



UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS

Office of Media Relations

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Safe Environment Programs

Churches, schools and youth organizations are required by law in most states to ensure that children and youth who worship, study, or participate in activities sponsored therein can do so in the safest and most secure setting possible. Parents and caretakers must have confidence in these institutions before they will allow their children to become involved with them "Safe environment" programs designed to assist institutions in instilling that confidence are encouraged by insurance and risk management companies as well.

The *Charter for the Protection of Children and Youth* also requires that dioceses/eparchies establish "safe environment" programs. Article 12 of the Charter states:

"Diocese/eparchies will establish "safe environment" programs. They will cooperate with parents, civil authorities, educators, and community organizations to provide education and training for children, youth, parents, ministers, educators, and others about ways to make and maintain a safe environment for children. Dioceses/eparchies will make clear to clergy and members of the community the standards of conduct for clergy and other persons in positions of trust with regard to sexual abuse."

In addition, Article 13 states:

"Dioceses/eparchies will evaluate the background of all diocesan/eparchial and parish personnel who have regular contact with minors. Specifically, they will utilize the resources of law enforcement and other community agencies."

Guidelines for Implementation of Safe Environment Programs

The following information is presented to assist dioceses/eparchies in the implementation of "safe environment" programs.

What are the necessary elements of a "safe-environment" program?

A safe environment program begins with a "code of conduct" for all adults who work with youth on a regular basis. A "code of conduct" establishes acceptable behavior that is legal, professional, and responsible and it must include standards of conduct with regard to sexual abuse and harassment. Written copies are to be provided to each employee/volunteer who must acknowledge in writing that they understand and must abide by it.

A "safe environment" program requires **training** of parents, ministers, educators, church personnel, volunteers and others regularly involved with minors as to the issue of abuse of children, to include sexual abuse.

Training programs for adults should include the following:

- A. What **constitutes** child abuse, **including** sexual abuse?
- B. What actions, procedures and policies are used to **prevent** child abuse in any form?
- C. How does an adult **identify** instances of abuse of a child, including sexual abuse?
 - What signs should an adult look for in a child who may be abused?
 - What signs should an adult look for in a person who may be abusing a child in any way?
- D. What **actions** should an adult take when they believe that child abuse, to include sexual abuse, may be occurring?
- E. What are the laws and policies regarding the **reporting** of abuse, to include sexual abuse, of children?

Training programs for **children and young people** should include age appropriate materials pertaining to personal safety. This includes information about improper touching and relationships. Children are not expected to be fully knowledgeable about child abuse or of the laws governing care of children but they need to know when they should seek assistance from a trusted adult.

Should dioceses/eparchies have codes of conduct for minors?

Codes of conduct are recommended for students as well as your employees and volunteers. Children in your schools should adhere to standards of behavior that include respect for their fellow classmates, teachers and volunteers. It is important to remember that while child abuse is usually committed by an adult, children and young people may be offenders.

Who must be included in "safe environment" programs?

Training relating to prevention, identification, response and reporting is to be provided to ministers, educators, parents, volunteers, church personnel and others who have regular contact with youth.

How do we ensure that parents receive this training?

It may be difficult to ensure all parents in a parish are adequately informed about the issue of child abuse. To reach as many parents as possible, attempts should be made to provide various types instruction. Multiple delivery methods could include formal training sessions led by experienced child-safety professionals, independent reading material, videos, or information posted on the diocesan web-site.

Do children in our parish religious education classes receive the same training as our students in Catholic schools?

Children in parish religious education programs should receive the same basic information as those who attend Catholic schools. Some programs may have to be modified for parish religious education programs due to time constraints.

What types of "safe environment" programs are available?

In addition to those offered by public and private social service agencies and schools, there are a variety of "safe environment" programs available commercially. The National Federation of Catholic Youth Ministers, Washington, DC (www.nfcym.org) is an excellent resource regarding codes of conduct for adults and youth.

Can a diocese/eparchy create its own "safe environment" program?

A diocese/eparchy can create its own "safe environment" program as long as it includes the information outlined above and reaches the pertinent audiences.

What do "safe environment" programs cost?

The costs of commercially available programs vary. Some programs are provided at no cost, or reduced charge, by government agencies and social service institutions.

How long should "safe environment" programs last?

Due to the dynamic nature of parish life and personnel turnover, safe environment programs must be incorporated into the long-term mission of dioceses/eparchies..

Are new employees required to become part of "safe environment" programs?

New employees must receive "safe environment" training and adhere to diocesan/eparchial codes of conduct.

Can a diocese/eparchy change "safe environment" programs?

A diocese/eparchy can change "safe environment" programs as long as the new program includes the information outlined above and reaches the pertinent audiences.

Can a diocese/eparchy utilize a community or public-school based program?

A diocese/eparchy can utilize a community or public-school based program, as long as the program includes the information outlined above and reaches the pertinent audiences.

Can a diocese/eparchy obtain a grant, loan or other funding to pay for a "safe environment" program?

Dioceses/eparchies can sometimes obtain grants, loans or other funding to pay for "safe environment" programs from charitable foundations or benefactors.

How do dioceses/eparchies evaluate the background of personnel who have regular contact with minors?

Background investigations of personnel who have regular contact with minors must be conducted. Such investigations are best conducted by a reputable professional agency, law enforcement or social service agency, if available in your area. Background investigations should include criminal history checks of the employee/volunteer and, if lawful in your state, the employee/volunteer should be asked if they have ever been accused of or investigated for an act of abuse or harassment. References must be checked.

Is there a cost for a background investigation?

Most agencies, private and public, charge for this work. The costs vary.

Who evaluates the results of the background investigation and determines if the individual is suitable for work with children?

Supervisory personnel within your diocese/eparchy can evaluate the results of the background investigation. It is preferable that this individual have experience in human resource management.

Article 8 of the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Youth* states that the Office of Children and Youth Protection will produce an annual public report on the progress made in implementing the standards in the Charter. Does this include the establishment of a "safe environment" program?

The establishment of "safe environment" programs by the dioceses/eparchies will be addressed in the annual public report.

When do safe environments have to be in place?

Safe environment programs should be identified, selected and underway by June 20, 2003.

Questions regarding "safe environment programs" may be directed to the Office of Child and Youth Protection, USCCB, (202) 541-5413.

Adopted March 7, 2003