of the U.S. population, out in the technological cold. Despite the inequity of access, millions of Americans are utilizing the Internet for information seeking and that should not be ignored by anti-violence service organizations. "The Web is becoming as mainstream in some ways as television, CD's, radios and newspapers," ([McFarland as quoted by Austen 2000](#)).

The American Psychological Association ([1996](#)) suggested that one in three adult women experience at least one physical assault by a partner during adulthood (p. 10). Other estimates show that one to four million American women experience violence by an intimate each year ([Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1995 p. 3](#)). These rates of victimization also appear in teen dating relationships and same-sex couples ([Barnes, 1998](#); [Brustin, 1995](#)).

Detailed information about Internet usage by survivors of intimate violence is unknown at this time. However, according to Media Metrix, a firm specializing in reports about the size of Internet markets worldwide, women account for 50.4% of the World Wide Web user population in United States ([Rickert & Sacharow, 2000](#)). Another study indicates that "PC penetration in the U.S. now tops 55 million households, with 45 million connected to the web" ([Oppelaar, 2000](#)). Given the rates of female web usage and estimated levels of victimization, it is possible to extrapolate that up to 7,560,000 women (16.8% of the United States Internet population) are current or former survivors of intimate violence, thus making the Internet a viable tool for reaching survivors of intimate violence.

## **Service organizations online**

A growing array of resources on the World Wide Web is available to survivors of intimate violence. Finn ([2000](#)) conducted a survey of 166 domestic violence organizations with a presence on the World Wide Web. He found that there were 24,880 ".org" web pages, a 37% increase, that Hotbot, an internet search engine, had indexed under "family violence" and other related terms in just the few months between September 1998 to February 1999. Despite this rapidly growing presence, Finn notes ". . .there has been little empirical study of the types of services offered online or the benefits and problems encountered by human service organizations in providing these services" ([Finn, 2000, p. 84](#)). This absence of analysis should be of great concern to the anti-violence against women movement, as it is likely that the number of Internet users will continue to grow and so too will the numbers of survivors seeking help online. Greater numbers of anti-violence service organizations are appearing on the web and offering information and services to survivors. Finn's survey found that domestic violence organizations reported five main functions they hoped to achieve with their online presence: (1) agency visibility; (2) direct service; (3) community education; (4) advocacy; and (5) securing resources ([Finn, 2000](#)).

Providing direct services in an online environment is uncharted territory for battered women's and sexual assault organizations. Traditionally, crisis support has been delivered in person or through a telephone hotline. Anti-violence advocates know that safety is paramount when responding to crisis calls. Advocates typically ask a survivor if it is a safe time to talk and if it is acceptable to call her back in the event of being disconnected. When returning calls, advocates say "sorry, wrong number" or simply hang up if someone else answers the phone. And when sending printed information, advocates inquire whether correspondence should be sent to the

victim's address, or to another (Ann Moore, Domestic Abuse Project, personal communication, December 20, 2000).

In the past few years, organizations have been reaching out to victims of violence and abuse to provide this same sort of advocacy online. Finn's (2000) survey asked domestic violence organizations to report what types of "direct services" they offered online. They described the following: (1) online assessments of violent relationship; (2) outreach to survivors; (3) information and referral; (4) direct service through email; (5) links to monitored online chat rooms; (6) online support groups; and (7) art and stories by survivors (Finn 2000). Thus far, responding to unsolicited email requests, which commonly involves providing information and referrals via the Internet, has no established protocol and therefore, requires breaking new ground.

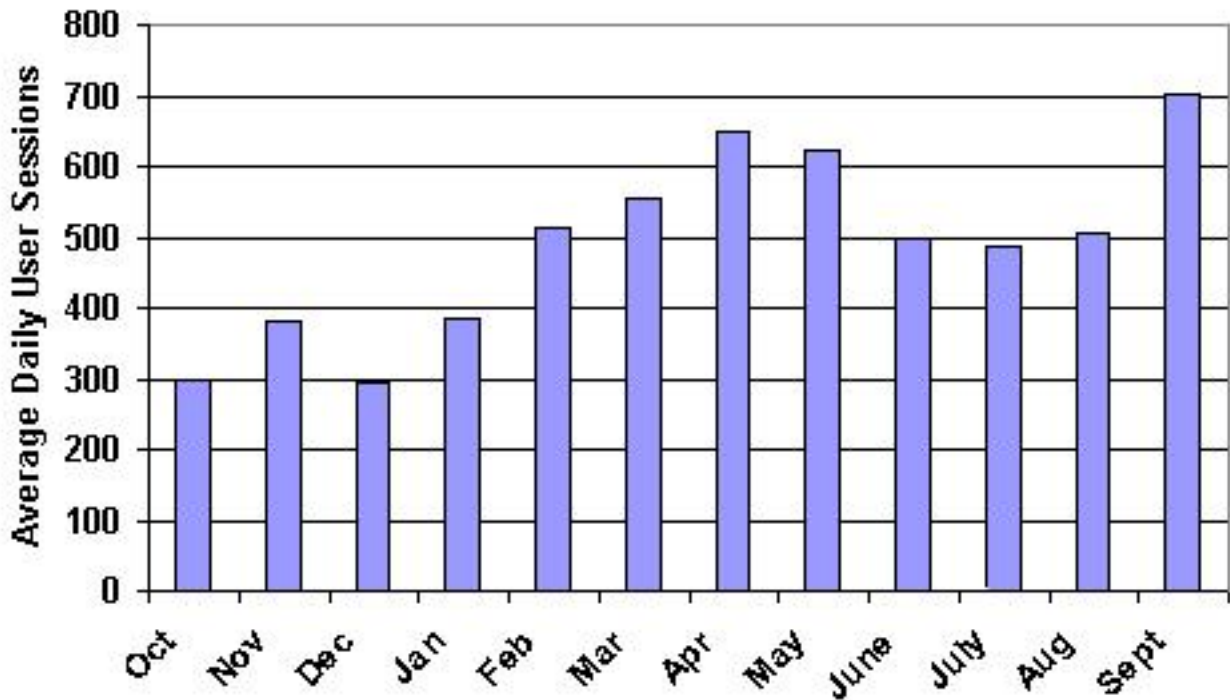
## **A 12-Month Study of Electronic Help-Seeking Requests**

To gain insight regarding the nature of unsolicited requests and the population placing these requests, a study was conducted of one such website's requests. Violence Against Women Online Resources [ <http://www.vaw.umn.edu> ] is a website that originated from a cooperative agreement between the Minnesota Center Against Violence and Abuse (MINCAVA) and the United States Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Violence Against Women Office (VAWO). The site, which delivers current information on intervention to stop violence against women, offers training manuals, sample legal documents, model legislation, research reports, assessment tools and more to an intended audience of law, criminal justice, and social service professionals. Approximately two full-time staff members support the site. The website also offers an email address for site users to send information requests electronically. This section of the paper reports the results of a study of 427 information requests sent to Violence Against Women Online Resources website through the site's email address [ [info@vaw.umn.edu](mailto:info@vaw.umn.edu) ] between October 1, 1999 and September 30, 2000. These dates represent the first Federal fiscal year data were collected.

### **Site Usage**

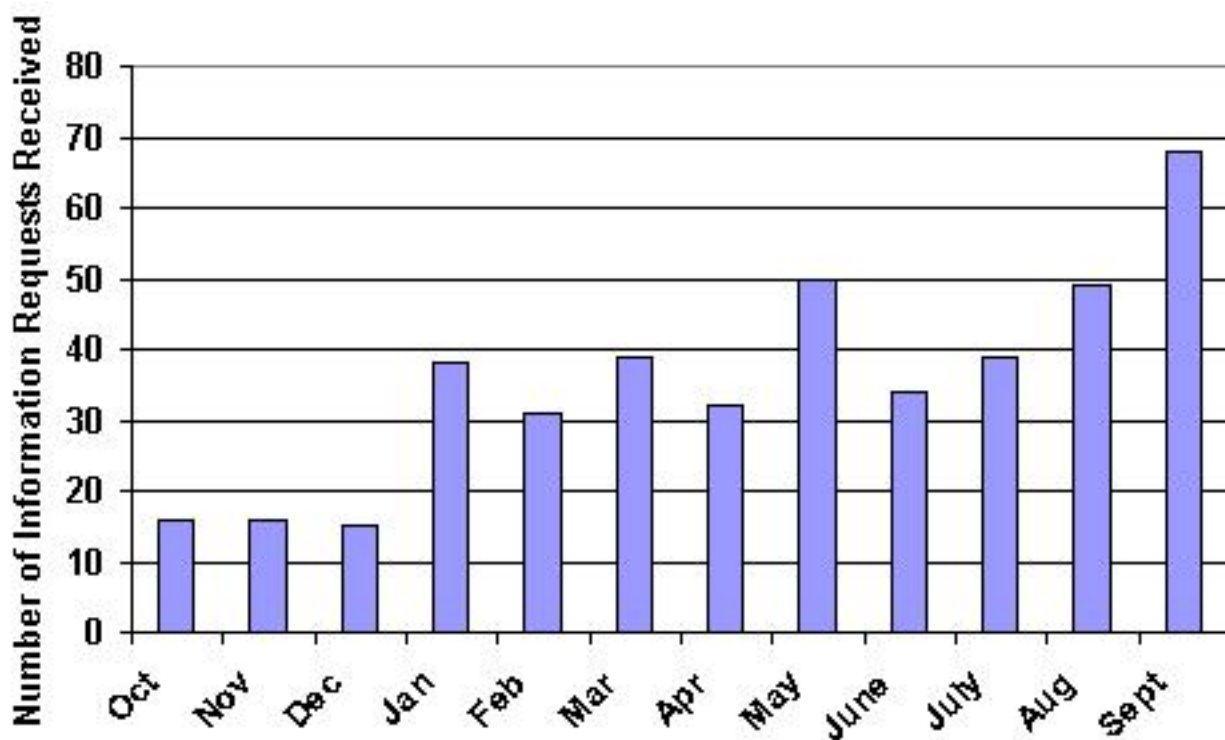
Since its initial funding in late August 1997, the Violence Against Women Online Resources site has grown in terms of content and traffic. In 1997, the site tracked about 50 users per day. As documents were added to the site, traffic steadily increased. As of January 2001, the site received over 100,000 "hits" per month, averaged more than 700 unique users per day, and made available more than 100 documents related to domestic violence, sexual assault and stalking. A monthly breakdown of the site's unique user sessions from October 1, 1999 to September 30, 2000, is shown in Figure 1 and reflects the average number of people who logged into the site daily. The site averaged 325 users per day in the first quarter, 484 users per day in the second quarter, 590 users per day in the third quarter and 565 users per day by the end of the fourth quarter. Overall site usage jumped 267% from 35,518 hits for the month of October 1999, to 94,879 hits for the month of September 2000.

**Figure 1: Daily User Sessions by Month**



As traffic increased on the site, so too did the incoming requests for information through the site's email address. As Figure 2 shows, the site received 16 requests in October 1999. The requests steadily increased each month reaching over 68 requests by September 2000, a 425% increase. The email address was originally listed on the site in order to help the intended users (i.e., police, judges, advocates, etc.) find the resources they require to address violence against women in their work.

**Figure 2: Number of Information Requests Received by Month, N=427**



## **Study Sample and Procedure**

The sample consisted of 427 email messages received by Violence Against Women Online Resources between October 1, 1999 and September 30, 2000. The original email messages were the sole source of information for this study; no survey instruments were developed. The messages were coded by the Violence Against Women Online Resources' program director or research assistant into the following categories: general nature of requests; information seeker type; primary concern; additional concerns; gender of victim and perpetrator; and relationship of the perpetrator to the victim. Each message was assigned a category with the breakdown as follows in Table 1. (Limitations exist when attempting to validate such information without any face-to-face contact.) There were no follow-up requests for information for the study. The information gathered was entered into a database and the database was stripped of the requester's email address to ensure privacy.

Primary victims were identified by the information they disclosed in their messages, which described their personal experiences of abuse, expressed a fear of imminent harm, informed of a protection order, or named their victimization, e.g. "I am a rape survivor." Secondary victims were identified by the information they disclosed about their relationship to the primary victim. These individuals described incidents of the primary victim's abuse, expressed fear for their family member or friend's safety, informed of a protection order, or named their friend or family member's victimization, e.g. "My wife was abused by her ex-husband."

**Table 1: General nature of survivors' requests**

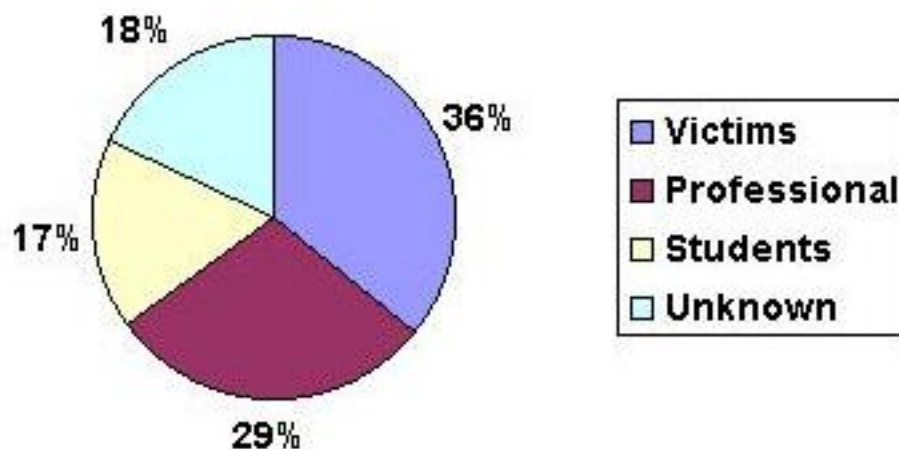
Category	Frequency	Percent
Advocacy/support	102	66.7
General VAW inquiry	31	20.3
Other	20	13.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>153</b>	<b>100.1</b>

## Results

Of the 427 information requests received, primary victims sent in 114 (26.7%) requests, and secondary victims, which were defined as family or friends of the primary victim, sent in 39 (9.1%) requests. As Figure 3 shows, survivors of intimate violence (primary and secondary survivors combined) accounted for the largest group of information seekers, sending in a combined total of 153 (35.8%) requests. In second place, 124 (29.0%) professionals requested information. Students sent in 73 (17.1%) requests for assistance in locating resources that could help them with their assignments. There were 77 (18.0%) requests that were unable to be identified as coming from a victim, professional, or student. These requests were coded as "unknown."

This report focuses on the 153 requests sent in from survivors of intimate violence. These requests from survivors were assigned categories with respect to the general nature of the request and included: advocacy/crisis support; general violence against women inquiry; and other. "Advocacy/Crisis support" ranked first among the categories with 102 (66.7%) requests-72 (70.6%) from primary victims and 30 (29.4%) from secondary victims. These requests detailed specific information regarding that particular case of violence/abuse and typically asked for help with financial and legal matters. Survivors requested general information, such as "can you please define sexual abuse?" or "please tell me about the Violence Against Women Act" in 31 (20.3%) requests. These requests were categorized as a "general violence against women inquiry." The remaining category of "other" represented 20 (13.1%) requests from survivors who wanted grant information, assistance with site navigation, or involved some sort of "networking" appeal, such as a request to cross-link web sites, share conference materials, or volunteer at an organization in his or her local area.

**Figure 3: Breakdown of Information Seekers, N=427**



The site's content addresses domestic violence, sexual assault and stalking, however, 99 (64.7%) requests from survivors, nearly two-thirds of the requests received, had a primary concern of domestic violence. In 16 (10.5%) messages from survivors, the primary concern of message was unclear and those messages were coded as "unknown." An example of such was a request to help someone get his/her child back, but the message did not explain why custody was lost in the first place. Sexual assault information was requested from 15 (9.8%) survivors. Survivors sought general information about violence against women in 15 (9.8%) of the requests. The least requested topic was "stalking," comprising of 8 (5.2%) of the messages received from survivors.

**Table 2: Primary concerns of survivors**

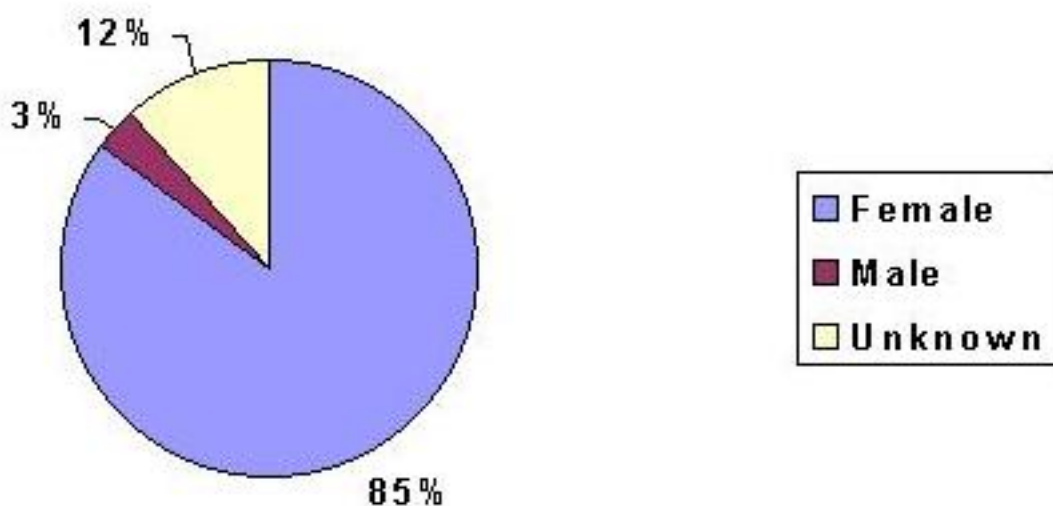
Primary Concern	Frequency	Percent
Domestic violence	99	64.7
Unknown	16	10.5
General VAW	15	9.8
Sexual assault	15	9.8
Stalking	8	5.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>153</b>	<b>100.0</b>

While Table 2 conveys the primary concern of the email messages, some survivors detailed additional concerns in their messages. For example, a message may have described an overall fear of an abusive partner, but also relayed a specific concern about child custody. The top ten additional concerns received from survivors were 1) battery/physical assault; 2) custody; 3)

emotional abuse; 4) sexual abuse; 5) stalking; 6) murder attempt; 7) restraining orders; 8) financial abuse; 9) disability; and 10) murder.

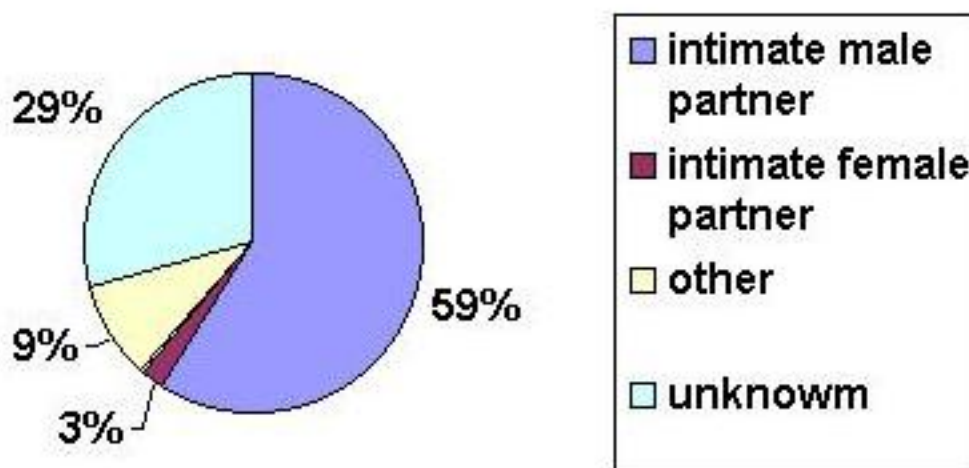
In most of the requests, survivors provided specific self-identifying information. Figure 4 details, that in 153 email messages, the gender of the victim was identified in 135 (88.2%) messages. Victims identified themselves as female in 130 (85.0%) messages, and as male in 5 (3.3%) messages. The gender of the victim was not identified in 18 (11.8%) of the messages.

**Figure 4: Gender Breakdown of Victims, N=153**



As Figure 5 demonstrates, in 118 (77.1%) of the survivors' requests it was possible to ascertain the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator.

**Figure 5: Breakdown of Perpetrator Specifics, N=153**



Out of the 153 requests, victims identified the perpetrator as a male intimate partner in 90 (58.8%) messages-48 (53.3%) of the male perpetrators identified were currently involved in the relationship with the victim; and 42 (46.7%) of the male perpetrators identified were formerly involved according to the victim. Victims did not identify the gender of the perpetrator in 45 (29.4%) of the messages received. These perpetrators were coded as "unknown." The "other" perpetrators identified consisted of 14 (9.2%) individuals, which typically included a parent, child, stranger, or person in a position of authority. Victims identified four (2.6%) of the perpetrators as female. If perpetrators of unknown gender were excluded from the sample, the perpetrator was male in 90 (83.3%) messages, female in 4 (3.7%) messages and in a position of authority in 14 (13.0%) messages.

## **Summary of Study Findings**

In review of the 427 email requests sent to Violence Against Women Online Resources between October 1, 1999 and September 30, 2000, the following general points of information can be surmised:

- Site usage is rising rapidly.
- Information requests are increasing even more rapidly.
- Information requests from victims and their family members or friends accounted for the predominant number of the messages sent to Violence Against Women Online Resources website.
- Most victims identified were female.
- Most of the perpetrators identified were male.

- Nearly two-thirds of all requests had a primary concern of domestic violence and the top five related secondary concerns were 1) battery/physical assault; 2) custody; 3) emotional abuse; 4) sexual abuse; and 5) stalking.

## **A call for national discussion**

Should organizations answer these pleas for help online? Should advocates reply to an email from a survivor and assume she has considered the ramifications of the perpetrator seeing mail from a site such as Violence Against Women Online Resources? How can staff respond to a message in order to inquire about the best way to proceed without possibly affecting a survivor's safety? If a particular organization cannot help a victim, can staff there forward her email to someone else in another organization that may be better suited to meet her needs? Can an organization be held liable for harm? The anti-violence against women movement must wrestle with these questions to uncover the safety, confidentiality, ethical and liability issues that come into focus as direct services are delivered in cyberspace.

Women have already begun to deal with harassment, stalking and threats online ([American Bar Association, 1999](#)). There is software available that an abusive partner can install to covertly monitor a computer's every keystroke, site viewed, and chats held via the Internet (see <http://www.webroot.com/wgds.htm> (This site is no longer available as of 06/25/04) ). The American Bar Association's Commission on Domestic Violence has published a web page warning victims/survivors to take safety precautions when on the Internet. "How An Abuser Can Discover Your Internet Activities," (see <http://www.abanet.org/domviol/internet.html> ) provides detailed information about how to secure incoming and outgoing email messages; the use of printed and saved email as evidence of harassment; and the practice of clearing the computer's cache file in order to erase the history of web activity.

Changing technology requires new methods of response. The initial shift from telephonic crisis support to digital crisis support requires the development of a new protocol, even though the needs remain familiar. Instead of hearing a scared voice of someone who has no idea where to turn for help, one reads the words that carry the same message.

This relatively new and serious issue of survivors and their friends and family seeking help online begs for discussion and action by the anti-violence against women movement. There is an urgent need for a national discussion about this issue and the development of a strategic plan to address online requests for help. An initial plan could provide an analysis of the safety, confidentiality, and liability concerns of providing online advocacy to survivors of intimate violence. Elements of a strategic plan should also address the pressing needs of service organizations online. It could include, but not be limited to: basic standards for domestic violence and sexual assault organizations with a web presence; a centralized online help center for victims of intimate violence; and a protocol for how local domestic violence organizations can share information with a centralized online victim help center while protecting the privacy and safety of victims/survivors. The time to address this issue is now. The need will only become more prevalent as the Internet becomes further integrated into people's daily lives.

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The following projects are a part of the Minnesota Center Against Violence and Abuse (MINCAVA):

[MINCAVA Electronic Clearinghouse](http://www.mincava.umn.edu/) (<http://www.mincava.umn.edu/>) | [The Link Research Project](http://www.mincava.umn.edu/link/) (<http://www.mincava.umn.edu/link/>) | [Violence Against Women Online Resources](http://www.vaw.umn.edu/) (<http://www.vaw.umn.edu/>) | [VAWnet \(Applied Research Forum\)](http://www.vawnet.org/) (<http://www.vawnet.org/>) | [Minnesota Rural Project for Women and Child Safety](http://www.mincava.umn.edu/rural/) (<http://www.mincava.umn.edu/rural/>) |

MINCAVA is directed by [Jeffrey L. Edleson, PhD](http://www.tc.umn.edu/~jedleson/) (<http://www.tc.umn.edu/~jedleson/>).

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