

INTRODUCTION

Purpose

The purpose of this handbook is to serve as a resource for ministry leaders and volunteers, providing guidance on addressing various forms of sexual misconduct. It also aims to establish clear guidelines for the development of protocols that foster safe ministry environments and appropriate interpersonal behavior.

Disclaimer: *The information presented in this document should be considered for informational purposes only and not as legal advice. It is not a substitute for seeking legal counsel. While this document offers recommendations for WVCSB churches, each church is autonomous and should independently develop and implement its own policies and procedures moving forward.*

Terms and Language

Terminology and word choice are critical when addressing sexual misconduct. It's essential to understand the definitions and usage of terms like harassment, abuse, and assault, as each has distinct meanings and requires different responses. Notably, legally, sexual misconduct falls under sex crimes, encompassing acts done for sexual gratification against someone's will or without their consent.

Types of Misconduct

Child Sexual Abuse

This form of abuse encompasses both physical and non-physical sexual behaviors between an adult and a minor (individuals under 18 years of age). Any sexual behavior undertaken by an adult (including looking, showing, or touching) with the intention of fulfilling the adult's own interests or sexual needs constitutes sexual abuse. It is crucial to emphasize that child pornography (production or possession) also falls under the category of child sexual abuse.¹

Peer-on-peer Abuse

This form of abuse occurs when various forms of physical, sexual, emotional, or financial abuse or coercive control take place between children and young people, both in online and offline settings.² While

¹ Stop It Now! "The Scope of Child Sexual Abuse: Definition and Fact Sheet." Retrieved from <https://www.stopitnow.org/faq/the-scope-of-child-sexual-abuse-definition-and-fact-sheet>.

² Safeguarding Network. "Child on Child Abuse." Retrieved from <https://safeguarding.network/content/safeguarding-resources/peer-peer-abuse>.

this handbook primarily addresses sexual abuse between peers, it's essential to recognize that there are other types of peer-on-peer abuse that may also occur.

Sexual Assault

In the state of West Virginia, sexual abuse is defined as "engaging in sexual intercourse or sexual intrusion with another person and, in doing so, causing serious bodily injury or using a deadly weapon during the commission of the act." (§61-8B-3)

Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment involves unwelcome sexual advances, conduct of a sexual nature, or requests for sexual favors. It must explicitly or implicitly impact a person's employment, unreasonably disrupt work or school performance, or create a hostile, intimidating, or offensive work or school environment.

Important Information Regarding Sexual Misconduct

- 55% of the children served by the WV Child Advocacy Center were there due to allegations of sexual abuse.³
- 95% of the alleged offenders were individuals known to the child.³
- In the United States, a woman is raped every 6 minutes.
- Annually, approximately 132,000 women report being victims of rape or attempted rape, with more than 50% of these victims knowing their attackers. It is estimated that 2 to 6 times as many women are raped but do not report it.
- The actual number of rapes may be as high as 792,000 per year in the United States.
- 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 7 boys will be victimized before their 18th birthday.⁴
- False allegations of child sexual abuse are rare.

This data holds significant importance for the WVCSB as it underscores the impact of this issue on our churches and ministries. According to these statistics, it is highly likely that someone within your church community has been affected by some form of sexual misconduct. Recognizing the urgency of this need within our churches, this handbook aims to address the questions that arise from these alarming numbers.

³ West Virginia Child Advocacy Network. "2021-2022 Statewide Data Report." Retrieved from <https://wvcn.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/FY22-Statewide-Data-Report.pdf>.

⁴ Centers Against Violence. "Sexual Assault." Retrieved from <https://centersagainstviolence.org/sexual-assault.html>.

TAKING ACTION

INTRODUCTION TO A CARING WELL TEAM

A valuable starting point in preparing your association and church to support survivors and prevent future abuse is to establish a Caring Well Team, aligned with the Caring Well Initiative. For further information, please visit their website at caringwell.com.

Why Have a Caring Well Team (CWT)?

This team, rooted in your state and local association, serves to assist you in coordinating your church's efforts as you implement policies and procedures aimed at creating a safer environment for survivors and preventing abuse. Specifically, a CWT will:

Encourage

This team demonstrates to parents and survivors in your association, church, and community that you take this issue seriously and are committed to caring for and protecting the congregation and local community.

Deter

Having a dedicated team focused on this issue sends a clear message to potential perpetrators that our organization takes this issue seriously. This awareness may act as a deterrent, as perpetrators tend to target locations where they have easy access to victims.

Communicate

This team can channel its efforts toward this critical issue and help translate the initial commitment of the church, association, and state into concrete actions. They will serve as a conduit for your local churches' efforts to move from ideas to implementation.

Who Should Be on the Caring Well Team?

The composition of the Caring Well Team may vary slightly for each association, depending on its unique context. Ideally, the team should consist of a small group of key leaders from your associational leadership, staff, or volunteers who are involved in various ministries such as student ministry, children's ministry, women's ministry, or marriage ministry. Associations and churches may also have volunteers with expertise or unique perspectives to contribute. It's crucial to assess your specific associational and church context to determine what will best serve your needs. Given the gravity of this issue, it's essential that your most trusted leaders are enthusiastic about supporting this effort.

Consider individuals within your association or congregations who can bring expertise and experience to the team. If you have associational members with backgrounds in social work, law enforcement, counseling, or education—fields experienced in responding to abuse—they would make excellent team members. Additionally, if there is an associational member who has personally experienced abuse and is at a point in their recovery where participation would be healthy for them, their perspective would be immensely valuable. It's also important to include both men and women.

What Will They Be Responsible For?

The primary responsibilities of the Caring Well Team (CWT) will include:

- Reviewing and implementing policies and procedures for abuse prevention and survivor care across associational churches.
- Learning about abuse-related issues.
- Communicating with leadership about the next steps in addressing abuse.
- Attending relevant training sessions.
- Assisting individual churches in reviewing their current policies and recommending necessary revisions.
- Assisting in the implementation and maintenance of a screening process for volunteers.

How Can They Be Trained for Their Role?

Before your church begins implementing changes, it's crucial to ensure that your CWT members are well-trained on the issue of abuse. The Caring Well Challenge is designed to guide the team step by step through the process of addressing abuse, providing care to survivors, and preventing future abuse. Additionally, the WVCSB has adopted the "Darkness to Light" program as a statewide sensitivity training initiative to help leaders and volunteers identify and appropriately handle sexual abuse (d21.org). Churches are also encouraged to seek further training opportunities from state conventions, associations, and other relevant partners.

What If We Already Have Something Like a Caring Well Team?

If your church already has teams of leaders in place that function in a manner similar to the CWT design, that's excellent news, as you are already on the right track. The goal of the WVCSB is to ensure that all churches have access to knowledge and support related to this issue, ensuring that our churches remain safe places for worship and spiritual growth for everyone.

PREVENTION STEPS

Screening Policy for Workers and Volunteers

It is critical for churches to establish a thorough and robust process for recruiting and screening employees and volunteers involved in ministries serving children and students. This process should ensure alignment with the church's values and child protection policies. Rushed recruitment and selection processes, driven by staffing shortages, can pose risks to the safety of children and youth.

A comprehensive and rigorous recruitment and hiring process are essential to properly vet individuals and determine their suitability for ministry positions within the church. This process should allocate sufficient time and space for evaluating candidates and identifying any potential red flags.

It's important to view the hiring and recruitment process as an opportunity for both the ministry and the applicant to become acquainted with each other. Establishing effective hiring and recruitment policies and practices, applicable to both employees and volunteers, is key to reducing risk and enhancing the safety of children and youth within your church community.

Once your policies and procedures are established, it is imperative that all ministries within your church consistently adhere to these processes. In cases where a particular aspect of the process is found to be unrealistic or unfeasible, consider revising your policies to ensure alignment between your policies and actual practices.

As you implement a screening process for employees and volunteers, here are some key considerations for churches:

- Written application
- Background check
- Reference checks
- Interview
- Social media review
- Orientation and training

Written Application

A written application is a valuable tool for efficiently gathering information from applicants while assessing their suitability for roles involving children and youth. It should encompass standard questions and include inquiries aimed at evaluating candidates from a child protection perspective. Here are some suggested questions for your written application:

- Please list all experiences you have working with children/youth. This should include any paid positions, babysitting, volunteer roles, summer jobs, camps, or church-related work. Provide details such as start dates, reasons for leaving, job positions and responsibilities, supervisor information, and contact information for verification.
- Have you ever been suspended, asked to leave, or fired from a job? If so, please explain.
- Have you ever been suspended or expelled from high school or college? Please explain the circumstances.
- Have you ever been convicted of a crime? Provide dates and a description of the nature of the offense.
- Have you ever been accused of harming or abusing a child?
- Have you ever been asked to step down from a leadership position in a church? Please provide details, including the timeframe and reasons.
- Describe an area where you believe you need improvement or find challenging when working with children or youth.
- What personal characteristics or qualities do you possess that make you a good fit for working with children/youth?

In addition to these questions, it may be necessary to obtain written permission from the applicant to conduct background checks on all previous employment and volunteer positions related to their work with children, including contacting references not provided by the applicant.

Background Check

Background checks are necessary but are never a guarantee of a person's safety. Background checks are only effective after someone has been caught, so relying solely on them can provide a false sense of security. While it is necessary to complete a background check on all staff and volunteers, it should never be your only screening mechanism. These checks serve only as an initial screen and deterrent and should be followed up with other steps.

Additionally, background checks need to be conducted on a recurring basis. Recurring background checks may reveal red flags that occurred after the staff or volunteer began working at your church. Some companies that provide background checks offer ongoing checks as part of their service.

Mike McCarty, a veteran law enforcement agent and background check expert, highlights the dangers that churches face when relying solely on simple background checks:

"Churches and ministries are inundated with cheap background check solutions from a highly unregulated background screening industry. There is no such thing as a single, complete database of criminal records, not even the FBI. Sexual predators are highly motivated, and the current church and ministry approach to background screening is insufficient. Protecting children and the ministry requires a complex approach that includes training, comprehensive background checks, reference checks, and the development and implementation of security teams."

When choosing a background check provider, it is essential to select an option that is comprehensive. Look for an option that includes the following:

- Social Security number verification to validate identity, other names, and develop an address history.
- A multi-state or national criminal database search and county criminal search.
- A search scope that extends as far back as the records allow.
- Real-time arrest alerts, which notify you anytime the person is arrested in the future.

Conducting a comprehensive background check on each staff member and volunteer may require an increase in your budget, but it will be well worth the investment.

One example of a church that has chosen to make this investment is Johnson Ferry Baptist Church, a Southern Baptist congregation. Their director of human resources, Jill Kearney, explains their decision:

"Johnson Ferry takes seriously the protection of our minors, elderly, employees, volunteers, and the church as a whole. In an effort to do ministry with excellence, which is a core value of our church, we decided to delve deeper into our background check process, inevitably increasing costs. If this helps us protect our minors and the elderly from any form of abuse, we view it as being good stewards of what the Lord has blessed us with."

The church safety team should decide in advance what results are acceptable and unacceptable and adhere to the same set of policies for everyone. This approach avoids favoritism and improves the screening process. If something is disclosed through the background check that leaves you unsure how to proceed, seek legal counsel.

For additional information in regard to background checks, please visit:

<https://ministrysafes.com/the-safety-system/background-check>

<https://www.netgrace.org>

Reference Checks

Reference checks play a crucial role in the screening process for employees and volunteers. It's essential to recognize that references are valuable only when you take the initiative to contact and speak with them. Reference checks should be conducted before making any staffing or volunteer placement decisions, and they should be treated with the utmost seriousness.

Consider the list of employers, volunteer supervisors, and personal references as data points that must be actively pursued to verify the individual's identity and to identify any potential red flags from previous employment or ministry work. Employment references should be thoroughly examined to validate accuracy and assess job performance. When the applicant has served in other churches or ministries, it is important to reach out to those organizations to inquire about their experiences and interactions with

children and youth. Obtaining references from a past church, a family member, or at least one person of the opposite sex can also be beneficial.

During reference interviews, consider asking the following questions for informative insights:

- Please confirm the applicant's position, responsibilities, and the start and end date of their involvement.
- What was your relationship with the applicant, and how long did you know them?
- Describe the applicant's interactions with children/youth.
- Describe the applicant's interactions with supervisors and individuals in positions of authority.
- What strengths does the applicant demonstrate when working with children/youth?
- What weaknesses or challenges did the applicant face when working with children/youth?
- Do you have any reservations about recommending this applicant for work with children/youth?
- Would your organization be open to having this person return in the future?

Interview

An interview provides an opportunity to meet face-to-face with the applicant or potential volunteer. During this interaction, direct questions regarding prior work experiences and interactions with children and youth are valuable. It also serves as a platform for educating the applicant about your church or ministry area, your vision, and your top priority of child protection. It's important to convey that your organization conducts screening, provides training, has clear policies in place, and takes a vigilant stance on reporting abuse.

When educating the applicant about your church, it's advisable to review your child protection policies during the interview and inquire if they have any questions or concerns regarding compliance with these policies. The applicant's response can offer insight into their level of commitment to child protection. It's worth noting that some predators may not display any indicators, so it's essential to remain vigilant. Efforts by the applicant to push back on the boundaries of the established policies or to seek exceptions are a red flag.

Predators look for soft targets and vulnerabilities, so by communicating that your organization enforces and evaluates its policies, you create an environment that is less appealing to potential predators. Simultaneously, you gain valuable insights into the applicant's alignment with your beliefs, background, commitment to safety, relevant experience, demeanor, and sense of responsibility.

Preparation before the interview is key. Have a list of prepared questions and review the applicant's written application in advance. During the interview, it's beneficial to have at least two trained interviewers present. This approach allows interviewers to perform multiple tasks concurrently, such as asking questions, observing non-verbal cues, actively listening to responses, documenting answers, and benefiting from multiple assessments.

Social Media Review

In today's era, where most individuals have a social media presence, it is beneficial to review the applicants' social media history for any red flags or content that might suggest improper behavior.

Orientation and Training

The final step in the hiring and recruitment process involves orienting and training new volunteers and employees regarding your ministry area and child protection policy. While this step occurs after the decision to hire or extend a volunteer invitation, comprehensive training on policy and recognizing abuse dynamics must commence early and be provided regularly throughout an individual's service to the ministry. Many liability carriers require training on a one- to three-year basis, but consistent training, even in shorter modules, reinforces the church's commitment to preventing abuse and ensuring child safety.

It is imperative that all staff members and volunteers are mandated to attend training on sexual abuse prevention and identification. Numerous excellent ministries and local agencies are available to provide training for your congregation. The WVCSB has trained facilitators for the "Darkness to Light" program, and training sessions tailored for SBC churches are regularly conducted throughout the state. Equipping West Virginians with the knowledge and confidence to promote abuse prevention and child safety is a top priority for our convention, associations, and churches. Please contact the WVCSB state office for an upcoming training schedule in your local area or reach out to your associational leader for more information. While in-person training is recommended to enable active participant engagement and opportunities for questions, there are also many excellent online training resources available.

Sample In-Person Training Programs:

All of these programs involve a participation fee:

- Darkness to Light's Stewards of Children Training
- GRACE Safeguarding Initiative

Sample Online Training Resources:

While we encourage in-person training for every church, these resources serve as valuable supplements or are suitable for staff and volunteers who cannot attend in-person sessions.

- Darkness to Light Online Training Modules: D2L offers six distinct online child abuse training modules (fees may apply, but access is available at any time).
- Darkness to Light's Two Minutes for Prevention: A collection of 25 brief 2-minute videos.
- Darkness to Light has produced two documentaries that offer a deeper understanding of the experiences of child sexual abuse survivors in an educational format. These documentaries convey insights into child sexual abuse through the voices of survivors.
- Freedom for the Captives offers a free 4-hour training that any church can utilize (they simply need to complete a form on the FFTC website). Viewers can complete the videos at their own

pace, and each video includes an online test to ensure that volunteer staff members working with students have viewed the video and grasped the essential information.

- GRACE's Valued Conference Videos: The GRACE website features numerous videos from the Valued Conference that focus on addressing child abuse within faith communities. These videos are available for anyone to link to and utilize in their training efforts.
- Ministry Safe offers a five-part online Sexual Abuse Awareness training program.

PROACTIVE POLICIES

Churches should develop and maintain a set of child protection policies that collaborate to ensure the safety of children. Effective child protection policy is intended to safeguard the individuals in your church, not just the church itself. By protecting individuals, you are, in essence, safeguarding the organization.

Each church's policy should be tailored to comply with their state laws, community resources, and congregation size. It's imperative to develop policies that suit your specific context. However, it's even more critical to create policies that your church can consistently adhere to. The greatest risk you pose to both children and your church is crafting unrealistic policies that your church cannot uphold.

As God's people, a church's foremost priority should be the protection of vulnerable individuals, prioritizing their welfare over safeguarding the organization. Our primary motivation in crafting and maintaining sound child protection plans should be care rather than merely liability. We should recognize that policy is a means of expressing love and care for people by ensuring their safety. Developing and consistently operating within sound policy is not only an act of honoring God but also a means of responsibly managing the trust that our congregation and community have placed in us to be vigilant and protective of those who may be unable to protect themselves.

Formulating sound policies, mandating compliance with these policies, and responding effectively to policy violations and disclosures of abuse are all ways to effectively protect and shepherd your congregation.

STOP

The WVCSB has adopted the STOP acronym as an easy tool to help remember the steps to follow when reporting abuse:

Stay calm and listen well (James 1:29-30), gathering information if possible. Remember, it is not your job to investigate.

Collect:

- Demographic information of the victim(s) and household members.
- Description of the suspected abuse or neglect.
- Current location of the victim and caregivers.
- Information about the presence of protective caregivers.
- Information about the perpetrator's access to the victim.
- Description of the general functioning of the victim and caregivers.
- Potential safety threats in the home/family to first responders, such as domestic violence, weapons, vicious animals, dangerous individuals, etc.

Turn to proper legal authorities (Romans 13:1-5).

Call:

- 9-1-1 if there is obvious physical injury witnessed or observed.
- 1-800-352-6513 (WVDHHR Abuse and Neglect hotline) if there is a complaint of abuse or neglect.

Remember: Persons making a report in good faith are immune from civil or criminal liability under WV Code §49-2-810 for reports of child abuse or neglect and WV Code §9-6-12 for reports of adult abuse or neglect.

Operate with a commitment to protect the weak and vulnerable (Exodus 22:22).

Call the WVCSB abuse hotline at **xxx-xxx-xxxx** to get in touch with our Sexual Abuse Protection Coordinator and your local Caring Well team. All calls are handled with complete confidentiality and aim to assist survivors and ministries in handling any situation with grace and wisdom.

Prioritize care for the victim. Seek safety for those in harm's way (Psalm 10:11-15).

It is crucial to note that under WV Code §49-2-812, any person, official, or institution required by this article to report a case involving a child known or suspected to be abused or neglected, or required by WV Code §49-2-809 to forward a copy of a report of serious injury, who knowingly fails to do so or knowingly prevents another person acting reasonably from doing so, is guilty of a misdemeanor and, upon conviction, shall be confined in jail for not more than ninety days or fined not more than \$5,000, or both fined and confined.

Under WV Code §49-2-803, certain persons are mandated reporters and are required to make a report not more than 24 hours after suspecting this abuse or neglect. **Mandated reporters include, but are not limited to, clergy, camp counselors and volunteers, employees, coaches, or volunteers of an entity that provides organized activities for children.**

Choose A Point Person Or Team To Develop, Review, And Implement Policies

To begin, regardless of your current progress, it is beneficial to have the backing of a CWT that can assist your church throughout the policy development process. The WVCSB, and eventually each association, will establish a team to aid your church in creating specific protocols and policies tailored to your church's spaces, facilities, and ministries.

Regardless of your church's size, the following individuals can be valuable resources for formulating and reviewing policies: children's minister, student minister, director of women's ministry, a parent, a social worker, law enforcement officer, attorney, counselor, medical professional, and schoolteacher.

Additionally, it is advantageous for your church to designate a point person who can facilitate communication with the CWT and ensure your church remains on track with policy updates and acts as a "first responder" in case of issues in this area. This point person should possess an understanding of abuse dynamics, a strong commitment to protecting children and creating a safe environment for the vulnerable, and a practical approach to implementing ideas.

Recognizing that this task can be overwhelming for one person or a team to handle on their own, the WVCSB has a Sexual Misconduct Prevention and Response Coordinator available to provide your church and volunteers with the necessary support to address this issue.

What to Include In a Safety Policy

When establishing the specific details of your policies, it's crucial to recognize the heightened responsibility that comes with working with children. When dealing with children and youth, we strongly recommend that churches, at the very least, adhere to the national standards outlined by the Centers for Disease Control for youth-serving organizations ([cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/preventingchildsexualabuse-a.pdf](https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/preventingchildsexualabuse-a.pdf)).

Advocate Victor Vieth further encourages:

“Indeed, true Christian witness would shatter these minimal standards and also implement policies to address not only sexual abuse within the church but also sexual abuse in the home, as well as physical abuse, neglect, emotional abuse, and witnessing violence.”

Some important considerations for your policies include but are not limited to:

1. Check-in/out Procedure

Implement strict check-in and check-out policies to ensure that children can only leave the classroom with a parent or an adult with parental permission.

2. Hall Monitor

Designate a volunteer to patrol the building during services to ensure that no adults are alone with children. This proactive measure communicates to potential predators that there are no areas in the church where they can isolate a victim.

3. Multi-Person Policy / Avoid Isolation

Require the presence of at least two unrelated adults whenever a child is present. If one of the adults is related to the child, then no additional adult is necessary. This policy guarantees that a child is never left alone with an adult who is not their parent.

4. Parent Classroom Participation Policy

To prevent adults who haven't undergone a thorough background check from accessing children, do not allow parents to enter the classroom during drop-off.

5. Workers Under 18 Years of Age

When determining student-to-teacher ratios for children's ministry or the two-deep policy, exclude students under 18 from the count of workers. While the church encourages students to learn to serve, conducting effective background checks on minors is challenging. This policy ensures consistency in background checks. However, the remaining screening process should be applied to student volunteers to assess suitability and identify potential red flags. Some forms and training may require modification or adaptation for workers under 18, especially regarding sexual abuse training for younger youth to avoid causing trauma.

6. "Known to Your Church" Rule

Establish a policy that requires a volunteer to be "known to your church" for a specified period and by a specific number of leaders before they are eligible to volunteer. While this may present challenges for churches reliant on many volunteers, an appropriate policy is essential for deterring predators and thoroughly vetting those who interact with vulnerable individuals. A veteran children's minister at a Southern Baptist church suggested waiting until a volunteer has six months of consistent attendance and engagement before allowing them to begin the application process for children or student ministry roles.

7. Open Doors

Implement an open-door policy throughout your church, unless a door is equipped with a full window. Full barriers can create private areas that perpetrators may exploit. Leaders and activities should always be visible and interruptible.

8. Social Media and Communication Policy

It is crucial to ensure that all communication between staff/volunteers and students is transparent and approved by church leaders and the child's parents. Social media platforms can easily be misused for secretive conversations, making it essential to establish clear guidelines to safeguard children.

- Zero Abuse Project offers sample social media policies (see appendix A).

- Safe Ministry has developed helpful suggestions to consider when drafting social media guidelines for your church:
 - Direct youth group members, their friends, and parents to the church or youth group's official social media accounts, such as Facebook, Instagram, or Snapchat. Caution should be exercised when using sites that delete posts, images, and comments. These accounts should be used for one-way communication only; for instance, the church's Snapchat account should not add, follow, or comment on any follower's account. Information posted online should be limited to logistical purposes and basic encouragement. At least two designated leaders should moderate each account for accountability.
 - Leaders can use closed (not secret) Facebook groups for communication. Information shared in these groups should be related to logistics, encouragement, and prayer. At least two designated leaders should moderate the group for accountability. A senior leader, such as the youth minister, should be informed of all groups. Leaders should never create groups with students of the opposite gender only. Whenever possible, students should be directed to a group account rather than an individual leader's account. If an individual's account is used, it should be done in consultation with a senior leader, like the student minister. Strict guidelines should be developed when using this type of site, including but not limited to:
 - Youth should initiate friendships, following or adding to their account, not leaders.
 - Ensure that all text posted online is beyond reproach and cannot be misconstrued.
 - Ensure that all photos and videos posted or tagged are beyond reproach and cannot be misconstrued.
 - Record and retain all private conversations, never deleting them.
 - Leaders should not use social media platforms for interactions with youth that allow anonymity, such as AskFM or KiK messenger.
 - Leaders should not use social media platforms for interactions with youth that automatically delete posts, images, or comments (e.g., Snapchat).
 - Leaders should not use video calling for interactions with youth without a second adult present in the video call.

Safe Ministry also emphasizes the importance of caution when communicating with young people online. Transparency and accountability must be maintained in all interactions. Care should be taken with both the words and images used in messages, as they may be perceived differently by those who receive them.

9. Transportation Policy

Establish clear and consistent guidelines for transportation to and from church events to prevent one-on-one settings and opportunities for perpetrators to gain access to victims under the guise of being "helpful" and offering rides. (See sample in Appendix C)

10. Overnight Policy

Ensure that all overnight activities at the church maintain the multi-person unrelated adult policy, avoiding any times of isolation between an adult and a child. Also, consider sleeping logistics to ensure that children are protected throughout the night. It is best to have one person in each bed, and no adult

should share a bed with a student unless it is that student's parent. Many adult chaperones should be present throughout the entire event, with chaperones provided for each gender (i.e., male chaperones for male sleeping arrangements and female chaperones for female sleeping arrangements).

11. Respect for Child's Privacy

Guarantee children's privacy when they are changing, going to the bathroom, or during diapering procedures. This privacy should be maintained both in the church setting and at offsite activities like retreats and church camps.

Finally, it is important to note that the WVCSB is committed to ensuring the safety of all individuals at convention-hosted events. Therefore, the best practices listed above are considered policies and procedures to be followed and adhered to at all WVCSB events, including but not limited to Summit Camp, YEC, Men and Boy's Retreat, etc.

Further Resources to Help You Develop Policies and Procedures

Here is a collection of sample policies and resources to help you begin to consider the protections you need to implement in your congregation to prevent abuse:

- Safe Ministries Sample Policies (See Appendix B).
- GRACE Safeguarding Initiative (netgrace.org): If a church goes through the GRACE certification program, they will have at least one expert help them in developing their policies.
- CDC Policy Guide (cdc.gov): The Centers for Disease Control has an online guide on developing policies, which includes sample questions for screening, etc.
- Darkness to Light Sample Code of Conduct (See Appendix A).

PREPARE FOR DISCLOSURE

"One of the hardest things a survivor of sexual assault ever does is say these words out loud: I have been a victim of sexual assault. People often do not share this because of shame and unwarranted guilt that plagues them. So when someone tells you this deeply personal part of their story, you must be ready to listen and care without any hint of accusation."

Trillia Newbell, "Responding with Excellence to an Allegation of Sexual Abuse Within the Church," Currents in Theology and Mission, vol. 45, no. 3 (2018), p. 42.

To be prepared to respond effectively when a survivor of sexual violence discloses to you as a pastor or church leader, it is crucial to grasp the significance of such a disclosure. Disclosure is not always straightforward and may manifest in various ways. Survivors might just be starting to process what they've experienced and might not use terms like "abuse" or "assault." They could minimize or downplay

what happened to them. It is vital to listen patiently and respond in a manner that conveys your belief in their story.

When a survivor discloses sexual abuse, whether it occurred within or outside church premises, whether it happened recently or decades ago, we must be ready to respond with compassion and action. Our primary responsibility in caring for survivors of abuse is to prioritize their protection and well-being above all else. Boz Tchividjian emphasizes:

"Jesus consistently stood with the vulnerable and the wounded ... We should evaluate every decision with this question in mind: How does this decision safeguard and care for the alleged victim?"

To prepare well for disclosures, consider taking the following steps:

1. Form a team of caregivers to provide support for a survivor of abuse.
2. Develop an action plan for reporting abuse to the appropriate authorities, in compliance with state laws.
3. Familiarize yourself with local agencies and organizations that assist survivors of abuse.
4. Establish a survivor-care ministry.
5. Seek guidance from local law enforcement on how to offer pastoral care to the accused perpetrator during the trial phase of proceedings.

Care Team

Identifying key staff members, church leaders, and professionals for the care team that supports a survivor disclosing abuse is vital. Given the unique scenarios and survivors, the composition of the needed team may vary. Examples of individuals who may need to be included are pastors, elders, women's ministry leaders, student ministry leaders, children's ministry leaders, professional counselors, medical professionals, and attorneys. The number of members on a care team will vary based on the situation, but typically, a team of two to four individuals suffices. When forming care teams, consider the following:

Consider the survivor's needs and agency.

Recognize that each survivor has endured a unique ordeal. Some may require immediate medical or mental health attention, while others may need a supportive presence as they process their experiences. Some survivors may need guidance on their legal options for reporting and holding their perpetrator accountable, while others may be children in urgent need of protection from a dangerous situation. Regardless of the necessary actions, it's imperative to respect the survivor's agency—their ability to make their own choices. The survivor should have the autonomy to determine when and how they receive care.

One survivor, who disclosed rape at her Southern Baptist higher education campus, illustrates the consequences of being compelled to attend counseling with a specific female counselor. During the initial session, the counselor's questions insinuated blame on the survivor. Although she fulfilled the requirement to attend subsequent sessions, she experienced heartbreak and confusion. It wasn't until over a decade later that she independently sought professional counseling, initiating her path to recognition and healing

from the assault. Empowering her to choose when and where to seek help from the beginning could have significantly altered her journey.

Exercise extreme care when dealing with child survivors.

When a survivor is a child, it's crucial to respond with great delicacy. Expressing anger or disbelief can further confuse and traumatize the child, causing them to withdraw. Children need assurance that they are believed and that everything will be done to ensure their safety. Avoid making statements like, "Let me investigate," which may signal to the child that they are not believed and not safe. Do not ask leading questions that could retraumatize the child; instead, use open-ended questions like "Then what happened?" However, it's essential to remember that we are not trained investigators. Safeguard the survivor's confidentiality.

Protect the identity and story of the survivor.

Safeguarding the survivor's identity and narrative is paramount. Before informing anyone else about the abuse, consult the survivor. While it's important to communicate with the congregation when abuse is reported, it's unnecessary to disclose the survivor's identity or breach their trust by revealing it. Include only those individuals who are essential and have been welcomed by the survivor. Keep in mind that reporting requirements can vary from state to state, even for adults. Quickly assess whether any reporting obligation exists that would necessitate disclosing the survivor's identity to the authorities.

Include both men and women in the process.

The care team should ideally consist of both men and women, each offering a unique and invaluable perspective to the situation.

Reporting

The church should not act as an investigative body in criminal matters. When abuse is disclosed and an investigation is needed, local law enforcement should be called. In the "Becoming a Church that Cares Well for the Abused" curriculum, attorney Samantha Kilpatrick explains that churches often make mistakes when attempting to handle everything internally. This approach is problematic because churches may lack the necessary expertise required in an abuse situation. Church leaders sometimes hesitate to involve external authorities due to mistrust and a desire to handle abuse matters internally.

Instead of mistrust, the church should view these authorities as valuable resources – God-ordained entities responsible for the safety of those they serve and protect. The nature of the disclosed abuse will determine the types of reports required and the relevant entities to contact. Each state has distinct requirements for reporting sexual abuse and harassment of adults and sexual abuse of minors. To understand your state's reporting obligations, consult the national Child Welfare Information Gateway. In West Virginia, for example, the law states that a mandated reporter is:

*“Any medical, dental, or mental health professional, Christian Science practitioner, religious healer, school teacher or other school personnel, social service worker, child care or foster care worker, emergency medical services personnel, peace officer or law-enforcement official, humane officer, **member***

of the clergy, circuit court judge, family court judge, employee of the Division of Juvenile Services, magistrate, youth camp administrator or counselor, employee, coach or volunteer of an entity that provides organized activities for children, or commercial film or photographic print processor who has reasonable cause to suspect that a child is neglected or abused, including sexual abuse or sexual assault, or observes the child being subjected to conditions that are likely to result in abuse or neglect shall immediately, and not more than 24 hours after suspecting this abuse or neglect, report the circumstances to the Department of Health and Human Resources.”

As Christ's ambassadors, we are called not to conceal any evil or abuse. If you suspect child abuse, you should immediately report it to the appropriate authorities. When talking to an adult survivor of childhood abuse, a crucial question during the initial conversation is, "Does your abuser currently have access to children?" If the answer is "Yes," it is reasonable to assume that children are at risk, and a report should be made. However, in cases of sexual violence against adults, it is the survivor's choice whether to report it to the authorities. It is essential to inform the survivor of their options and encourage them to report the abuse. While providing guidance and encouragement, ensure the survivor knows that you or someone from your Caring Well team is available to support them through the process in the manner they choose. In many instances, a perpetrator may continue harming others or have the potential to do so, making reporting the best course of action to prevent further harm. Lesson 3 of the "Becoming a Church that Cares Well for the Abused" curriculum offers valuable insights into pastors' and ministry leaders' roles and responsibilities when dealing with abuse cases involving both minors and adults. It outlines when reporting is mandatory and how to assist a survivor when deciding whether to press charges.

Local Partnerships

When someone in your church discloses sexual abuse, it is essential to engage with local law enforcement and appropriate professionals trained to handle such difficult situations. Establishing connections with your local police department, mental health providers, department of child services, domestic violence advocacy groups, and others in your community is crucial. These relationships will prove invaluable when a disclosure occurs.

By understanding the available resources in your community before a disclosure happens, you can alleviate the pressure during a crisis. This preparation allows you to bring in experts to support the survivor and your church community, which may be in a state of shock and unprepared to effectively address the situation.

In cases of child abuse, your local Child Advocacy Center (CAC) will be a vital resource. CACs aim to protect children from the trauma of having to repeatedly recount their abusive experiences. When a child discloses abuse, taking them to a CAC is essential. There, a trained interviewer will ask the appropriate questions to document the child's story without causing further trauma. Subsequently, a multidisciplinary team, including medical professionals, law enforcement, mental health experts, prosecutors, child protective services, victim advocates, and other professionals, can use the recorded interview to make informed decisions regarding how to proceed and safeguard the child.

Survivor-Care Ministry

Whether the disclosed sexual abuse is ongoing or occurred many years ago, creating a safe environment within the church for survivors to heal is of paramount importance. In a larger congregation, this may involve hiring professional counselors as part of your staff to assist survivors and their families in navigating the aftermath of abuse. Smaller congregations can explore partnerships with local nonprofits and agencies to establish relationships that facilitate easy referrals for counseling when necessary. Regardless of your church's size, ensure that you have curated resources in advance to help your congregants address the long-term effects of sexual abuse.

Interacting with the Accused Perpetrator

When establishing a policy for dealing with an accused perpetrator, always prioritize the survivor of abuse and the protection of potential victims. According to the National Sexual Violence Resource Center, false allegations of sexual violence typically range from 2% to 10%. Therefore, when addressing accusations involving children, it is prudent to initially treat disclosures as credible until external professionals indicate otherwise. Assuming innocence without due consideration can place children at risk.

Churches should take immediate action in various areas when handling allegations of child sexual abuse. This includes regulating the accused's access to church property and events during the investigative process. Given that a church is responsible for the care of children, the standard for access should be at least as rigorous as that of a school during this period. It might be advisable to assign a church leader as a liaison to the accused during this time. While encouraging them to engage with the church remotely, such as listening to sermons online or submitting prayer requests through their liaison, it is essential to establish strict and immediate boundaries to safeguard survivors and the entire congregation. Crafting the precise parameters for such situations is undoubtedly complex, and it is wise to involve law enforcement and local experts in making these decisions.

Are You Ready for a Disclosure?

It is important to identify when and how to report in advance so that you can respond swiftly when a disclosure is made. Develop a comprehensive plan that covers the following key areas:

1. We know our state's reporting laws for both child and adult disclosures.

- Who is mandated to report?
- What specific information must be reported?
- The required timeframe for reporting
- The appropriate authorities or agencies to report to

2. We know whom to contact in these areas:

- Local law enforcement
- Social Services
- Community resources
- Legal assistance

3. Our leadership team is equipped with a readily accessible list of essential phone numbers.

4. We have a well-defined plan in place to address any allegations of sexual abuse, ensuring that our staff and volunteers are familiar with the plan and understand their responsibilities regarding reporting.

Further Resources to Help You Plan for Disclosure

- Safe Ministry has developed forms for reporting. (ministrysafe.com/resources)
- Darkness to Light’s Guide for Reporting and multiple articles about handling reports of abuse. (d2l.org/get-help/reporting/making-a-report)
- “Implicit Messages & Spiritual Injury in Faith Communities”: GRACE provides this resource written by Laura Thein & Carrie Nettles. GRACE also has articles that can be downloaded and used for training. (netgrace.org)
- Freedom for the Captives articles: The Freedom for the Captives website also has several articles that can be downloaded under the resources section. (freedomforcaptives.com).

Discuss your policies and procedures with staff, volunteers, and congregation.

Ensure you have proper liability insurance, including coverage for sexual misconduct. Establish a plan and schedule for reviewing policies and practices regularly. Develop a strategy for informing your church community about the steps taken to ensure their well-being in this area. It's essential for everyone to be aware of the new procedures and guidelines to contribute to creating a safe environment. Encourage open communication where people feel heard and not dismissed, and where they are comfortable expressing their concerns.

Moreover, making prevention policies clear and visible to everyone will serve as a deterrent to potential predators within your congregation, sending a clear message that easy access to victims will not be tolerated.

Further Resources to Help You Equip Your Entire Congregation

- "God Made All of Me" by Justin and Lindsey Holcomb: A book parents can use to teach their children about personal safety.
- The Jacob Wetterling Resource Center (Zero Abuse Project): Offers information and resources for parents on teaching children personal safety and keeping them safe. (zeroabuseproject.org)
- Darkness to Light: Provides tips for parents to keep their children safe from abuse in specific settings, including checklists for safer sleepovers, camp experiences, and tips for hiring caregivers. (d2l.org)
- "On This Rock: A Call to Center the Christian Response to Child Abuse on the Life and Words of Jesus" by Victor I. Vieth: This book by Victor Vieth, a Christian theologian and child abuse expert, explores the role of Jesus' life and teachings in addressing child abuse in the New Testament world.

WVCSB ROLE IN HELPING

West Virginia Convention of Southern Baptists are committed to equipping churches and associations with the necessary resources to address all aspects related to sexual misconduct. To achieve this goal, the convention has implemented several tools designed specifically for this purpose:

Sexual Misconduct Response and Prevention Coordinator

A dedicated individual has been appointed to serve in the role of "Sexual Misconduct Response and Prevention Coordinator." (Please refer to the appendix for a job description.)

24/7 Hotline

A dedicated hotline is available 24/7 to report or request assistance related to sexual misconduct. You can reach the hotline at **xxx-xxx-xxxx**.

Website Resources

Additional resources and links related to misconduct have been added to our website for easy access. You can find these resources at wvcsb.org.

Darkness to Light Training

Trained facilitators are available to offer "Darkness to Light" training for leaders and volunteers throughout our state convention. For more information, please contact the WVCSB state office at 304-757-0944.

This Handbook

We are providing this handbook as a helpful resource for West Virginia Southern Baptist churches and associations in addressing issues related to sexual misconduct.

CONCLUSION

Sexual abuse has impacted many individuals within our congregations and communities. As highlighted by J.D. Greear in the Sexual Abuse Advisory Group report presented at the 2019 SBC Annual Meeting, our response to sexual abuse is not just a matter of policy but a gospel issue. Greear posed two essential questions: "First, what greater lie could we illustrate about the gospel? At its core, the gospel is about God's commitment to protect the vulnerable. The cross shows us that he is a safe refuge for all who run in repentance to him. What greater lie could we tell about the gospel than for us not to be doing whatever it takes to make our churches safe places for the vulnerable? Second, why would the lost trust us with a message of salvation if they are not sure if they can trust us with the safety of the vulnerable?"

Why would survivors trust us to care for their souls if they are not sure if they can trust us to care for their wounds? May churches use this guide as a foundational resource to take proactive steps in creating safe spaces for survivors and safeguarding against abuse within their congregations.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Considerations for Youth-Serving Organizations

- Direct youth participants and their parents to engage in a public discussion page or group page instead of sending a friend request to you as an individual. By creating a group page like "Apollo Student Leaders," students, leaders, and parents can discuss relevant topics without needing access to an individual's page. Group administrators lack access to their members' pages, ensuring communication while respecting the privacy of youth members.
- No adult staff member or volunteer is permitted to "friend" a youth participant in a program. Sending such requests can place young individuals in uncomfortable situations, especially when they wish to keep their online life private.
- Avoid utilizing the "chat" feature or entering private discussion chat rooms with youth. Allow space between messages to give young individuals the room to process. Youth may tend to over-share in back-and-forth messages, so it is the responsibility of adults to establish healthy boundaries and maintain a positive tone. While texting is the primary mode of communication for youth, limit it to specific details (e.g., meeting times or clarifications) rather than emotional or social conversations.
- Refrain from using the Internet while feeling angry or upset. If a young person breaches a rule or behaves inappropriately, initiate a face-to-face discussion about the consequences, always notifying parents.
- Establish in advance the rules for staff and volunteers concerning friend requests, recognizing that different social media platforms offer varying opt-in/opt-out options. Some examples include:
 - Only accepting friend requests when the young person is at least 18 years old and out of high school.
 - Accepting friend requests only if you are already friends with the young person's parents on social media and feel comfortable discussing online concerns with them.
 - If young people opt to "follow" a one-way social networking option, ensure that your content, including words and photos, is suitable for youth to view. If your content isn't youth-friendly, as an adult, establish boundaries and block youth access from your account.
- Do not engage with young people on applications that encourage immediate message responses or back-and-forth photo sharing.
- Remind young individuals that if you encounter images or text on their pages that suggest they are being harmed, may harm someone else, or may be harmed in the future, it is your role as a leader to report these concerns. Follow through with reporting if you observe concerning behavior.

- Above all, keep in mind that you are setting an example for young people in all your interactions, both in person and online. If you prefer to keep your online life private and free from scrutiny by youth, it is advisable not to accept friend requests from minors.
- If you choose to opt-in, ensure that any communication remains appropriate for ministry or mentorship purposes. If communication or boundaries become unclear, print the discussion to have a record, and promptly consult with a supervisor to establish accountability and new boundaries.

For additional information, please visit: zeroabuseproject.org.