

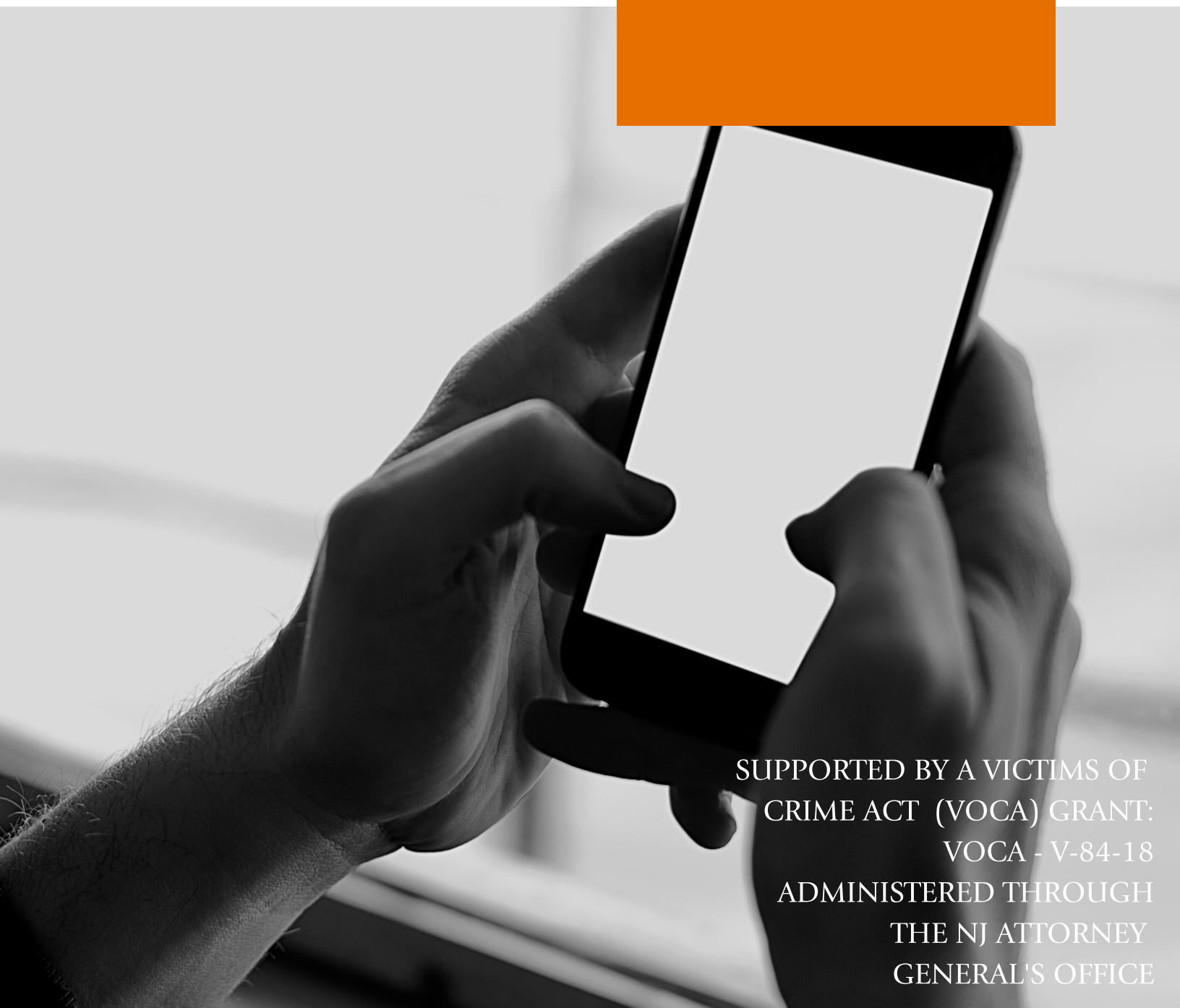
BENEFITS AND LIMITATIONS OF TEXT-BASED COUNSELING: AN OVERVIEW

Contributors

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ENHANCING VICTIM
SERVICES PROJECT



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OVERVIEW

Text-based counseling services have been utilized since the widespread use of the internet in the mid-1990's (Maheu & Gordon, 2000) and include synchronous (e.g., live chat) and asynchronous (e.g., email) formats. Text-based services may be offered as a replacement for face-to-face or telephone counseling, or as an adjunctive treatment. Some text-based services involve one-way communication; for example, Text4Mood, introduced in Alberta, Canada, was designed as an adjunctive treatment to improve subscribers' depression and anxiety symptoms (Agyapoing et al., 2016). Agyapoing and colleagues (2016) found that subscribers to Text4Mood felt connected to supports and hopeful and in control of their ability to manage mental health symptoms. There is limited research on which types of clients and their presenting problems benefit most from text-based counseling services and differences in effectiveness based on format type. However, research has demonstrated benefits and limitations of text-based counseling services.



BENEFITS



Increased sense of privacy and anonymity by users

One systematic review found that these factors were related to higher levels of self-disclosure and discussion of more intimate topics

However, other research has demonstrated the opposite: that more complex and sensitive topics necessitate richer communication formats, such as face-to-face psychotherapy



Reduced stigma discussing mental health



Feelings of safety and comfort with text-based communication, especially for younger clients



More time to reflect before responding



Accessibility and flexibility of chat-based communication



More control over sessions for clients/service users



Improved mental health outcomes compared to waitlisted study



Improved reach to underserved populations

LIMITATIONS

- » Users' discomfort with this type of technology
- » Connectivity issues can disrupt communication
- » Slower responses can inhibit goal-setting
- » Too many opportunities for miscommunication
- » Difficulty perceiving client affect
- » Differences in strength of therapeutic alliance in text-based vs. face-to-face counseling
- » Lack of adequate research on culturally competent text-based therapy

Text-based counseling services increase the availability of counseling to those who may not want or have access to face-to-face counseling services. However, the limitations of text-based communication should also be considered when providing this type of service. Additionally, victim service providers should consider whether to include text-based counseling as an additional communication option for crisis hotlines and warmlines (single session), or whether text-based services will be offered in an ongoing format (multiple sessions).

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