
TEXT MESSAGING FOR PARTNER NOTIFICATION

Introduction

This document has been developed by the National Internet-based Partner Services group (NIPS) in partnership with the National Alliance of State and Territorial AIDS Directors (NASTAD) to inform and educate disease intervention specialist (DIS), key stakeholders within health departments, and those involved with or have interest regarding the use of text messaging for partner notification.

History

Approximately 88% of Americans have a mobile phone¹. Of notable importance, there are an increasing number of Americans that are now reachable only through wireless mobile devices. A Centers for Disease Control (CDC) study released May 2009, showed that 20 percent of American homes subscribe to a wireless (cellular) phone service and not a traditional landline making these households reachable only through a mobile telephone².

As a communications device, the mobile phone provides users with options as to the type of contact they prefer. Text messaging, one of the most used features for a mobile device, has quickly become the preferred method of communication for a growing population. Text messaging, or Short Message Service (SMS), is the sending and receiving of brief written messages most frequently sent and/or received between one mobile phone and another mobile phone.

Since 2007, mobile phone subscribers in the United States sent and received more text messages than phone calls. As of the second quarter of 2008, a typical U.S. subscriber sent or received 357 text messages per month, compared to placing or receiving 204 phone calls. In the U.S. today, about 200 million of the 259 million wireless subscriber lines subscribe to or purchase text-message capability of these, 138 million (or 53% of all mobile subscribers) use text-messaging on a regular basis³.

Additionally, it is important to note that in response to user demand, most wireless carriers now offer 'text only' plans which provide unlimited text messaging and often do not include or permit voice calls. In cases such as this, text messages are the only means of communication through the wireless device.

About Text Messages

The terms Short Message Service (SMS) and Text Messaging can be used interchangeably, although SMS is a term more often used within the mobile industry. A single text message can be up to 160 characters in length and can be comprised of words, numbers, or an alphanumeric combination.

Currently, text messages can be sent to a mobile phone or communication device in one of three ways: mobile to mobile, internet to mobile, or email to mobile. (Be aware that most services that offer free 'web-to-text' or 'internet to mobile' services will include advertisements within the text message that is sent.) Using a third party service, such as a free web-to-text service found on the internet, may not be a secure method of communication and could expose the DIS, their clients, and patients to spyware, cell phone spam, and possibly have other undesired outcomes. It is therefore recommended that DIS do not utilize free, third party web-to-text sites to contact clients and/or partners.

Most cell phone carriers will offer their own web-to-text service. When the carrier is known (obtained through a reverse search or other methods) the web-to-text tools provided by the carrier may be used as an alternative to using a cell phone when a cell phone is not available or when a texting plan is not available. (Examples of web-to-text tools include: <https://text.vzw.com>, <http://messaging.sprintpcs.com>) When the carrier information is incorrect it is most likely that the message sent though the carrier's site will not be delivered. It is important to make every effort to confirm that the contact number you have is associated with a cellular phone and who the current carrier is.

Texting as Partner Notification

Considering current shifts in the ways Americans communicate, text messaging is a viable means for conducting partner notification (PN). Recently, txtPN has become a valuable tool for DIS and in some cases, has been the only means for reaching a patient.

Text messaging should be an option for communicating with clients and conducting PN. The goal of text messaging by DIS is to motivate the recipient to communicate via voice. Conducting PN through text is particularly applicable in situations where a client or partner is not responding to traditional means of follow-up e.g. phone calls and field visits.

Field experience in this area is currently limited, as protocols and guidance for text message partner notification (txtPN) have not previously been developed. There is however, a growing number of DIS from several departments of health, who have reported that they are receiving feedback from clients and their partners stating that text message is the preferred method of contact, and in some cases, the only means of contact.

Case Studies

In June of 2009, the New York State Department of Health was made aware of a 'needs treatment' patient that was unreachable by the provider. Several calls were made to the contact number provided and letters were sent to the address on record with no response. A DIS located in Rochester, NY, conducted a reverse search, through the internet, on the telephone number provided. The DIS discovered that the phone was a cellular phone and that the carrier was Verizon. The DIS then sent a text message stating that he was with the department of health and needed to speak with them regarding an urgent health matter. The patient sent an immediate reply via text message and stated that they would call the DIS the next day. The patient called the next day and was made aware of their infection and need for treatment.

Text messaging has also been used as the preferred means of communication when a client was hearing impaired. Using text messaging when a patient or partner has a hearing impairment should be presented as an option when possible.

There have been several instances around the nation where a partner has responded by text message to a voice message left on a cellular line.

It is highly recommended that supervisors have an in-depth discussion with their DIS regarding their experience in the use of text message for partner services.

Applying Text Messaging for Partner Notification

As stated earlier, conducting PN through text is applicable in situations where a client or partner is not responding to traditional means of follow-up (e.g. phone calls and field visits).

A text message should be sent in order to prompt the person to respond. Caution must be taken to ensure that the DIS has the correct number and that the correct number is being entered. Ideally the DIS will confirm that the contact number on file is a number that is connected to a mobile phone through internet tools such as 'reverse search'. (Example: www.reversemobile.com) It is important to note that information obtained through a reverse lookup may not be the most current information. It is possible for a cell phone subscriber to retain a cell phone number that has been assigned by one carrier when switching from to a new cellular provider. In this case the previous cellular provider may be inaccurately listed as the current provider.

When conducting txtPN, messages must be sent from a work phone or a work computer; personal cell phones or computers should not be used to communicate with clients or their partner(s).

Confidentiality is of the utmost importance regardless of the tools used for communication. Sending a text message carries similar risks to leaving a voice mail message on an answering service. DIS should remember that text messages can be viewed by people other than the intended recipient if they have access to the mobile phone of the person receiving the text message. Because of this, it is recommended that broad language be used when communicating via text message. (See sample text messages on page 5) It is not recommended that disease specific information be exchanged through text messaging.

Text messaging is a rapid means of communication. When you are contacted through text message a timely response will be anticipated by the sender. When you receive a reply to a text message, responding in a timely manner will help ensure your success, and is similar to the importance of quickly building rapport during an original interview. If you are attempting to initiate contact, send no more than three text messages spaced apart over a specific period of time to be determined by the conditions and the protocol of your department.

Some carriers will provide you with an option to receive a text message delivery confirmation this services, where available, is requested by you through the settings on your cellular phone or through your carrier account preferences. If you have received confirmation that your first text message has been delivered and you have not received a response within 3-6 hours, it is recommended that you send a second text message, at another time of day (e.g. evening, morning, night). If you have not received a reply to the second message, another message should be sent within 6-12 hours, making this the third and final attempt. If you are unable to confirm that your first message has been received, a second message should be sent between 3 and 12 hours later. It is important to remember that text messages can be received at any time of day or night and you should be aware that you may receive a reply to your text message at any time of day or night. (Times listed are used for example only and should be adjusted according to your protocol).

Text messages that are received should be responded to with a text message unless a voice call has been agreed upon. Once contact has been established, the next text message from the DIS should be a request that the conversation be further conducted through a 'voice call'.

As cell phones are wireless devices and can be used anywhere, it is important that you consider your location when sending a text messages. Text messages should be sent when you are in a space that offers privacy. Should the recipient respond quickly; you must be prepared to respond quickly, communicate confidentially, and have

access to any resources that may be needed to conduct partner services. Never text message while you are driving or otherwise preoccupied.

As with internet partner services, when sending a text message send one message to one phone at a time, do not send multiple messages to multiple phones, and do not forward messages.

Most of the major carriers including but not limited to; Sprint, Verizon, and T-Mobile, offer a service called "Text to Landline". (See: <http://www1.sprintpcs.com/explore/ueContent.jsp?scTopic=txt2landline293>) Text to Landline will allow you to send a text messages from your cellular phone to a 'land line' automatically converting the text to a computerized voice call. This is of particular importance when it is assumed that the contact number that has been provided is a cellular number but the number is actually associated with a 'land line'.

Similar to other partner services logs, cell phones used for communicating with clients or their partners contain a history of communication and must be secured at all times and locked with the screen turned off or darkened when not in use. Phone numbers and messages exchanged with clients or their partners must be properly documented on the appropriate forms and deleted from all electronic devices once the case is closed.

Before sending a text message, consider the following:

- Be aware of the tone of your text. It is extremely difficult to discern tone in text messages. What seems to you to be an acceptable message may be misunderstood or appear impersonal to the recipient.
- Remain professional at all times, do not to use abbreviations or slang phrases.
- Keep your messages short and to the point. The purpose of sending a text message is to engage the person in a voice call or face to face conversation, not to disclose disease specific information.
- Text messages/SMS are limited to 160 characters (including spaces). If a message is over 160 characters many cell phone carriers (but not all) will split an oversized message into two or more messages automatically during transmission. However, because this is not always the case, it is recommended that messages be kept within the 160 character limit.
- If you are already communicating with a client or patient in others ways, such as through email, and believe that a text message may be a more effective, be sure to ask your client or patient if texting is acceptable before sending any messages.
- Be aware that some people do not have a text messaging plan as part of their cell phone service. When this is the case there are usually charges for each text message received and sent. Also remember while most users will have the capacity for text but some users will choose to block text messages.
- The texting history of the case on the mobile device should be cleared and texting should cease once a case is closed.

Sample Text Messages

Your first text message should identify who you are and/or where you work and provide a brief message and your contact phone number.

- I am John Doe with the *(insert local Health Department name)* and I need to speak with you. Please call me as soon as possible at 555-555-5555.
- I am with the *(insert local Health Department name)* and I have important information regarding your personal health, please call as soon as possible 555-555-5555
- Hi _____, I am with the *(insert local Health Department name)* and I have information regarding a urgent health matter, please call 555-555-5555

If the person does not respond to your initial text within 24 hours a second message urging the person to call you may be sent and it should read:

- This is John Doe again with the *(insert local Health Department name)*. I need to talk to you regarding an urgent health matter, please call me at 555-555-5555.
- This is John Doe again with the *(insert local Health Department name)*. I have urgent health information for you. Please call me at 555-555-5555.

If the person does not respond to either of your first two messages a final text may be sent, it should read:

- I have been trying to contact you as it is very important that we talk. Please call me at 555-555-5555. This is my last attempt to help you.

Should the person you are texting respond with a text message requesting more information, your response should read:

- I am not able to give you the specific information in text message this is urgent and needs your immediate attention. Please call me at 555-555-5555.
- This is a serious matter, I can tell you more when you call, please call me through a private line at 555-555-5555
- The information I have for you is confidential. I can tell you more when you call, please call me through a private line at 555-555-5555

Should it be determined that disease-specific information may be given through text it is highly recommended that you:

- Receive authorization from the partner to transmit the disease-specific information through text
- Only provide disease-specific information if you are going to lose contact with the partner
- Ask the partner to contact if you if seek testing and treatment for follow-up

Conclusion

In the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Health Marketing Director's Blog, Jay M. Bernhardt, PhD, MPH states "Mobile text messaging (SMS) can benefit many areas of public health, including early warning systems for outbreaks or public health emergencies, chronic disease self-management, medication adherence, diet and physical activity self-monitoring and tailored messaging, and many other health promotion issues." As these new tools are adopted and used by the general public these same tools must be adopted and used by public health for their HIV/STD prevention and disease intervention activities.

Frequently Asked Questions

1. Who can I text message?

Text messages should be sent to clients, their partner(s), or members of their social network only during the course of a public health investigation and when texting is the only venue of communication or when the client and/or partner states that text message is the preferred method of communication.

2. When should I consider sending a text message?

Text messages should be considered when traditional means of communication, such as phone calls and field visits, have not yielded a response or are not an option.

3. How many text messages can I send an individual person?

If you are attempting to initiate contact, it is recommended that you send no more than a total of three text messages. The final message should indicate that it is your last attempt at contact. If you are exchanging messages, ask if communicating through text message is acceptable. Once communication is established, text messaging should be limited to what is required to establish contact through other means, such as a voice call. Texting should cease once the case is closed.

4. Can I use abbreviations or slang phrases in a text message?

All messages should be as professional as possible and spelled correctly. Avoid abbreviations and acronyms. Remember that you are sending a message on behalf of the health department and all your communications should reflect professionalism. Do not send smiley faces, symbols, or use SMS or multimedia message service (MMS) to send photos or other media.

5. Can I tell someone that they have been exposed to an STD or HIV via a text message?

It is recommended that DIS follow the same general standards regarding disease-specific information as established by the state or local internet-based partner services guidelines and protocols.

6. Can I conduct an interview over a text message?

Text messages are designed to be short and to the point, every effort should be made to conduct an interview through other methods of communication.

7. How long should I keep text messages on my cell phone?

Copies of text messages sent or received should be retained in the mobile device and/or email account during the investigation deleted upon case closure.

8. Do I have to document all text messages communication?

All communication/interaction should be documented in detail on the appropriate forms and retained in the investigation case file.

9. What should I do if I receive inappropriate or non-related text messages?

Respond to the incoming messages with a message such as: "Please do not send me these types of messages. It is inappropriate for me to receive these types of messages. Thank you."

10. Is text messaging a confidential or anonymous way to communicate with people?

Text messaging is not anonymous and messages can be traced. Messages are not 100% confidential as cell phone carriers (e.g. AT&T, T Mobile, Verizon, etc) can store and retrieve the messages sent and received. There are similarities between IPS and txtPN in the level of confidentiality as website administrators have access to sent and received emails, just as cellular phone carriers have access to sent and received text messages.

References

¹ International Telecommunication Union (ITU), "World Telecommunication Indicators Database", as reported by emarketer, June 2009.

² Early release of estimates from the National Health Interview Survey, July-December 2008. National Center for Health Statistics. May 2009. Available from: <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nhis.htm>.

³ Covey Nic: Nielsen Consumer Insight: Optimize, Flying Fingers. November 2008. Available from: <http://www.nielsenmobile.com>