

Combating Complacency in the “New Normal”

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Over the last decade, U.S. Catholic organizations have committed time, funds and energy to implement safe environment initiatives. The programs mark a new era for the safety of children in the Church community, and they represent a “new normal” in how ministries operate. As they institutionalize best practices such as requiring employees and volunteers to undergo background screening and participate in abuse prevention training, Catholic organizations now mobilize for the next battle – combating *complacency*.

Initially, staff and volunteers may be vigilant about adhering to standards: they attend training, complete required documents, and dutifully report their observations, suspicions or concerns. But even in the most fortified organizations, drift from standards occurs and risk creeps in. A new unscreened choir member helps at the last minute to chaperone an overnight field trip; a staff member ignores youth talking about questionable content on a youth minister’s Facebook page; a school counselor covers the window in his office door, blocking the view from outside. While none of these situations constitutes abuse, each one constitutes drift, drift that goes overlooked. People have begun to lose sight of the bigger picture and become complacent in their routines.

Sexual abuse is high intensity event. A single incident can leave lasting effects on the victim, the victim’s family, the organization, and the community. That’s why there can be no room for drift from standards. Here are five steps you can take to stem complacency:

- **Screen applicants for policy adherence.** Behavioral psychology teaches that the best predictor of future behavior is past behavior. Ask applicants about a time when they didn’t agree with a policy at their last job or volunteer position and how they responded. Their answers will clue you in on their attitude toward following the rules.
- **Regularly reinforce the importance of policies.** This can be done in individual or team meetings, event planning sessions or while doing random drop-ins. Find out if policies

are being skirted because of situations that are perceived as unique. Remind folks that policies are there to *help* them, not limit them.

- **Take advantage of learning opportunities.** As with all safety programs, regular refreshers are critical for maintaining awareness. Send staff and volunteers an e-mail reminder about a particular policy. If you come across a news article about an incident, distribute it and discuss it with your team.
- **Respond swiftly to policy violations.** Treat these types of incidents as free training material for your staff and volunteers. Reflect on whether or not the incident is symptomatic of a larger problem in the system and what can be done.
- **Engage others in monitoring for adherence.** Not only supervisors, but any trained set of eyes in the program has something to contribute. Actively solicit feedback from volunteers, children and youth in the program. Research shows that parental involvement can be pivotal to a safety program's success¹. Parents who are informed of the policies (and ideally trained in abuse prevention) can monitor for policy violations outside of the regular program activities.

Creating a safe environment is an ongoing process that requires strong commitment, constant vigilance, regular reminders, and no tolerance for drift. Thankfully, we know that across the U.S. population, child sexual abuse has declined dramatically². Still, we recognize that abuse often remains unreported for years – and it is up to us to ensure it won't happen on our watch. The challenge remains to keep the importance of this issue alive by acknowledging that our work is not done – it is just beginning.

¹ Wurtele S, Kenny M. 2010. Partnering with parents to prevent childhood sexual abuse. *Child Abuse Review* **19**: 130-152.

² Finkelhor D, Jones L. 2006. Why have child maltreatment and child victimization declined? *Journal of Social Issues* **62**(4): 685-716.