

Susquehanna Conference

Safe Sanctuaries Policies

Responding to and Reporting Abuse

A quick, compassionate, and unified response to an alleged or actual incident of abuse is necessary and expected. All allegations are to be taken seriously. In all cases of reported or observed abuse in a ministry event, the entire staff of that event, paid and/or volunteer, shall be at the service of all official investigating agencies.

A mandated reporter must make a report of suspected child abuse if they have reasonable cause to suspect that a child is a victim of child abuse under any of the following circumstances.

1. The mandated reporter comes into contact with the child in the course of employment, occupation and practice of a profession or through a regularly scheduled program, activity or service.
2. The mandated reporter is directly responsible for the care, supervision, guidance or training of the child, or is affiliated with an agency, institution, organization, school, regularly established church or religious organization or other entity that is directly responsible for the care, supervision, guidance or training of the child.
3. A person makes a specific disclosure to the mandated reporter that an identifiable child is the victim of child abuse.
4. An individual 14 years of age or older makes a specific disclosure to the mandated reporter that the individual has committed child abuse.

The goal of an immediate response to alleged or known incidents of abuse will be to ensure the safety of the victim and any additional potential victims. In all cases of alleged or actual abuse, professional support is obtained by informing the Police, ChildLine and Abuse Registry, or other appropriate authorities. The parents/legal guardians of the victim will be notified unless they have been named as the alleged perpetrator of the abuse. Pastoral support is sought by informing the Conference Director of Communications, District Superintendent or Pastor, as appropriate.

If the allegation or incident concerns events or persons outside any relationship to a conference and/or local church related event, it is the responsibility of the person who heard the abuse to make the initial contact with ChildLine. The procedures outlined in this section will provide guidance for responses and reporting.

Example: Child, youth, or vulnerable adult telling a camp counselor about abuse by a relative during the prior year. If this report were made to the counselor in the course of his/her duties as a camp counselor, then it is the responsibility of the camp counselor to make the call to ChildLine. The camp counselor may talk with the Camp Dean or Site Director before making the call, asking for support. After making the report to ChildLine, a written report (CY 47 Form) needs to be sent to ChildLine within 48 hours of making the report.

An incident report should be filed with the Site Director as a part of the reporting process.

If the allegation is against or involves a conference staff person, pastor, helper or volunteer, or if it occurred in the course of a conference ministry event, it is still the responsibility of the person who heard the abuse to make the initial contact with ChildLine. Afterward, a report must be made to the staff person in charge of the event, the Conference Director of Communications, the Director of Connecting Ministries, and the Dean of the Cabinet shall be contacted immediately to handle communications. Procedures for responding to and reporting the abuse are contained herein.

The Director of Communications of the Susquehanna Conference or his/her designee is the only person/s authorized to make statements to representatives of the media. All requests for statements shall be directed to the Director of Communications. Staff persons and volunteers are to be trained in how to handle media requests by referring them to the Director of Communications.

How to respond to allegations of abuse

Care for the alleged victim's safety. Once a child, youth, or vulnerable adult has disclosed alleged abuse, the one to whom the disclosure has been made should reassure the alleged victim of a concern for his or her safety and well-being. They will then make the call to ChildLine. The alleged victim (and any other potential victims if the abuse has allegedly taken place onsite) should be calmly moved to another safe place onsite in view of at least two other non-related adults. Someone safe and familiar should stay with the victim at all times.

Persons who are accused of abuse, if on site, will be immediately and discreetly removed from the ministry setting (both the alleged abuser and the victim to separate locations or areas) until the situation is resolved. This is to protect all persons involved, including the accused. The person to whom the disclosure was made should inform the victim in an age appropriate way that a report will be made to appropriate legal authorities.

Should the victim be in need of immediate medical attention, a call should be made for medical transport by ambulance. The parents/legal guardians of any victim under the age of 18 should be notified. It may not be appropriate to contact the parents/legal guardians if they are the alleged perpetrators of the abuse, in which event the person designated as the reporter should be contacted and should handle contacting the parents/legal guardians when appropriate.

Report the allegations of abuse. The mandated reporter will obtain the information needed for the filing of reports, including, but not limited to, the victim's name and age, the name of the alleged perpetrator, the alleged facts of the abuse, and physical home addresses for the victim and the perpetrator. It is important to let the victim verbalize the allegations in his or her own words, being careful to limit questions asked of children or youth under the age of 18, or to vulnerable adults. If the victim is under age 18, a report should be made immediately to ChildLine at 1-800-932-0313. If the victim is older than 18 years of age or older, a report should be made to local law enforcement directly. It is the responsibility of the mandated reporter to handle these matters in a professional and caring manner. Once the call is made the mandated reporter needs to immediately notify the Site Director who will notify the Director of Camp & Retreat Ministry who will notify the Conference Director of Communication, Conference Legal Counsel, Conference Insurance Director of Connectional Ministries, and the Dean of the Cabinet.

Maintain confidentiality. Allegations are to be discussed only on a need-to-know basis. The person(s) to whom the allegations were disclosed should immediately contact ChildLine giving the details to that person.

Other adults onsite should be alerted to stay with the alleged victim and other potential victims. Once the allegations have been reported, the person to whom the allegations were made should not discuss the matter with other persons except law enforcement or designated state investigators. To do so could cause irreparable harm to the victims, their families, and the community.

Response Team. As directed by the Office of the Bishop, the Conference Response Team may be called upon to assist in a given situation.

Handling calls and questions from the media. If a member of the media – newspaper, TV station, Radio station, Magazine – calls or approaches a staff or volunteer in person and asks about the situation, that person should get their name and phone number and respectfully tell them that the Director of Communications will get back to them with the answer as soon as possible. The following “hold response” can be used:

“I want to make sure we give you the most accurate and up-to-date information. The Director of Communications can best help you. If you give me your contact information, deadline and topic you are calling about, I will have them return your call as soon as possible.” or, “Here is the phone number/email of the Director of Communications...”

No staff person should answer any questions. The staff person should be polite, but firm. A staff person should never simply tell a reporter, “No Comment,” as this response raises concern that the incident (alleged or known) is not being dealt with or taken seriously by the church. Nothing is assured to be “off the record” when talking to the media. A staff person/volunteer should realize that any statement made to the media can be used publicly, even if the reporter says it is “off the record.”