

Abuse Prevention

Newsletter for Churches and Christian Organizations



Abuse Prevention Audit: A Board Responsibility



WHY?

An abuse prevention policy is the single most important risk management tool utilized by children's and youth-serving organizations!

Implementing and maintaining an effective prevention plan are both crucial and equally important in protecting those in your care, avoiding unnecessary lawsuits, defending your organization and directors in a civil court case and maintaining your ongoing insurance coverage eligibility.

Some myths about prevention and compliance...

- If we don't know about it, it's OK
- If we have a policy on it, we don't need to check
- That's not a board responsibility
- This is a ministry, the courts will treat us differently
- It won't ever happen here
- They would never sue us

An external third party audit conducted by a legal or other professional outside party is always highly recommended. However, internal auditing is also a good solution for monitoring and measuring compliance to your organization's prevention plan. The goal is to provide your leadership with a report card and an action plan. The advantage of this type of audit is being able to correct problems internally before they result in oversights that can lead to injury, abuse, litigation and uninsured claims.

WHAT?

Following is a framework for monitoring and assessing the scope of your abuse prevention audit in relationship to your specific operations as a church or charity:

- Do an inventory of all ministries, activities, programs and events which your organization is currently sponsoring or co-sponsoring
- Evaluate potential risks associated with new or proposed activities and programs prior to board or senior management approval

- Keep updated regarding ongoing changes in legislation, regulation and statutory legal obligations through local police, your lawyer and your insurance provider
- Review past issues or concerns that your organization has faced, including previous audits

WHO?

An audit should be conducted by having an independent internal auditor (individual or committee) appointed by your board (or congregation) to review and survey your various programs, ministries and departments and to report back to your board members to ensure compliance with your organization's own stated written abuse prevention plan and to verify that your actual operations are in compliance with your policies and procedures.

WHEN?

Your board (or congregation) should ratify an internal abuse prevention audit protocol to be conducted on an ongoing annual or bi-annual basis which reflects the size, scope and nature of your organization's particular children's and youth ministries, programs and events.

"Board members should be aware that they could be exposed to personal liability if they permit their organization to work with children or other vulnerable persons where the board has failed to implement an appropriate abuse prevention policy that has been customized to reflect the specifics of their organization. Failure to follow the protocol set out in the abuse prevention policy could also lead to liability, so it is important that an organization that has the foresight to implement a policy also makes sure that the policy is strictly followed."

– Terrance Carter of Carters Professional Corporation, www.charitylaw.ca

HOW?

Following is a simple and easy to use outline for conducting an internal audit:

1. A director, officer, committee or other qualified individual should be appointed by the board (or congregation) and given power and authority as internal auditor to oversee all aspects of the audit procedure and to whom your children's

and youth ministry department leaders will have the responsibility to assist and cooperate. Ideally this individual or committee should be knowledgeable about abuse prevention but should be removed from the day-to-day operations of your youth and children's ministries in order to assure objectivity.

2. The internal auditor will be provided with specific guidelines to survey the various department ministries, programs and events, which will include, but not necessarily be limited to, review of your physical premises (e.g. windows in all classrooms), your operational procedures (e.g. "two adult" rule), your training of all new and existing workers (e.g. awareness of the prevention plan and duty to report abuse) and your screening procedures (e.g. minimum 6 months of attendance prior to eligibility, personal interview and references, criminal record checks, etc.) With respect to screening, a random number of new and existing workers should be confidentially surveyed by the auditor to ensure that they have been properly screened and trained.
3. The results of the survey will be summarized and reported to the board by the internal auditor, outlining the areas of full compliance, partial compliance and non-compliance, along with a recommended "to-do" list in order to achieve maximum compliance.
4. The board will review and ratify the internal auditor's report and propose an action plan to achieve maximum compliance within a reasonable time frame. This action plan may include temporarily shutting down non-complying programs and events while staff or individual department leaders remediate the problem areas. Remediation may include following up on outstanding or overdue screening documentation and initial or refresher training for workers. It may also include changes to operational procedures, building modifications and checking with the organization's legal counsel or insurance provider for clarification of any outstanding liability or coverage issues. Once the non-compliant areas have been satisfactorily addressed, staff or department leaders should formally report back to the board in order to confirm full compliance with your organization's abuse prevention plan.