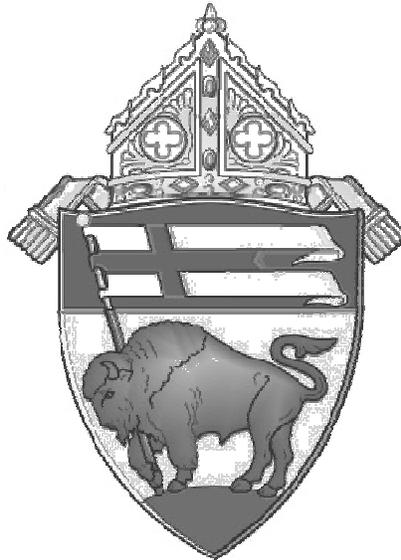

Diocese of Buffalo

Business Administration – Best Parish Practices

Section 9 – Safe Environment Program



July 2013

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Section 9 – Safe Environment Program

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A. Safe Environment Program Policies

In June 2002, the United States Conference Catholic Bishops (USCCB) mandated certain policies for individuals across the country who work with youth. The Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People (The Charter), which can be found on the USCCB website at <http://www.usccb.org/ocyp/charter.shtml> recognized the problem of child sexual abuse as a significant problem world-wide and that as a Catholic community; we have a responsibility to protect children from sexual predators.

In simple terms, The Charter outlined standards for key groups of people including all clergy and candidates for ordination, as well as others who work with youth including educators, diocesan employees, parish/school employees, volunteers, parents and youth:

- Safe Environment training and background screening for these identified categories of adults
- Safe Environment training for children
- Outreach and support to victims of clergy abuse

The Charter further requires each diocese to develop their one response to the Charter, detailing the implementation of the Charter within their own diocese.

The main emphasis of the document is that ALL active clergy and all candidates for ordination, as well as adult educators, employees and volunteers who work with youth are to be trained to recognize the warning signs of abuse and what actions to take when they have a concern. This includes notifying the proper civic and Church authorities.

The Diocese has developed a Code of Conduct which describes appropriate and inappropriate behavior when working with youth.

The Charter mandates that proper applicant screening be conducted on adults who work with youth. The screening must include reference checks and a criminal background check.

In addition to the training requirements for adult volunteers and employees, The Charter mandates that dioceses offer training to parents, and that children in Catholic schools and religious education programs are to be provided training.

As a separate and equally important component, The Charter includes requirements for outreach and care for victims of clergy abuse.

A Safe Environment Office was created at the Catholic Center to ensure that the policies of the Diocese are fully communicated and implemented. At the local level, each parish, school and Catholic organization has a Local Safe Environment Coordinator. The local coordinator is generally the Pastor or administrator of a parish and the principal and canonical administrator of a school. Additional administrators may also be appointed. Administrators have responsibility for fully implementing these policies at their location. Special privileges on the Virtus website facilitate monitoring of local compliance through reports and capabilities to update participant records.

All forms and updates to policy are published on the www.virtus.org website in the “My Diocese” section for “local coordinators” to view or download.

B. Annual Audit

The Charter requires that each diocese submit to an annual audit to ensure compliance with USCCB and diocesan Safe Environment mandates. Each diocesan location must report and provide access to records for adult and youth training, applicant screening, background checks and other records at the request of the diocese or auditors. Each location must manage and update their records in order to provide complete, up-to-date and accurate picture of compliance at their location.

C. For All Employees

1. A completed **employment application** must be completed and on file at the location of the hiring entity (parish, school or organization).
2. During the hiring process, at least **2 references** must be checked, by phone or in person, and documented by the hiring supervisor. References for employees should not include relatives. References should include former supervisors. If the employee has regular contact with children, references should be told that the applicant may be working regularly with children. The reference should be asked if they would have any concerns about the applicant working alone with or around children. Other questions in the reference check should include a discussion about character and competency to perform the job for which they are being hired. Note that distribution of a form letter is not an appropriate method of conducting a check of references.
3. All employees must sign the **Code of Conduct** which must be filed for the employee at the local entity's facility.
4. All employees must submit to a **criminal background check**. These checks are conducted by the Diocese in cooperation with information provided by the schools, parishes and organizations.

D. All Volunteers

1. **Volunteer Questionnaire** to be completed by the applicant and to be maintained in a file at the location of the hiring entity (parish, school or organization). Note that the Volunteer Questionnaire may not provide space for phone numbers of volunteer references. However, it is necessary to collect contact names and phone numbers in order to conduct the reference checks. Be sure to collect that information. Volunteer references do not need to be employment references.
2. During the selection process, at least **2 references** must be checked, by phone or in person, and documented by the volunteer coordinator. Reference checks should be performed by an assigned “employee” of the school or parish, or diocesan organization. Preferred references are from persons who have worked with the individual in volunteer or other activities. Relatives of the applicant may not be used a reference. If the volunteer has regular contact with children, references should be told that the applicant may be working regularly with children. The reference should be asked if they would have any concerns about the applicant working alone with or around children. Note that distribution of a form letter is not an appropriate method of conducting a check of references.
3. **Code of Conduct** to be signed and maintained in a file for the volunteer at the local entity's facility. Note that the signature on the back of the code of Conduct form authorizes the Diocese to conduct a criminal background check.

4. Volunteers that work with children must go through a **criminal background check**. These are conducted by the Diocese with information provided by the individual through the school, parish or diocesan affiliate. There are no exemptions for those who may have a background check as a result of prior employment background checks.

E. All Children in Catholic Schools and Religious Education Programs

Safe Environment training is mandated for all children in Catholic schools and in all parish-based religious education programs. Curricula have been developed by the Office of Lifelong Faith Formation that integrates the training into regular classroom instruction. Training is to be provided each year, allowing parental opt-out as needed (with documentation).

F. Protecting God's Children™ Workshop and Ongoing Training

The Protecting God's Children™ workshop is required for the categories of individuals indicated above. The main purpose of the initial training is to help the community become aware of the extent of the problem of child sexual abuse in society, and provide solutions to prevent abuse from occurring. Additionally, periodic training bulletins and annual re-certification are required as follow-up for anyone who is required to attend the workshop. Pre-registration is encouraged at www.virtus.org.

New employees and volunteers who are required to attend the workshop are required to attend within 90 days of their start date. The local organization may grant a thirty (30) day extension as needed. However, volunteers are not permitted to work without direct, on-site supervision until the training is completed.

Who needs to attend? All adults over the age of eighteen (18) who have regular contact with youth are required to attend. Minors, those individuals that are under the age of eighteen, are specifically discouraged from attending this program, as it is geared for adults. Seventeen year olds may attend with a parent or guardian, however they are NOT required. The final decision on specific job functions that require attendance may be made at the local school or parish level. Some guidelines are listed below to clarify the intent. In the examples below, we are **always referring to adults**.

In the parish: All clergy (priests and deacons), candidates for ordination, youth ministers, religious education coordinators must attend. All staff or volunteers involved with music, spiritual or sports programs (where youth may be involved) must attend. Eucharistic Ministers who take the Eucharist to homes where youth may be present must attend. All adult catechists must attend. Facilitators for the Children's Liturgy of the Word must attend. The parish secretary must attend as they may be in regular contact with youth.

In the school: All clergy (priests and deacons), candidates for ordination, administration, secretaries, guidance counselors, teachers, aides, nurses, cafeteria workers, coaches and maintenance personnel must attend. Each school secretary or administrative staff person is required to attend the training. All employees and volunteers who have regular contact with children including lunch monitors and all parent or community volunteers who come in contact with youth through school programs must attend the training. Volunteers who accompany children on field trips or other school activities should attend. Individuals who are certified social workers or state mandated reporters are NOT exempted.

Scout Leaders. Scout leaders who go through scout training on child sexual abuse prevention are granted an exemption from the diocesan live training, Code of Conduct, Volunteer Questionnaire and criminal background check if their work is limited to the Scouts. Those individuals receive their training and clearance through the scout program. If these leaders work in another ministry in the Diocese, they should participate in the Protecting God's Children™ training.

Ongoing Training Requirement. Periodic training bulletins and annual re-certification are an integral part of the training mandate for everyone who has had Safe Environment training. The Protecting God's Children Workshop provides only an overview of the training program and diocesan policies. Thus ongoing training is an important component of the complete training required for the protection of youth. Individuals who do not comply with the ongoing training requirement will have their training account suspended, and therefore no longer have access to ongoing training material. The employee or volunteer owners of these suspended accounts will be considered as persons who have been allowed to continue to work or volunteer in clear violation of diocesan mandates with full knowledge of the diocesan location which is responsible for that individual. Administrators must take measures to bring these individuals into mandated compliance by providing printed copies of the Virtus training bulletins and ensuring that a criminal background check has been completed before an individual can be reinstated.

G. Note on Privacy

Collection of personal information is essential in order to conduct criminal background checks and reference checks. According to counsel, it is entirely legal and appropriate to request this type of information from all volunteers and employees. In many cases, our volunteers have not been asked previously to provide their personal information as a condition of their ministry. Note that anyone seeking employment will always provide their Social Security Number to their employer. Likewise, it is now necessary for our volunteers to provide this information so that we can protect the safety of our children through criminal background checks. All personal information must be maintained in the parish or school in a secure and locked location so that this information is not available for inappropriate use. Appropriate measures should also be taken to maintain confidentiality of information kept on computers and computer networks. For those instances where information is to be transmitted over the Internet, secure technology, encryption and password protection should be utilized to maintain security. This same level of confidentiality will be maintained at the diocesan level.

Revised: December 15, 2010