

DIGIUM'S SWITCHVOX MODERNIZES CRISIS HOTLINE – AND SAVES THEM MONEY



CASE STUDY

SWITCHVOX

Over 1,200 victims of domestic and sexual abuse called the confidential 24-hour crisis hotline at Ashland, Virginia's Hanover Safe Place (HSP) last year. The small nonprofit provides victims with free case management services, emergency shelter, abuse advocacy counselors, and support groups. HSP's mission is to help victims, prevent domestic and sexual abuse throughout the county, and create community awareness around these issues. In order to maintain their ability to provide 24/7 response and victim confidentiality, they required a flexible, stable, and highly responsive business communications system. Digium Switchvox fit their requirements perfectly.

Switchvox answers call to improve crisis hotline capabilities for Virginia-based Hanover Safe Place

Eighteen months ago, HSP had 10 staff members and an annual budget of \$600,000. Left over from the previous occupants of HSP's Ashland location, the legacy phone system in place was a POTS, or Plain Old Telephone Service. The system came with four analog phone lines, no voicemail capability, and no ability to transfer calls. There was also no intercom system to page a counselor for incoming client calls.

There was basic communication within the office, meaning whoever happened to be available would answer the phone. Employees had to write down messages and phone numbers on a notepad and leave them on the desk of the caseworker, counselor, or staff member for when they came into the office. According to HSP director, Sheree Hedrick, this was not only inefficient in today's world, but it was also problematic in terms of the strict federal and state laws their organization must abide by in regards to confidentiality.

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**Sheree Hedrick,
Director, HSP**

“Without voicemail, we could not simply leave communications from or between clients and staff lying around on a desktop for anyone to see,” Hedrick explains. “Not just during the business week, but especially on weekends, we had to lock up phone messages so the cleaning staff couldn’t see them. You can imagine how awkward and inept our old system was.”

Hedrick says the prompt to finally consider an updated phone system came from a connection at her local Rotary Club. Fellow Rotary member, Kevin Smyth, of Barre Y Lane Communications, is a value added reseller (VAR) and Digium channel partner. He recommended Digium’s Switchvox Unified Communications (UC) solution as the right alternative and replacement for HSP’s legacy phone system.

“Kevin is a great person and is known for doing a lot for our community,” Hedrick says.

“He knew the right questions to ask and helped us look at all of our options. We told him our needs and explained how important it was for the system and the hotline to be client-centered. The last thing we wanted was for a client to say they tried to call and no one answered, which had happened a couple of times with the old system. We also needed a means for documenting every hotline call, something that had been nearly impossible with any accuracy on the old system.”

The new solution had to be easy to operate, especially transitioning from such an old system. While Hedrick had some extra funding in the budget available for use toward a new system, cost was still an issue. The new system had to be affordable and adaptable to their small, but growing, nonprofit operation.

First, they looked into upgrading the current phone system, but that option was cost-prohibitive. Hedrick and several of her staff members then went to Barre Y Lane’s office where Smyth and his team ran a demo on how the Switchvox system worked. When he explained how calls could be distributed however they wanted, and that they had the ability to transfer a call to another office, they were thrilled.

“My first reaction to the demo was that it gave us more than we needed, but I now see that Kevin helped us think bigger and to look ahead,” Hedrick says. “Technology moves so fast and he knew the Switchvox system really well.”

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Because the office was not wired originally for VoIP, Smyth offered a nonprofit discount and worked hard to piece together what they needed to upgrade at a price point HSP could afford. The wiring was completed in one day and they transitioned their Internet provider to Comcast Business Class, their current PRI carrier.

“The more we use the Switchvox system, the more we incorporate its advanced capabilities into our operations, so I was wrong in my first assessment about it being more than we need. In fact, we needed more capability than we knew was available.”

HSP purchased a Switchvox system designed for small businesses with less than 30 employees. They also purchased a mix of ten D40, D45, D50, and D70 Digium IP phones, and a cordless phone, which is hooked up to a Cisco ATA device. “Sometimes there is only one person in the office. If you have to walk away from your desk or go to the bathroom, we have a cordless we can take with us so we can always answer the hotline.”

Problems with confidentiality no longer exist. Even with voicemail, some clients don’t want to share details in their counselor or case manager’s voicemail, so if they are out of the office, they can still answer calls out in the field. This provides the counselors the flexibility of working outside of the office or from home.

Efficiency, follow-through, and the ability to track calls are all important aspects of the organization

“From an administrative standpoint, we can quickly log into the system and track calls, eliminating the documentation problem, and I can also see who is taking calls, how long they are spending with a client on a crisis call, and help to better manage the quality of those calls through the tracking and reporting feature,” Hedrick says. “Another shelter in Richmond shares the 24/7 hotline with us, so we can provide 24/7 service without being staffed 24/7, and we can even transfer calls to a live person if need be.”

Hedrick says the system was a breeze to learn for the younger staff members who are quick to pick up on technology. Even the older employees (like Hedrick herself) have found their groove, although Hedrick admits the staff teases her that she transfers calls incorrectly. “They go through, and that is what matters!” she laughs.

Some of the fun things they can do include converting the HSP logo to a .png file so that it appears on all of the phone sets. They also configured the ring tones to differentiate between normal business calls and hotline calls. They also purchased a three-year warranty plan so that they can add and upgrade phones when needed, which they have done over the past two years.

“We have saved an amazing amount of staff time and efficiency when you consider the time it took to write down messages and deliver them,” says Hedrick. “There was always that time when you were busy and forgot to deliver a message, and sometimes paper messages just got lost. Efficiency, follow-through, and the ability to track calls are all important aspects of our organization and part of our responsibility to the client who is already under duress.”

“Kevin was looking two years down the road and his foresight was invaluable,” Hedrick says. “I received a grant to fund the opening of a second office, and because Barre Y Lane built a Digium Switchvox telephone system that grows with us, we are currently seamlessly linking a wireless phone system at the new satellite office with the main office here in Ashland.”



The Asterisk Company

Digium Headquarters

445 Jan Davis Drive NW
Huntsville, AL 35806 - USA
Phone: +1 256-428-6000
Fax: +1 256-864-0464

www.digium.com
www.asterisk.org

