

## **Initial Lessons Learned from using Video Conferencing Software to deliver Interventions for Men using Violence in Intimate Relationships.**

**Rosanna Bellini and Nicole Westmarland**

In response to a rise in the interest in the use of video conferencing software (VCS) such as Go To Meeting, Skype, Zoom, Teams etc. as a mode of delivery for men's non-violence groups, we decided it would be beneficial to share our findings from an exploratory study we have been performing with Pathways to Family Peace as of January 2019. We are grateful to Melissa Scaia for the opportunity to partner with her on this exciting project. We strongly agree with Melissa's previous statement on the Aquila mailing list that while VCS may seem a 'quick fix' alternative to in-person groups given the usual and unprecedented COVID-19 circumstances, there are important considerations to take as to whether such use of a tool would be safe and suitable for your men's groups. We have organised a list of six initial areas of learning that we have discovered as a result of our exploratory study that we share here somewhat earlier than expected (subject to much deeper analysis in coming weeks).

### **Brief overview of research**

We observed 25 VCS sessions, interviewed four facilitators from two VCS groups, 11 observers to a VCS session who were all experienced at running in person groups, and five men who attended one of the VCS programmes. Ethical approval was granted by Durham University Department of Sociology. All interviews were transcribed and we are in the process of analysing these thematically.

### **Brief overview of programme**

The Pathways to Family Peace programme uses VCS to run a 'live' groupwork programme. It is *not* an e-learning, self-directed programme. It is based in the US and uses the Duluth Model's 'Creating a Process of Change for Men who Batter' curricula combined with the 'Addressing Fatherhood with Men Who Batter' curricula (see <http://www.minnesotaironwoman.com/pathways-to-family-peace.html#> for more information about the programme). Participants are court mandated, volunteer to be part of the VCS pilot, and drawn from rural areas of Minnesota where there exists no opportunity to attend an in-person group.

### **1. VCS groups are second best, and only if assessed as safe.**

At the moment there is no research that demonstrates that VCS is an effective and safe means of delivering a perpetrator/batterer intervention programme/men's behaviour change programme in any country. In our research we conducted an *exploratory* study to investigate what challenges and benefits a VCS could potentially bring to the delivery of future services on such a sensitive topic of domestic violence. It is not an outcome study that we are conducting – this needs to be done in the future. We underline that we need a larger body of evidence to identify whether it is an effective means of working with perpetrators. We recommend for now that any use of VCS is always a secondary option and only if deemed safe for that particular family and only if no in-person alternatives are available.

### **2. Physical environment and digital possessions matter.**

Each participant in a programme requires either a tablet computer (screen size minimum 18cm) or a laptop in order for their face and environment to be seen by a facilitator. While VCS may seem accessible for programme facilitators for effective multi-agency coordination, the same is frequently not true for service users. We identified that the barriers to VCS for some perpetrators were greater than expected with some men, regardless of technical skill. Problems included not possessing a digital device suitable for visual communication, or broadband speeds that could reliably sustain a connection between the facilitators and perpetrators. Facilitators should set up an initial 'testing session' with each of the perpetrators joining the group in order to establish technical proficiency

and a good internet connection to the group. Programmes should be mindful to ensure participants who do not have these required digital devices or recommended broadband speeds may instead have access to community centres, libraries or probation offices where they can access these facilities in their area.

If VCS is deemed as being an appropriate channel to deliver a programme, each participant needs to be in a safe, quiet and isolated location away from victim-survivors, children, pets and friends. This is to ensure sensitive and private conversations do not present an additional risk to victim-survivors as a result of being overheard or the privacy of the participant or other group members being compromised. Please be mindful that there is always a data security risk in the use of any smartphone, tablet computer or laptop through the ability to Screen Capture or Screen Shot the live session. We recommend that while participants may be in a more comfortable environment that their behaviours should be in line with attending an in-person group. By this we mean that smoking/vaping and drinking should not be permitted across the duration of the call.

Facilitators should also be aware of their surroundings and ensure that they apply the same rules to themselves as to their participants, for example all using headphones and making sure they are visible to emphasise this rule applies to all. They should also be very aware of things on their screen (e.g. personal documents, family photos as screensavers/wallpapers etc) if they are sharing their screen and of their physical location within the home, e.g. family photos etc. in the background should be removed.

### **3. Participants tend to communicate less with each other and more with the facilitator when using VCS.**

Part of the importance of running domestic violence perpetrator programmes in a group work setting is to promote a pro-social environment for men learning to action non-abusive behaviours. The ability for men to both support and 'challenge' each other as they move through the programmes is usually deemed important. Through the use of VCS, we saw a reduction in the number of times each participant spoke directly to each other instead of through the facilitators (we base this on what we know about in person groups and through the interviews with observers, we did not conduct a direct comparison). There were numerous occasions where facilitators had to directly encourage some perpetrators to contribute to a discussion. The VCS seemed to impose an artificial turn-taking effect on conversations where the amount of cross-talk, talking over another participant and different conversations occurring at the same time dramatically reduced. In part because of this, we propose participant numbers should be reduced for VCS sessions (perhaps 6-8, see also point 6 below).

### **4. Facilitating an VCS programme is very different to an in-person programme.**

Online courses for some individuals have been seen as being the same as an in-person course only delivered through a technical means. From our investigatory study we identified this was clearly not the case as moving content and delivery to an online space changed the type of facilitation that was necessary to sustain a group and the content that was suitable to be included in the programme. Our project identified that it can be challenging for facilitators to identify and adapt to each other's style of facilitation online.

Courses with heavy use of digital materials, such as videos and online worksheets, should consider trialling different platforms for how this content is broadcast to different remote locations. We found that use of the Duluth programme used videos in more than one in three of their sessions which caused technical problems when conducting a live broadcast of a video (watching in real time). For one group, this activity required participants to go away and watch the video through platforms outside of the VCS and then return back to the group and discuss what they had seen. This

may give participants to leave group unexpectedly and without a reason. However, the other group managed this by downloading videos in advance.

#### **5. Digital delivery should still be part of a Coordinated Community Response.**

Many of the benefits of participating in an online programme, such as for self-learning or organisational training, is that such services are normally framed as an additional add-on to or replacement of in-person training or learning. Similar to in-person groups, we underline the importance that any changes to the delivery of interventions for perpetrators be approached as a piece of a wider, coordinated multi-agency response to domestic violence. By this we mean that it is important for victim-survivor support services to be made aware if the programme moving online and offering any necessary support the victim-survivor might need during and after their current or ex-partner is participating or has participated in the session. As the victim-survivor may not be in physical range of domestic violence services now conducting activities online this will likely require more resources to potentially reach them and their family for support. Risk assessments, communication with partners, child safety and contact assessments etc. all still need to be conducted – arguably more so – for VCS based programmes.

#### **6. New challenges arise with the introduction of technology.**

While technology might give off the impression of solving the problem of participation and coverage, we strongly reinforce the understanding that using technology in response to these problems (particularly in the wake of COVID-19) will result in new problems to the delivery of such courses that we have outlined earlier. As we discussed previously, technical connection problems, alterations to verbal turn taking and access to the safe quiet space would not normally be challenges to an in-person group. For our study, Pathways to Family Peace used a Premium version of GoToMeeting that performed generally well for communication between participants but did not work well in the transmission of videos and lacked a built-in whiteboard. While there are a range of different platforms that may host video-conferencing features (Microsoft Teams, Zoom basic, Google Hangouts) we ask that facilitators consider the following technical requirements:

- (Essential) Live hosting of more than 8 participants at the same time
- (Essential) Change host title name to remove identifying details (i.e. surname)
- (Essential) Ability to mute participants by facilitator
- (Essential) Ease of sharing digital documents and presentations
- (Essential) Live hosting of more than 10 participants at the same time (2 facilitators, suggested maximum of 8 participants)
- (Ideally) An electronic whiteboard feature to document in-session activities, this can be substituted with sharing a word document or a facilitator holding up a small whiteboard
- (Ideally) Ability to broadcast videos within the session
- (Ideally) A private chat feature so that facilitators can communicate with each other

It is also worth remembering that different countries and states will have different legal requirements around data security that will need to be taken into consideration (e.g. GDPR for the UK, HIPAA in the US).

We note here that this list is only our preliminary findings and recommendations for courses that wish to immediately move to using videoconferencing software as a result of unprecedented circumstances. We expect the full report that list will expand on these recommendations by evidencing our findings in more details to follow shortly within the next few months. Please get in touch if you have any questions, concerns or comments that can inform this field moving forward.