

Reducing the Risk of Child Sexual Abuse **Copyright 2006 Richard Hammar**

The risk of child sexual molestation in children's and youth programs at church remains high. Consider the following two points:

First, I recently concluded my research on church litigation that occurred in 2005. The number one reason that churches were in court involved the sexual misconduct of a minor. This is not an issue that is going away. Sadly, my research demonstrates that no more than a third of the churches in this country are doing any screening of volunteer children/youth workers. Churches that continue to ignore this problem are placing themselves and the most vulnerable members of their congregation at an unacceptable level of risk.

Second, the FBI profile of pedophiles contains the following statement:

“Unfortunately, certain youth organizations inadvertently provide the child molester with almost everything necessary to operate a child sex ring. A *scouting organization*, for example, fulfills the offender's needs for access to children of a specific age or gender, a bonding mechanism to ensure the cooperation and secrecy of victims, and opportunities to spend the night with a victim or have a victim change clothing. The bonding mechanism of the scouts is especially useful to the offender. Loyalty to the leader and group, competition among boys, a system of rewards and recognition, and indoctrination through oaths and rituals can all be used to control, manipulate, and motivate victims. Leaders in such organizations, especially those who are not the parents of children involved, should be carefully screened and closely monitored.”

What steps can children's leaders take to reduce this risk? The good news is that you can significantly reduce the risk of children being sexually molested by taking the following steps:

1. *Application.* Churches can reduce their risk of molestation by having every applicant for children/youth ministry complete a “screening application.” At a minimum, the application should ask for the applicant's name and address, the names of other children/youth-serving organizations in which the applicant has worked as an employee or volunteer, a full explanation of any prior criminal convictions, and the names of two or more references.

2. *Contact references.* Contact each person and organization listed as a reference in the application and request a written reference. If you do not receive back the written reference forms, then contact the references by telephone and prepare a written memorandum noting the questions asked and the reference's responses. The best references will be from other churches or charities in which the applicant has worked with minors. Examples include other churches, scouts, Big Brothers/Big Sisters or other mentoring organizations, YMCA, public or private schools, or youth sports. Seek a reference from any such organization in which the applicant has served. If a person has never worked with minors in any other church or charity, you must obtain personal references. However, for persons with no prior work involving minors, any personal references should come from members of your church.

3. *Interview.* Candidates for any children's/youth ministry volunteer position should be interviewed. This will provide the church with an opportunity to inquire into each applicant's background and make a determination as to each person's suitability for the position under consideration.

4. *6 month rule.* Churches can reduce the risk of incidents of sexual molestation by adopting a policy restricting eligibility for any volunteer position involving the custody or supervision of minors to those persons who have been members in good standing of the church for a minimum period of time, such as six months. Such a policy gives the church an additional opportunity to evaluate applicants, and will help to repel persons seeking immediate access to potential victims.

5. *Criminal records check.* By performing criminal records checks, a church not only will be reducing its risk of liability in the event a child is molested on its premises or during an off-site program or activity, but more importantly, it will be protecting vulnerable children from a lifetime of suffering.

At a minimum, churches should check the sex offender registry maintained by the United States Department of Justice on its website, www.nsopr.gov. You can instantly check the sex offender registries of nearly every state simultaneously by simply inserting a person's name. No social security numbers are required. These checks are somewhat limited, since they only reveal convictions for certain sex crimes after a specified date in states that make their records available. But it is a simple, fast, and no-cost option that should be performed by any church. Be sure to print and date a copy of each search that you perform so that you can later prove that you conducted this check.

Many churches will want to do more thorough criminal records searches, and there are many options to choose from. One option is "VolunteerSelectPlus" (www.volunteersselectplus.com). All churches are eligible to use this service. In most states, a national criminal records check will cost \$5, and a social security number trace will be \$2.10. Keep in mind that these rates, and the VolunteerSelectPlus program, only apply to unpaid volunteers who work with a charitable organization. The fees for employees are higher. It is true that several companies provide more thorough criminal records checks, but at a much higher cost.

In the final analysis, cost is a barrier to many churches. As the price for a background check increases, the number of churches willing to use that service drops significantly. So, the issue is not which company offers the ultimate and most exhaustive criminal records check, but rather which companies offer reasonable services at a reasonable price? Further, note that several national youth-serving charities have selected VolunteerSelectPlus to conduct background checks. This undermines any claim that a church would be "negligent" in using VolunteerSelectPlus.

Criminal records checks must not be viewed as the only screening procedure that a church should implement. Such checks should be viewed as simply one component of an overall risk management policy that should include the other recommendations made in this article.

6. *Other precautions.* There are several other precautions that churches can take to reduce the risk of child molestation. These include adequate supervision, social security number checks, limiting or prohibiting "second chances," staff training, and being alert to current legal developments.

For Further Information

My web site, www.reducingtherisk.com, contains a wealth of information and resources that I have prepared to assist churches in reducing the risk of child molestation on church premises and during church activities. This includes an indispensable resource kit consisting of a two-

hour DVD (containing six separate presentations on key topics related to screening) and an accompanying book, along with application forms and reference check forms you can use. The web site also contains online training for church workers that includes tests to assess their knowledge of key issues.