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THE PARISH SCREENING
AND
VOLUNTEER MANAGEMENT PROGRAM

1. THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION

(1) Jesus said: “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” (Matthew 22: 37–40)

(2) In following these commandments, each of us is called to serve God and to minister to others in life-giving ways. While it is important to respect the dignity of all whom we come into contact with, we acknowledge that there are those among us who, through no fault of their own, are particularly vulnerable to harm and abuse. As ministers of God and followers of Christ, it is our duty and responsibility to recognize these people and do all that we can to protect them from coming to any harm through the ministries of our Church.

(3) The Diocese of Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island undertakes to ensure that our Churches be safe and holy places for all whom our ministry affects. It is therefore our policy that all staff and volunteers, lay and ordained, who come into contact with children, youth and vulnerable people be screened in a manner appropriate to the ministry or job being undertaken.

2. GUIDELINE RATIONALE

(1) The overall rationale of this guideline is to ensure that there is a safe environment in all parishes, ministries, and activities within our Diocese. It is recognized that clergy, diocesan staff, parish staff and volunteers serve in situations where abuse has the potential to occur. It is further recognized that children, youth, and vulnerable adults need to be protected from the occurrence of any such abuse, and that those who are ministering in our Churches need to be properly selected and trained to avoid abuse or the appearance of abuse to others. Abuse occurs when persons in a position of trust or authority misuse their position to further their own desires or fail to act in the best interest of the person to whom they are ministering. It is therefore necessary for all people within the church to be familiar with actions that constitute abuse and avoid both behaviour and situations where abuse or the appearance of abuse has the potential to occur. This abuse can take the following forms:

- physical abuse
- emotional abuse
- sexual abuse and harassment
- financial abuse and exploitation

(2) Where one individual holds power over another, due to position, age, size, gender or other reason, the potential for abuse is greater. An imbalance of power may be real or perceived, but where such an imbalance exists, the person in the position of power must be responsible for ensuring that abuse does not occur.

(3) Further, it needs to be recognized that by agreeing to specific ministries, staff and volunteers themselves become vulnerable to manipulation and abuse by others. As much as possible, people in positions of trust must take necessary precautions to avoid compromising situations and must take steps to reduce the risk associated with such situations. By recognizing and avoiding compromising situations, people who supply ministry protect others from abuse, they protect themselves from abuse, and they protect themselves from misunderstandings that may lead to allegations of abuse. Also, because of the intimate nature of ministry, people in positions of trust may suspect or become aware of situations of abuse or neglect by third parties against people to whom they minister. Where these situations involve children, a person is required, by law, to inform the local Children's Aid Society. In cases of neglect or abuse involving adults, the ministry person should encourage the abused person to seek the necessary support and help to stop the abuse and should endeavour to secure such help for the individual where appropriate and feasible.

3. TEN STEPS TO A SAFE PARISH

(1) STEP 1 - WRITE A VOLUNTEER MINISTRY POSITION DESCRIPTION

Careful position design and clear position description determine the position's level of risk while sending the message that the parish is serious about screening its volunteers. Ministry or "job" descriptions can be a powerful recruitment tool, helping volunteers understand the specific duties and boundaries involved in various ministries. Ministry descriptions do not have to be long, but should set out clear tasks and ground rules.

(2) STEP 2 - DETERMINE THE RISK

Risk assessment is the heart of volunteer screening. Immediate action can often be taken to lower the risk even before screening procedures are applied. Those organizing parish, regional and diocesan level events are encouraged to err on the side of caution when assessing the risk levels inherent in various ministries and positions. When there is doubt or disagreement as to the degree of risk, the risk level should be assessed as high. The risk assessment grid found on page 3.2 of *Screening in Faith* is a helpful tool in determining whether a particular activity is low, medium, or high-risk. An activity can automatically be assessed high-risk if any of the following circumstances apply:

- Any ministry to children, teens, or vulnerable adults when the person has direct care of, or access to, the participants;
- Access to the personal property or assets of vulnerable persons;
- Regular access to church property or assets;
- One-on-one interactions;

- Being in the church building alone – this may under some circumstances create high-risk for the volunteer/staff person;
- Off-site or overnight activities with vulnerable persons. A person can be considered vulnerable when they have difficulty protecting themselves for a number of reasons, including age, gender, disability, or temporary personal crisis. See also notes included in the Sexual Misconduct Guidelines (2.2.17).

(3) STEP 3 - ESTABLISH A RECRUITMENT PROCESS

Recruitment materials should indicate that your parish screens applicants. Requests for volunteers or paid staff should be done in a public way through bulletins, newsletters, etc. Screening measures should be explained to candidates at the earliest opportunity. Congregations are encouraged not to place people in high-risk ministry situations until they have known them for at least six months. All persons volunteering for ministry positions in the Church shall be screened in accordance with the applicable procedures.

(4) STEP 4 - USE AN APPLICATION FORM

Application forms collect basic information such as name, address, and experience. They also allow a congregation or event organizer permission to do reference checks and police records checks if warranted by the level of risk in the position. Human rights legislation outlines what kinds of questions can and cannot be asked on an application form. Acceptable and unacceptable questions can be found on page 4.2 of the *Screening in Faith* resource.

(5) STEP 5 - CONDUCT INTERVIEWS

In the case of high-risk positions, interviews should be carried out by at least two interviewers. The interview should be viewed as an opportunity to ensure there will be a “good fit” between a person and a particular ministry. Observations made during interviews should be documented and kept in a confidential file. Additional guidelines for interviewing can be found on page 4.10 of the *Screening in Faith* resource.

(6) STEP 6 - REFERENCE CHECKS

If references are asked for in an application form, these references should always be checked. Suggested reference check questions and a sample form are found on pages 8.7 through 8.9 of the *Screening in Faith* resource. In general:

- Referees should not be family members;
- Reference checks should be documented and kept on file;
- At least two references should be checked, one of whom knows the candidate in the context for which s/he is applying to serve;
- Candidates should not see completed reference check forms, or in any way be informed of what a referee said, unless the referee gives written permission.

(7) STEP 7 - REQUEST A POLICE RECORDS CHECK (PRCs)

(i) Police checks should never be the first, last, or only step of screening. Depending on the risks involved in the ministry, a candidate will be asked to provide a copy of his/her police record. If any convictions appear, the candidate will be asked to provide details and give permission for you to confirm the nature of these convictions with the police. A conviction does not necessarily exclude the applicant from a volunteer or paid position, rather, the nature of the conviction should be measured against the nature of the ministry. For example, in the case of someone who wants to help in the nursery, a conviction for abuse and harassment would be more pertinent than a conviction for shoplifting.

(ii) In the interests of confidentiality, it is preferred that police records checks be provided to the parish for review, but not kept on file. No photocopies should be made of the check, and the original document should be returned to the volunteer or paid staff person. What can be kept on file is a form stating that the check has been provided and reviewed. This form should be signed by a person or persons appointed by the parish to review police records checks. The form should also indicate whether the check has been approved or if follow-up conversations are required, but should *not* record the nature of any charges or convictions.

(iii) Congregations shall pay for the check (when fees apply). If an applicant refuses to provide a copy of his/her police record, s/he should not be permitted to serve in a high-risk ministry. Costs for obtaining a Police records check vary greatly across the Diocese. Often parishes can obtain free checks for their volunteers if they provide their charitable registration number. Consult your local police station.

(8) STEP 8 - ORIENTATION AND TRAINING

In fairness to volunteers in particular, congregations are strongly encouraged to provide orientation and training so that people can carry out their ministries effectively. Annual sessions for both new and experienced volunteers contribute to excellence in ministry and happier volunteers. Orientation and training sessions offer an opportunity to observe volunteers in a social setting and to provide information on your policies and procedures.

(9) STEP 9 - SUPERVISION AND EVALUATION

The greater the risk in a position, the more frequent and intense the supervision and evaluation process should be. All ministries should be appropriately supervised. Although the incumbent is responsible for general supervision and parish life, the incumbent need not be the direct supervisor for all ministries. For example, supervisory responsibility for the Sunday School teachers may be delegated to the Sunday School Superintendent. To be effective, supervision for medium and high-risk ministries must be systematic and recorded. In general:

- Volunteers and paid staff may complete an annual self-evaluation;

- A supervisor is encouraged to have an annual interview with the volunteer or paid staff person to address any concerns, offer support, and celebrate accomplishments;
- It can be beneficial to ask volunteers and paid staff to evaluate their direct supervisor(s), creating an atmosphere of mutual accountability;
- Spot-checks and reports should be done at least twice a year, in cases where a program leader is usually alone with vulnerable participants (see *Screening in Faith* 7.19).

(10) STEP 10 - PARTICIPANT FOLLOW-UP

Parish, Regions and Diocese should monitor the ministry by checking, from time to time, on participant satisfaction. A “participant” means anyone on the receiving end of a ministry or service (i.e., children in a Sunday School class, teens at a teen activities, shut-ins being visited). Regular, on-going contact with program participants and family members helps to ensure that programs remain relevant and of high quality. Such monitoring can also act as a deterrent to someone who might otherwise do harm and go undetected. This practice is part of overall risk management strategy and does not imply suspicion of particular individuals. In all cases, Parishes, Regions and Diocese are encouraged to check-in with:

- at least two participants in each medium and high-risk program annually;
- at least two participants after any off site or overnight events involving children or youth.

CONCLUSION:

These guidelines, together with the *Screening in Faith* resource, are designed to help parishes get started with implementing a screening program appropriate to their context. Although minor changes may be made to the guidelines and policies as they develop, parishes are encouraged to begin implementing an appropriate screening program immediately. Help is available to parishes and congregations who would like further assistance in developing and implementing a screening program.

REFERENCES:

1. Diocese of Algoma - *The Parish Screening & Program Management Kit*
<http://dioceseofalgoma.com>
2. Volunteer Canada's *Safe Steps Screening Program*
<http://www.volunteer.ca>