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Responding to an Allegation of Child Sexual Abuse

An allegation of child sexual abuse is one of the most difficult situations that a youth-serving organization such as a church can experience. Such an incident can have a damaging, lasting impact on the victim and his/her family, upon the organization, upon its members, and upon its impact or ministry to the community. Responding appropriately and in a timely manner is important in addressing the concerns of the individual and the organization and limiting the lasting damage that can occur.

Should a misconduct claim or allegation take place, consider the following steps in responding to the situation:

1. The parent or guardian of the child will be notified.

2. The individual alleged to be the perpetrator of the abuse or misconduct will immediately be placed on leave pending an investigation and instructed to remain away from the premises during the investigation. He or she should be instructed to have no contact with the victim or with witnesses.

3. All allegations of abuse should be reported to the authorities, and the organization will comply with the state's requirements regarding mandatory reporting of abuse as the law then exists. The organization will fully cooperate with the investigation of the incident by civil authorities.

4. Knowledge of your state's mandatory reporting law is vitally important.* State law dictates who is a mandatory reporter, what to report, and when a report should be made, among other things. Formal training of mandatory reporters is required in some states. Failure to follow the state's mandatory reporting law can result in criminal charges.

5. The insurance company will be notified, and the organization will complete an incident report. Any documents received relating to the incident and/or allegations will immediately be forwarded to the insurance company.

6. The organization will designate a spokesperson to the media concerning incidents of abuse or neglect. The advice of legal counsel will be sought before responding to media inquiries or releasing information about the situation to the congregation. All other representatives of the organization should refrain from speaking to the media.

7. Any person who is found criminally responsible of the alleged abuse or misconduct will be removed from their position working with children or youths.

8. If the organization learns that the individual has become involved in another youth-serving organization and that other children may be at risk, it should discuss with its legal counsel communication of this information to the other organization.

Once your organization has established a procedure for handling allegations of abuse, make sure to follow the procedure in every instance. Having a policy or procedure but not following it may be worse than having no policy at all.

By planning ahead and having the above information readily available, you may be better positioned to respond in the event of that an allegation of child sexual abuse involving your organization comes

to light.

*Information on reporting abuse in each state may be found on the Child Welfare Information Gateway website.

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