

EASTERN PA UNITED METHODIST CONFERENCE SAFE SANCTUARIES

INTRODUCTION

It is the responsibility of every local church to take steps to protect the well-being of children, youth, and personnel who work with them in the ministries of the church, as well as to comply with all laws of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. All churches safe sanctuaries policies follow the policies established by the Eastern PA Annual Conference policy which reference the Pennsylvania Child Protective Services Law which can be found currently at the time of the writing of this policy at <https://www.dhs.pa.gov/KeepKidsSafe/About/Pages/CPS-Laws.aspx>.

The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania periodically revises its child protective services law. It is the responsibility of every church to keep up to date on any changes to the law. The conference's policy does not quote from sections of the law but instead requires that churches comply with law as it is in force at any given time. All churches will follow the Eastern Pennsylvania Annual Conference in adopting the following as its Safe Sanctuaries: Reducing the Risk of Abuse in the Church Policy, which replaces all previous policies.

Additional information and resources may be found on the Eastern PA Conference website at www.epaumc.org or by contacting the Conference office at 800-828-9093.

SAFE SANCTUARIES Reducing the Risk of Abuse in the Church Policy May 2023

PREAMBLE

God has called us to make our ministries safe, protecting our children from abuse and exploitation. God has also called us to create communities of faith where children can be safe and grow strong.

Jesus taught "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me," (Mark 9:37 NRSV) and "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones...it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck, and you were drowned in the depth of the sea" (Matthew 18:6 NRSV).

The Social Principles of The United Methodist Church state "...children must be protected from economic, physical, and sexual exploitation and abuse." (Par. 162(D) *2012 Book of Discipline*)

At each child's baptism, we affirm our responsibility to their safety by our congregational response, pledging:

"With God's help, we will so order our lives after the example of Christ that this child, surrounded by steadfast love, may be established in the faith, and confirmed and

strengthened in the way that leads to life eternal.” (The Book of Worship, Baptismal Covenant, Congregational Pledge II)

Building on these foundations, we recognize that our faith calls us to offer hospitality and protection to all children, as well as those who are committed to ministering to them as volunteers and employees. Every 15 seconds, a child is abused or neglected. Often, abuse occurs in places where children feel safe – homes, schools, camps, and even churches. In over three quarters of reported cases, the victim was related to or acquainted with the abuser. In light of this, the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference of The United Methodist Church has seen fit to establish this policy that can help to 1) prevent such abuse from happening in our churches; 2) make our churches places where children can feel safer in disclosing abuse; and 3) protect the volunteers and employees that minister to our children.

It is the policy of the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference that every church in the conference adopt a Safe Sanctuaries policy that conforms to the standards set forth in this conference policy. It is the policy of the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference that all conference and district ministries with children comply with the standards set forth in this policy.

Notwithstanding anything contained in this policy, it is the responsibility of every church in the conference to ensure that it is in compliance with all aspects of the Pennsylvania Child Protective Services Law (23 PA. C.S.A. 6301) which can be found at the time of this writing at <https://www.legis.state.pa.us/CFDOCS/LEGIS/LI/consCheck.cfm?txtType=HTM&ttl=23&div=00.&chpt=063.&CFID=246217912&CFTOKEN=44782272>. In the event that the law conflicts with this policy, the law shall control.

SCREENING AND SELECTION OF STAFF AND VOLUNTEERS:

Screening Standards:

All applicants for employment and/or volunteer service in which that applicant shall have contact with children in a manner which, under Pennsylvania law currently in force and as enacted and amended in the future from time to time, requires the person to obtain background clearances shall complete the following prior to start of service:

- 1) Written Application: a written application that shall include at least the following, but not limited to, information:
 - a. Name
 - b. Address
 - c. Phone Number (cell and/or home)
 - d. Email Address
 - e. Work/Volunteer History
 - f. Experience and skills related to the position.
 - g. Two (2) personal, non-related references.

- h. Disclosure that they have been informed of and will comply with Pennsylvania law that requires them to inform the church in writing of any arrest, conviction or child abuse report that would prohibit them from working with children. (23 Pa.C.S.A. 6344.3(g)(1))

2) Background Checks:

- All background checks (PA criminal record background, Child Line check, and FBI clearance) required by the laws of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania currently in force and as enacted and amended from time to time which can be found at the time of this writing at <https://www.dhs.pa.gov/KeepKidsSafe/Clearances/Pages/default.aspx> will be conducted for all employees and volunteers. The current law at the time of this writing is that a minimum of every 60 months (5 years) clearances from the date the of the first clearance are required to be resubmitted. In the case of FBI clearances, for volunteers only, an affidavit can be submitted if the person has been a resident of PA for at least 10 consecutive years. This can be found under **Disclosure Statements** at <https://www.dhs.pa.gov/KeepKidsSafe/Clearances/Pages/default.aspx>

(Every five years both will be conducted for all employees and volunteers.)

- 3) References: at least two references from persons not related to the applicant shall be obtained and contacted for all new applicants for employment or volunteer service.
- 4) Relationship with Church: all prospective volunteer workers with children shall have an active relationship with the local church for at least six months before being allowed to be in a supervisory role in activities for children; or twenty-four months of good standing at their previous church. (Documented by the Pastor with a letter from the previous church.)
- 5) Records: all written records shall be confidential and shall be kept in a secure location with access restricted on a need-to-know basis, to the Pastor, SPRC chair and/or Ministry Lead. All files (clearances, reference checks, training attendance, letters of recommendations from prior church, etc.) shall be maintained for thirty (30) years after ministry ends with the individuals. Files can be digitized and kept in a permanent online secure environment.

TRAINING:

All persons who have direct contact with children shall participate in training as required under the laws of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania currently in force and as enacted and amended in the future from time to time which can be found at the time of this writing at <https://www.dhs.pa.gov/KeepKidsSafe/Pages/Trainings.aspx>.

Initial safe sanctuaries training for anyone new to working with children or youth shall occur and at a minimum cover reviewing and agreeing to this policy and the local church's specific policy. This training should occur prior to a person working with children or youth. Every year, some type of review training shall occur.

Those working as ministry leads are to be fully trained and fully cleared before working with any children or youth. Assistants who are not ever placed in charge of the ministry can be in the process for training but need to have all clearances before working with children and youth. Training must occur within the first month of working with children and youth for any assistant.

SUPERVISION:

Supervision procedures are designed to reduce the possibility of abuse or exploitation of children, and to protect staff persons and volunteers from unfounded accusations.

Supervision Standards:

Programs and ministries in the church that are licensed or accredited by a licensing or accreditation body or that have formally adopted supervision procedures, and that receive pre-approval from the conference Board of Trustees shall follow their established requirements for the supervision children.

All other programs and ministries of the church shall use the following standards for the supervision of children.

- 1) The two-adult rule: regardless of the size group, there will always be at least two adults present. This may include the presence of an adult 'roamer' who moves in and out of rooms/ministry activities. These adults are to be non-related.
- 2) No child will be left unsupervised while participating in a ministry activity/event.
- 3) All ministry activities should occur in an open view. Each room or space where ministry activities/events occur must be open to public view. For example: enclosed spaces such as classrooms shall have a viewing window, a glass panel in the door, a ½ door configuration or an open door.
- 4) No person shall supervise an age group unless he/she is at least 18 years of age or older and is at least 5 years older than the children being supervised.
- 5) Ministry events involving transportation shall require a written consent form signed by the parent or guardian of the child.
- 6) Registration forms shall be completed and maintained by the ministry lead that lists allergies, medical issues/medications, permission to use photos, etc.

Online Standards:

The current policies and procedures as outlined here are relevant for any physical distancing requirements or virtual ministry activities or events. But also realize the need for best practices and how to apply our current policies in the virtual environment. During times of swift change that are unprecedented it can be easy to forget standing policies and procedures when working with children and youth. During times like these, it is even more important to be diligent and follow all of the screening policies as they may be overlooked when someone offers help in virtual space.

- Unfortunately, those who seek to abuse use times of confusion and change to their advantage. Again, these guidelines are not meant to prevent virtual ministry from happening but to ensure ministry occurs in safe ways in the virtual world.

Towards this end the following resources and guidance in applying safe sanctuaries policies to the virtual world are below. These resources and guidance do not replace legal advice and are intended to be used in conjunction with this policy.

Three resources we recommend you review and utilize are:

- Discipleship Ministries, Young People’s Ministries guidelines and resources can be accessed at <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/articles/safe-sanctuaries-supporting-a-shift-to-online-youth-ministry-meetings>
- A Guide to Ministering Youth During a Time of Physical Distancing by Rev Angela Gorrell, PH.D. and Paul Gorrell and be accessed at <https://www.angelagorrell.com/resources>.
- “Safe Sanctuaries in a Virtual World.” by Joy Thornburg Melton and Michelle L. Foster. Which can be purchased at <https://bookstore.upperroom.org/AdvancedSearch/DefaultWFilter.aspx?searchTerm=safe+sanctuaries+in+a+virtual+world>

Here are the top five best practices to apply our safe sanctuaries policy to the virtual world.

1. Still use the two-adult rule so that there is NEVER one-on-one contact. At no time should one adult be holding any one-on-one conversations with any youth without other adults knowing there are conversations occurring. In addition, online meetings need to begin with two adults, not from the same family, and then allow youth to join.
2. Still use all selection, screening, and training policies. In the virtual world and space, it may feel right to let new volunteers that are untrained and lack clearances to lead discussions. Any online discussion should be considered no different than a face-to-face meeting. Volunteers need to be screened and trained before taking on leadership roles.
3. Use “ministry-based” on-line platform accounts instead of personal accounts. This means the local church should own an on-line account with access by several church leaders and/or staff so there is accountability of meetings.
4. Maintain the same communication with parents and youth about meetings including times and links to access the meeting. This way everyone knows what is going on. With younger children under sixth grade, syllabus and activities should be shared with parents or caretakers prior to online meetings so everyone is transparent as to what is occurring. For children sixth through twelfth grade, leaders should provide parents and caretakers with the same outlines of meetings and topics that are typical for your youth group with more transparency being utilized than less.
5. If your current release forms do not give you permission for picture/video sharing either get them updated or do not share pictures/videos of virtual meetings. This includes tagging your youth in the virtual environment. If you do not have permission do not post and tag them.

REPORTING:

Reporting of any allegation of child abuse shall be done in accordance with the laws of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania currently in force and as enacted and amended in the future from time to time.

It is essential that all employees and volunteers who have contact with children in a manner which, under Pennsylvania law currently in force and as enacted and amended in the future define them as a mandated reporter have a legal responsibility under the law to make a report directly to public child welfare officials any time, they have reasonable cause to suspect abuse has occurred. Failure to comply with this requirement can lead to civil and/or criminal penalties for the employee or volunteer.

The Pastor and District Superintendent shall be notified if the alleged perpetrator is a staff person or volunteer of the church. If the alleged perpetrator is the Pastor, the Chair of SPRC should be notified immediately and will notify the District Superintendent.

In the event that a member of the clergy becomes aware of suspected child abuse as a result of confidential communication which is protected under 42 PA C.S. 5943 (relating to confidential communications to clergy), the conference legal counsel should immediately be consulted.

PASTORAL RESPONSES FOR REPORTS OF ALLEGATIONS OF ABUSE:

Any allegation of abuse requires a process to address responding to the victim, the alleged perpetrator, and the press. The response must be quick, compassionate, and unified. All allegations will be taken seriously.

Pastoral response is NOT an investigation of the alleged abuse. The investigation is the responsibility of public officials (child welfare and/or law enforcement). In all cases of reported abuse, there shall be cooperation with all official investigating agencies.

Response to victims of abuse:

In the instance of any allegation of abuse, there shall be a reaching out to the victim and the victim's family. Pastoral resources shall be extended, and the conference I-Care Team can be contacted to assist in providing this service. The care and safety of the victim shall be considered the first priority. Response to the victim and the victim's family shall be done in a positive and supportive manner.

The parents of the victim shall be notified, and steps shall be taken to address the safety and well-being of the child until the parent(s) arrive. However, if one or both of the parents is the alleged abuser, the direction of the child welfare authorities shall be followed concerning notification of others.

Response to all alleged perpetrators of abuse:

In the instance of an allegations of abuse there shall be a reaching out to the alleged perpetrator and the perpetrator's family. Pastoral resources shall be extended, and the

conference I-Care Team can be contacted to assist in providing this service. Response to the alleged perpetrator and the perpetrator's family shall be done in a supportive way.

The alleged perpetrator shall immediately, yet with dignity and respect for their sacred worth, be removed from further involvement with children and advised that there has been an allegation of abuse. Details of the allegations of the abuse shall not be discussed with the alleged perpetrator at the time of removal. In any removal of a staff member or volunteer from any activity/ministry, care shall be taken to handle the removal in a discreet manner.

When it has been alleged that a member of the church staff or a volunteer, has committed an act of abuse, the staff member or volunteer shall be required to refrain from all ministry activities/events with children until the incident has been fully resolved by the appropriate state authorities and/or in accordance with the Book of Discipline. At that time, a meeting shall be held with the employee or volunteer to discuss the incident(s) that led to the report being made. Even if the public agency determines the report to be unfounded, the church has the right to prohibit the volunteer or employee from resuming working in ministries with children based on the facts and circumstances available at that time.

Response to the Media:

In consultation with the presiding bishop, the District Superintendent, the Conference Director of Communications, and pastor shall decide on a single spokesperson for contact with the public/media. All media requests for statements shall be directed to that spokesperson.

Building Use Agreements

For any group that is a non-ministry group of the church that enters into a building use agreement with the church and/or trustees of the church and works with anyone under 18 that group needs to:

- 1) Follow this safe sanctuary policy and complete all application, training and background checks before the building can be used and comply with the policy as the building is being used.

or

- 2) Provide a safe sanctuary policy of the group that meets the minimum of this policy and is approved by the church's trustees and Pastor Staff.

With either option the building use agreement shall identify which option is chosen.

Resources of samples on the EPA website

Many samples of forms are provided by the conference Safe Sanctuaries Team and can be found at <https://www.epaumc.org/safe-sanctuaries/>.

Compliance: Compliance with this policy shall be a matter of record at each annual Charge Conference.