Volunteer Guidelines

1. Purpose of the Service

Trans Walk and Talk is a peer support service for trans and gender-diverse people who would like someone to stay on the phone with them while they walk home. The goal is to help users feel less nervous, isolated, or unsafe during their walk.

As a volunteer, your role is to provide friendly conversation, reassurance, and a sense of connection until the user reaches their destination. You are not expected to act as a counsellor, security professional, or emergency responder.

These guidelines are intended to help volunteers provide a consistent, respectful, and safe experience for everyone using the service.

2. Privacy and Confidentiality

All users' names, contact information, personal details, and experiences must be treated as confidential.

Volunteers must:

- Never disclose who has used the service to friends, other community members, or people outside the program.
- Never share a user's personal information without their explicit consent, except when disclosure is required by the program's safety or reporting procedures.
- Never share details about an incident that occurred during a call simply because the story is dramatic, upsetting, or could be useful to the wider community.
- Respect that a user's experiences belong to them. It is their choice whether to share their story publicly or with others.
- Keep all information about users secure and follow the program's documentation procedures.

Sharing incidents

If an incident occurs during a call, ask the user what they are comfortable with, where appropriate, before documenting or sharing information about their experience.

Depending on the user's wishes, they may:

- Prefer that the incident not be shared with anyone beyond what is required for safety reporting.
- Want the incident documented by the program.

- Want a supervisor informed.
- Want a volunteer to corroborate their experience if they decide to make a report.
- Want relevant safety information shared with other trans community members.

Respect the user's preferences wherever possible.

Exception: Volunteer safety

Any incident that creates a risk to volunteer safety should be documented and reported to the supervisor, even if the user would prefer that it not be reported. Share only the information necessary to address the safety concern, and explain this limit to the user when appropriate.

If you are unsure about what can be shared, consult the supervisor.

3. Documentation and Team Communication

Accurate documentation helps the program maintain continuity, identify safety concerns, and support volunteers.

For each call, follow the program's established recordkeeping procedures. At a minimum, the program should determine whether to record:

- Call start and end times.
- Whether the user reached their destination safely, if known.
- Any incidents, safety concerns, or significant disruptions.
- Any follow-up required from a supervisor or the next volunteer.

Keep records factual, brief, and relevant. Avoid speculation, unnecessary personal details, or subjective judgements about users.

Only record and access information through approved program channels. Do not keep personal copies of user information or discuss cases through informal channels.

If a safety concern arises, report it to the supervisor promptly. If a call is handed over to another volunteer, communicate only the information necessary to continue supporting the user safely.

4. Boundaries with Users

Trans Walk and Talk aims to build community without making users or volunteers feel obligated to form personal relationships.

Personal contact information

Volunteers are discouraged from sharing their personal phone numbers, social media accounts, or other contact information with users. This is not an absolute prohibition, but volunteers should consider the potential risks before doing so.

Sharing personal contact information may lead to unwanted contact, harassment, or expectations that extend beyond the service. Relationships and interactions outside the program are outside its scope and are not covered by the program's volunteer support procedures.

Volunteers may use these guidelines as an explanation if they do not wish to share personal information.

If a user and volunteer are planning on contacting each other outside of the service, they may want to meet at a public trans community event rather than exchanging personal contact information.

Contacting users outside the program

Volunteers must never use contact information provided to the program to contact a user personally without the user's explicit consent.

If a volunteer finishes their shift before a user reaches their destination, they may ask the user whether they consent to the incoming volunteer providing an update once the call is complete.

Existing friendships

We encourage you to share this service with your friends. So, some volunteers may already be friends with people who use the service. During these calls, volunteers are expected to follow the same professional boundaries and behavioural guidelines as they would with any other user.

Building community

Volunteers are encouraged to support community connection without making personal relationships a condition of receiving support.

If a user is looking to meet other trans people or build friendships, volunteers can suggest relevant community events and resources, including:

- Kind Space's Gender Quest.
- Ottawa Trans Library community events.
- ATLAS Ottawa.
- The Ottawa Trans Library.
- MAX Ottawa.

5. Behaviour Towards Users

Volunteers should aim to treat every user with respect, patience, and consideration. Volunteers should help create a positive and welcoming environment.

Volunteers should never:

- Flirt with users or make sexual advances.
- Ask invasive questions about a user's transition, body, medical history, or personal life.
- Pressure users to disclose personal information.
- Make assumptions about a user's gender, pronouns, identity, experiences, or circumstances.
- Dismiss, minimize, or argue with a user's concerns about their safety.
- Pressure users to continue a conversation or discuss a topic they do not wish to discuss.
- Use the service to promote personal, romantic, or sexual relationships.

Please always, use the name and pronouns provided by the user. If a mistake is made, correct it briefly and move on.

Respecting user preferences

If a user asks to change the conversation topic, please do so without asking them to justify their request.

If a user becomes quiet, tired, or less interested in talking, do not pressure them to maintain the conversation. Ask whether they would prefer to chat or have a quiet call.

The goal is always to help users feel more comfortable during their walk.

6. Appropriate Conversation

Conversation should be relaxed, friendly, and guided by the user's interests and comfort level. Volunteers do not need to fill every moment with conversation.

Appropriate topics

Examples include:

- How the user's day has been.
- Hobbies, interests, music, books, films, or television.
- Pets, food, games, or other everyday subjects.
- Local events and community activities.
- General trans-positive topics, if the user is comfortable discussing them.
- Plans for the evening or things the user is looking forward to.

Possible conversation starters:

- "How has your day been?"
- "Have you watched or read anything good lately?"
- "What kind of music do you like?"
- "Do you have any hobbies you've been enjoying recently?"
- "Would you like to chat about something in particular, or would you prefer a distraction?"

Topics requiring a check-in

Some topics may be comfortable for one person and distressing for another. Check before introducing subjects such as:

- Experiences of discrimination, harassment, or violence.
- Mental health, trauma, or difficult life events.
- Family conflict, relationships, or other sensitive personal matters.
- Political events or debates beyond general trans-positive discussion.

For example, ask, "Would you be comfortable talking about that, or would you rather discuss something else?"

If the user declines, change the subject without pressing for an explanation.

Topics to avoid

Volunteers should avoid:

- Debates about whether trans people deserve rights, dignity, or recognition.
- Unsolicited opinions about a user's appearance, body, transition, or identity.
- Graphic descriptions of violence or traumatic experiences.
- Sexual conversations, romantic propositions, or comments about a user's attractiveness.
- Gossip about other users, volunteers, or identifiable members of the community.

7. Unacceptable Behaviour from Users

Volunteers deserve to feel safe and respected while providing the service. Supporting a user does not require tolerating harassment, threats, sexual advances, discriminatory abuse, or other inappropriate conduct.

If a user behaves inappropriately:

1. **Set a clear boundary.** Calmly explain that the behaviour is not acceptable during the call.
2. **Redirect the conversation.** If appropriate, give the user an opportunity to return to respectful conversation.

3. **End the call if necessary.** Volunteers are not required to continue a call if they feel unsafe or are subjected to serious or repeated harassment.
4. **Report the incident.** Inform the supervisor and document the incident according to program procedures, particularly if there is a safety concern.
5. **Seek support.** Volunteers may ask a supervisor for assistance with difficult interactions and decisions about future contact.

Possible boundary-setting statements include:

- "I'm here to help you feel more comfortable on your walk, and I need us to keep the conversation respectful."
- "I'm not comfortable discussing that. Let's change the subject."
- "That comment is not appropriate. If it continues, I'll need to end the call."

If a user makes a threat or creates an immediate safety concern, follow the program's safety and escalation procedures. Volunteers should not put themselves at risk to continue providing the service.

8. Volunteer Wellbeing

Providing support can be meaningful, but volunteers should not feel responsible for solving every problem or absorbing every difficult experience shared by users.

Volunteers are encouraged to recognize their own limits and take steps to maintain their wellbeing.

Managing stress and preventing burnout

Helpful practices may include:

- Taking breaks between shifts or calls when needed.
- Maintaining a consistent sleep routine and getting enough rest.
- Walking, spending time in nature, listening to music, or engaging in other restorative activities.
- Exploring activities such as yoga, Pilates, or other forms of peaceful focus.
- Connecting with trusted friends, community supports, or spiritual supports, if helpful.
- Speaking with a supervisor when a call has been particularly difficult.
- Taking time away from volunteering when necessary.

These are just suggestions, what will help you best depends on who you are. Volunteers are encouraged to reflect on their personal needs when planning to avoid burnout.

Recognizing personal limits

Volunteers are not expected to provide counselling, clinical mental health support, or emergency response services. It is important to acknowledge that some situations are beyond the volunteer's role.

Volunteers may decline a shift, request a break, or step back from the program when needed. They should communicate with the supervisor about any support or adjustments that would help them continue volunteering safely.

9. Conflict Resolution

Conflicts should be handled respectfully, consistently, and with attention to the safety and wellbeing of everyone involved.

Conflicts between volunteers

For conflicts between volunteers, follow the ATLAS conflict resolution guide and consult the appropriate supervisor when needed.

Conflicts between volunteers and users

If a disagreement or conflict arises during a call:

1. Remain calm and avoid escalating the situation.
2. Listen to the concern and clarify any misunderstanding where appropriate.
3. Maintain the service's boundaries and safety requirements.
4. End the call if continuing is unsafe or inappropriate.
5. Document and report the incident when required by program procedures.
6. Refer unresolved concerns to the supervisor rather than attempting to resolve serious disputes independently.

Supervisors should review significant conflicts consistently, protect confidential information, and determine whether additional support, boundaries, or changes to service access are necessary.

Volunteers should not retaliate against users, disclose private information during a dispute, or use their position in the program to resolve personal conflicts.

10. Core Principles

Every volunteer is expected to follow these principles:

1. **Confidentiality:** Protect users' identities, personal information, and experiences.
2. **Respect:** Treat every user with dignity and affirm their identity.

3. **Consent:** Respect users' preferences about conversation, personal information, and sharing their experiences.
4. **Boundaries:** Keep the focus on providing the service rather than developing personal or romantic relationships.
5. **Safety:** Report and respond to safety concerns according to program procedures.
6. **Accountability:** Document incidents appropriately and seek guidance when unsure.
7. **Wellbeing:** Recognize personal limits and take steps to prevent burnout.

The purpose of Trans Walk and Talk is to help trans and gender-diverse people feel less alone and more comfortable while walking home. Volunteers contribute to that goal by providing consistent, respectful, and reliable support.

Guidelines

Privacy

- How much of a user's information should be confidential?
- There is often a strong urge to share stories, especially when the stories are dramatic. How will we create systems that actually stop people from sharing these stories?
- Anything that creates a risk of volunteer safety will always be recorded

- All user's names and personal information is confidential
    - Do not tell other people who have been using the program
    - This includes any incidents that happen to users while you are on call with them
        - We understand the desire to share these stories to inform the trans community but that is a trauma that they lived through and it is their story to tell, not yours
        - The exacts of this rule will depend on what the user decides
            - They may want you to not tell anyone
                - *If an incident indicates a risk to volunteer safety it will have to be documented and reported to the supervisor
            - They may want you to document the incident or tell a supervisor
            - They may want you to corroborate their experience if they decide to report it to the police
            - They may not care who you tell or even want you to inform other trans people of the incident for safety reasons
        - Whatever they decide it is imperative that you respect that decision

Documentation and Team Communication

- What should be documented for all calls?
    - Call start and end time?
    - If an incident occurred?

Boundaries with users

- We want this project to help build community but we also want both users and volunteers to not feel required to form relationships (platonic or otherwise) with others
- Discourage but allow volunteers to give out personal information?
    - Let them use the volunteer guidelines as an excuse for why they aren't giving their personal contact information
    - We're not liable or responsible for anything that happens outside the program
- Many volunteers will already be friends with users. How should we handle these cases?
- Volunteers may **never** use the contact information someone gives the program to personally reach out to someone without their explicit consent

- We encourage volunteers to suggest users go to community events, like the OTL or Kind Space's gender quest, if the user is looking for connection
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- This project is meant to help build community
    - We discourage you from giving your personal contact information to users
    - However, this is an inter community project and it is natural and expected that you may grow friendships with people using this service
        - You are discouraged but not prohibited from sharing contact information with users who you trust
            - But beware that whatever experiences you have with them through personal contact fall outside of the purview of this program
            - You may be putting yourself at risk of harassment or unwanted advances if you give them your contact information
    - There will also be many users who you are already friends with
        - During calls with friends we still expect you to follow the same guidelines as to appropriate conversation (no flirting/sexual advances) and to remember that you are still acting as a volunteer for this program
    - You may never use the contact information someone gives the program to personally reach out to someone without their explicit consent
        - If you leave a shift before they get home and want to know if they arrived safely you can ask the user if it's okay for the volunteer taking over for them to let you know once they have finished their call
        - For any other concerns you have regarding users while you are not on shift, you should contact the volunteer currently on shift to address those concerns
- We encourage you to suggest other queer resources such as those from ATLAS Ottawa, the Ottawa Trans Library or MAX Ottawa
    - Instead of giving your personal contact information to a user, you may want to plan to meet them at a trans event

Behaviour towards users

- What kind of behaviour might make a user feel less safe?
- What kind of behaviour might make a user not want to use the service again?
    - Which of these behaviours should be allowed and which shouldn't?
- If they ever ask to change the conversation topic, do, without any questions asked
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- Don't flirt with them
- Don't make sexual advances towards them
- Don't ask them invasive questions about their transition

Examples of Appropriate conversation

- “How was your day?”

Examples of inappropriate conversation

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Appropriate Conversation Topics

- What are topics of conversation you often have with other people?
- What are good conversation starters?

Inappropriate Conversation Topics

Never Discuss

- What conversation topics should not be allowed because we don’t want them associated with this service?
- What are some conversation topics that may cause conflicts?
    - Politics can cause conflict but this service is inherently political because of its a trans organization
    - Avoid politics other than general trans positive topics?

Always check if they are okay with the topic first

- What are conversation topics that may make some people uncomfortable?

Unacceptable behaviour from users

- What are some things that volunteers should not have to tolerate?
- How should volunteers respond?

Volunteer Wellbeing

- How do we avoid volunteer burnout?
- We don’t have the psych knowledge to be able to tell volunteers what the right decisions for their mental health are. How do we support them in finding what they need to do for their mental health and helping them implement it?
- Build a Toolbox for our mental health. An effective tool is moving; walking together is a great mental health tool. Finding a place in nature, listening to music, finding spiritual supports, things that work for you. Yoga and Pilates, or something that can allow for peaceful focus is fantastic.
- Sleep. Doesn’t matter what time it is, as long as it’s routine and enough will do wonders.

Conflict Resolution

- For conflicts between volunteers refer to the ATLAS conflict resolution guide

- What should happen for conflicts between volunteers and users?

Intake Questions:

- Phone number (if we're calling them over the phone)
- What would you like to be called?
- What are your pronouns?
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{receive call request}
{if you are busy} -> respond with a copy/paste message: “Hello, this service is currently busy. If you are experiencing an emergency call 911”
{if you are not busy} -> call the phone number they provided
    {if they do not pick up} -> try again in 10-15 minutes and document a ‘no response’ call
    {if they do pick up} ->

Introduction
Hello, this is [name/pseudonym] calling from community walk and talk. Is now still a good time?

{if user mentions ‘trans’ or being able to speak openly} - > confirm name, pronouns and emergency procedure
{else} -> ask them what name to call them and avoid mentioning that this service is for trans people or asking any questions that could indicate that (eg ‘what are your pronouns?’)

Ask if user would like to chat during the call or would just like to have quiet company
{if user would not like to talk} -> ask if it is okay for you to check in every ~5 minutes, if they’d like a different frequency or if they don’t want you to check in
{if the user wants to talk, refer to the appendix for appropriate/inappropriate questions to ask} -> remind the user that they are free to change the topic at any point in time and don’t have to answer any questions you ask. This conversation is just to keep them company and they are in control of it

{if someone is not calling just to harass volunteers} -> end the call immediately. If you don’t have a recording of the call, document it. Add the phone number to the ban list

{if user says something that makes you uncomfortable} -> inform them that you cannot engage with that type of conversation and redirect towards either having a quiet TWaT call or talking about approved topics
{if behaviour continues} -> warn them you will have to end the call if this happens again and try to redirect towards a quiet call or approved topics
{if behaviour still continues} -> inform them you now have to end the call and their phone number will be added to a ‘decline calls’ list until they make an appointment to speak with a supervisor about their behaviour. End the call immediately after informing them. DO NOT listen to pleas or last minute apologies. If they have not changed their behaviour by this point it is likely they will continue with the behaviour if you stay on the phone with them. They will have the chance to use the service again after talking with a supervisor.

Emergency procedure:
Are you okay with us calling 911 for you? If we have to should we avoid asking for police?

Is there an emergency contact you would like us to call

If you unexpectedly disconnect what would you like us to do
Call 911
Call 911 for ambulance
Call emergency contact
Send you a text inviting you to call us back and not take other steps
Other

What are some of the situations users might face?

- Someone might be following them
    - Get to a populated and/or well lit area
- Someone is harassing them
    - Take the user's focus off the harasser and encourage them to get to a safe space
- Someone is physically endangering them
    - Involve 911?