

Abuse Prevention Guidelines

California-Nevada Annual Conference

The United Methodist Church

Introduction

Jesus, time and time again, spoke of the importance of young people being included and provided for within the community of faith. Our hope and belief today is that the church is a place where children and youth will find the unconditional love and care they so desperately need to grow and thrive.

Every 15 seconds a child is abused or neglected. Abuse often happens in settings where children, youth, and vulnerable adults should be able to feel safe - homes, schools, camps, and most sadly, the Church. Abuse does occur in churches, large and small, urban and rural. It is a problem, which cuts across all economic, cultural, and racial lines. It is real and appears to be increasing.

The General Conference of The United Methodist Church, in April 1996, adopted a resolution aimed at reducing the risk of abuse of children, youth, and vulnerable adults in the church. As Christians, we must take our responsibilities to our children, youth, and vulnerable adults very seriously. We fail in our responsibilities if we neglect to take adequate precautions against abuse in our churches. It is unlikely that we can completely prevent abuse in every situation, but it is possible for us to greatly reduce the risk by following a thorough practical policy of prevention. This policy attempts to do that for Conference agencies that deal with children, youth, and vulnerable adults.

Purpose

God has given us a sacred opportunity and great responsibility to nurture and protect children, youth and vulnerable adults, and the persons who work with them. The California-Nevada Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church bears affirmative responsibility to create an environment of safe sanctuary for children, youth and vulnerable adults, and those who work with them in a conference setting. Thus we establish these Abuse Prevention Guidelines to demonstrate our absolute and unwavering commitment to the physical safety and spiritual growth of all our children, youth, and vulnerable adults.

It is the purpose of these guidelines first of all to protect the children, youth, and vulnerable adults that come to us. The second purpose of this policy is to protect our staff, both paid and volunteer, from potential allegations of abuse.

We have developed a comprehensive plan that includes all areas of the issue: screening, training, supervision, reporting procedures, and a response plan. We will follow stringent safety measures in the recruitment and selection of workers; we will implement prudent operational procedures in all programs and events; we will educate all of our workers with children, youth, and vulnerable adults regarding the use of all appropriate policies and procedures; we will have a clearly defined procedure for reporting a suspected incident of abuse that conforms to the requirements of the laws of California and Nevada; and we will be prepared to respond to media inquiries if an incident occurs.

Definitions

Adult means a person 18 years old or older.

Child abuse as defined under California and Nevada laws means any of the following:

- A child is physically injured by other than accidental means.
- A child is subjected to willful cruelty or unjustifiable punishment.
- A child is abused or exploited sexually.
- A child is neglected by a parent or caretaker who fails to provide adequate food, clothing, shelter, medical care or supervision.

Child means any person from infancy to 11 years old.

Activities mean any activity or program in which children, youth, or vulnerable adults are under supervision of staff persons or volunteers.

Conference means the California-Nevada Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church.

Staff person means any person employed by the Conference who is responsible for activities for children, youth, or vulnerable adults.

Volunteer means a person 18 years of age or older who assists in conducting activities under the supervision of a staff person.

Vulnerable Adults means any person over 18 years of age with diagnosed diminished physical, mental, or emotional capacities.

We means the California-Nevada Annual Conference.

Youth means any person from 12 years old to 18 years old.

Screening Procedures

Careful screening is one way to prevent the abuse of children, youth, and vulnerable adults. It can be time consuming and expensive, but provides some assurance that the most reliable, committed and experience staff and volunteers are in place for every program that involves children, youth, and vulnerable adults.

The following shall be MINIMUM standards:

All adults volunteer or staff persons, who have regular and direct contact with children, youth, and vulnerable adults shall be required to fill out an application that includes:

- Standard contact information
- Voluntary disclosure of past criminal history and allegations of criminal activity
- Listing of 3 non-related references with complete contact information for all references
- A signed release and waiver form allowing the Conference to perform a background check.

The policy shall be implemented in the following manner:

- All staff persons and volunteers, who have regular and direct contact with children, will submit to the screening procedures as outlined by this policy.
- All new applicants, persons having a break in service of one or more years, and
- those persons who have not been screened in three years since their last background check shall submit to the screening procedures again.
- The staff person in charge of the event and/or their designee is responsible for review and approving each application before a person's service begins.
- All records are confidential and will be maintained by the Annual Conference.
- When the Conference is hosting an event in which the local church is requested to bring adult chaperones, we recommend that all brochures and other written material specify these procedures as requirements for all adults serving as chaperones at the event.

Supervision

Competent and trained adults are important to any event. The procedures described below are designed to reduce the possibility of abuse to children, youth and vulnerable adults, and to protect staff persons and volunteers from unfounded accusations. These are MINIMUM standards and each event may adopt more stringent requirements if necessary.

1. Training is required for all persons having direct contact with children, youth, and vulnerable adults in Conference activities. The minimum standard shall include an annual orientation that includes information about this Policy, training in the supervision of children, youth, and vulnerable adults, and training in the identification and reporting of abuse.
2. Minimum standards shall include the two adult rule. The two adult rule requires that there will always be two unrelated, adults present.
3. In the case of children and youth, no person shall supervise an age group unless he/she is AT LEAST 5 years older than the children or youth with whom they are working with.
4. The Conference shall employ an open space rule. The open space rule requires that all activities shall occur in open view. Each room or space where children are being supervised shall have a window in the door or the door shall be left open.
5. Registration materials for activities in which children, youth, or vulnerable adults are outside the direct supervision of their parents/guardians shall require signed permission forms, which include health supervision and the parents/guardians permission to treat a child, youth, or vulnerable adult if they are injured or become sick during an event.
6. All participants who can understand a behavior agreement shall sign a participation covenant. This covenant can be in the form of clear, posted rules that are explained to the participants at the outset of the event.

Reporting

According to California and Nevada law, every person who has reason to believe that a child or youth under the age of 18 has been abused is mandated to report the suspected abuse. Volunteer leaders and workers are no exception.

At any Conference event, if an adult suspects the abuse or neglect of a child, youth, or vulnerable adult, whether it has occurred at the event or prior to the event, that person must report his/her suspicions to the leader of the event and together they must ascertain the details needed to make an accurate report. This report must be made within 24 hours. The report should include the following information, if obtainable:

1. The name, address, age and sex of the alleged victim;
2. The name and address of the alleged victim's parents or other person responsible for his/her care;
3. The nature and extent of the alleged abuse or neglect;
4. Any evidence of previously known or suspected abuse or neglect of the alleged victim or their siblings;

5. The name, address and relationship, if known, of the person who is alleged to have perpetrated the abuse or neglect; and
6. Any other information known to the person making the report that would be helpful to the investigation of the alleged abuse.

The event leader shall contact the appropriate state or county agency to file the abuse report and forward the aforementioned information to the agency as soon as possible. The person making the report should keep a copy of the report and consider it confidential information. Another report should be sent to the Conference staff person overseeing the event at which the alleged abuse occurred.

The alleged perpetrators of the abuse will be required to refrain from all events involving children, youth and vulnerable adults until the incident report is resolved. In any removal of a person from any activities, care must be taken to handle this in a discreet manner, recognizing that an investigation is still being conducted.

Response Plan

A quick, compassionate and unified response to an alleged incident of child abuse is expected. All allegations will be taken seriously. In all cases of reported or observed abuse in a children's activity, the entire staff of that activity shall be at the service of all official investigating agencies.

The Conference Director of Communications, or his/her designee, is the only person(s) authorized to make statements to representatives of the media. All requests for statements should be directed to the Director of Communications. Training in how to handle media requests should be a regular part of Conference staff training. A spirit of cooperation in helping the media find the "official spokesperson" is often helpful.

If the allegation is against a Conference staff person or volunteer or if it occurred in the course of a Conference activity, the staff person in charge of the activity and the Conference Crisis Management Team shall be contacted immediately. The Conference Crisis Management Team will advise the Conference's insurance carrier.

In either case, pastoral support will be available to all persons involved with the incident as indicated.