

**CHILD, YOUTH & VULNERABLE ADULT SAFETY POLICY
MANDATORY STANDARDS FOR THE RIO TEXAS CONFERENCE OF THE UNITED
METHODIST CHURCH
JUNE 2017**

Reducing the Risk of Abuse in the Church

“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me” (Mark 9:37 NRSV).

“If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones...it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea” (Matthew 18:6 NRSV).

This Rio Texas Conference Child, Youth, and Vulnerable Adults Safety Policy will go into effect immediately following the close of Annual Conference 2018.

This policy will guide the work of the conference. Districts, local churches, and other ministries are encouraged to adopt and implement a policy that is compliant with the minimum standards of this Rio Texas Policy as soon as possible, ensuring the safety of all persons within the bounds of our conference.

Call

In response to God’s call to care for the vulnerable, the Rio Texas Annual Conference is committed to the well-being of every person entrusted to its care, as well as those persons entrusted to the care of the districts and local United Methodist Churches throughout our conference borders. This commitment is in harmony with the Book of Resolutions (§162 *Social Principles*) and the baptismal covenant (*United Methodist Hymnal*).

Purpose

Rio Texas United Methodists are determined to provide an environment in which Participants (as defined herein) are safe from Neglect or Abuse. The scope of this policy and its provisions shall apply to all staff, volunteers, clergy, or lay persons in local churches, districts, and conference sponsored ministries of the Rio Texas Conference who have direct or indirect contact with Participants (Children, Youth, or Vulnerable Adults). This policy sets forth minimum mandatory requirements for screening and training of clergy, lay, staff, or volunteers. Implementation of mandatory ministry procedures and accountability action is required for all ministry leaders within the Rio Texas Conference.

Definitions

- A. **Abuse:** is any deliberate act that inflicts bodily or emotional harm to a Participant. Abuse includes: (a) the infliction of physical or emotional injury by other than accidental means; (b) the creation of a risk, or allowing the creation of risk, to a Participant by other than accidental means; (c) committing or allowing to be committed an act of Sexual Abuse, Sexual Exploitation, or prostitution upon the Participant.
- B. **Adult Leader: is any person** including any paid employee, volunteer, clergy, or lay person in the conference, district, or local church who has the responsibility for the care and Supervision of a Participant at an event. Adult Leaders shall no longer be in High School.

- C. **Applicant:** is any person 18 years of age or older seeking to become an Adult Leader in a local church or for a district or conference event.
- D. **Assistant Leader:** is any person 16 years of age or older who has been through the application and safety certification process, but does not qualify for a background check. These are still considered to be Participants and cannot fill the role of a mandatory Adult Leader.
- E. **Day Ministry Event:** is a local church, conference, district sponsored activity, or occasion that involves a gathering and care of Participants during the hours of 7:00am-10:00pm, and does not occur for more than four hours per day in duration of four or more consecutive days.
- F. **Exploitation:** is obtaining or using another person's income, assets, or possessions with the intent to deprive the person of those resources.
- G. **Neglect:** is failure to provide nutrition, medical, surgical, or any other care necessary for the well-being of the Participants.
- H. **Overnight/Extended Hour Ministry Event:** a local church, conference, or district sponsored activity, or occasion that involves a gathering and care of Participants for more than four hours per day in duration of four consecutive days or involves an overnight stay.
- I. **Participant:** is a Child, Youth, or Vulnerable Adult that is registered, enrolled, attending, or otherwise participating in an event or activity sponsored by the annual conference, a district, or a local church in the Rio Texas Conference.
 - 1. **Child:** is any person 11 years of age or younger.
 - 2. **Youth:** is a person 12-17 years of age.
 - 3. **Vulnerable Adult:** persons over 18 years of age with physical, mental, and/or developmental disabilities.
- J. **Prostitution:** to engage in, to offer to engage, or to force a Participant to engage in sexual contact by either soliciting or receiving a fee or other benefit.
- K. **Rule of Three:** The presence of two unrelated Adult Leaders at all ministry events involving Participants. Any engagement with a Participant requires the presence of two Adult Leaders.
- L. **Sexual Abuse:** is any sexual contact, sexually explicit language, gestures, or images directed to a Participant.
- M. **Sexual Exploitation:** is any deliberate act that allows or encourages a Participant to engage in an act of obscene or pornographic photography, filming, or depiction of a Participant as prohibited under Texas law.
- N. **Supervision:** is the leadership role of a person who is in charge of a group of Participants, giving direction, setting boundaries, disciplining appropriately, maintaining safety and being the leader in all situations.

SAFE MINISTRY MANDATES

All Conference, district, and local church ministry events must provide adequate Supervision from Adult Leaders.

- A. All ministry events with Participants shall follow the Rule of Three with a minimum of one Adult Leader for every eight Participants.
- B. Any one-to-one mentoring or consulting shall be conducted in sight of another Adult Leader.
- C. Adult Leaders and Assistant Leaders working with children and youth must be at least five years older than the oldest Participants with whom they work.
- D. Assistant Leaders must work under the Supervision of two Adult Leaders.

- E. Overnight Ministry Events
 - 1. Co-ed Overnight Ministry Events require co-ed Adult Leaders.
 - 2. Sleeping accommodations shall include sleeping distance of no less than three feet between Adult Leaders, Assistant Leaders, and Participants.
 - 3. Every Participant shall have a completed medical release and parental/legal guardian permission form before they will be permitted to participate at any Overnight Ministry Event.
- F. Travel
 - 1. Only Adult Leaders will be permitted to drive Participants to ministry events. Drivers must be:
 - a. 21 years or older
 - b. have a valid driver's license
 - c. proof of insurance at the state's minimum limits
 - d. not be otherwise disqualified from driving (i.e., under medication, impaired, etc.).
 - 2. Written permission from a parent/legal guardian is required for events requiring transportation to and from the event location.
- G. Phone, video, and online communication:
 - 1. Adult Leaders must notify parents/legal guardians before requesting access, friending, texting, contacting a Participant via social media, or using any other form of online phone/video communication.
 - 2. Using the Rule of Three, all group or social media communications must include two Adult Leaders who serve as administrators/moderators. All groups must be closed, private, and shall require the site administrator's approval to join.
- H. Adult Leaders shall not photograph Participants for use on internet or in print media without written permission of parent/legal guardian. A Social Media best practice resource will be provided by the Mission Vitality Center.

IMPLEMENTATION: SCREENING, TRAINING, AND ACCOUNTABILITY

- A. **SCREENING**
 - 1. Adult Leaders and Assistant Leaders shall submit an application for ministry along with three (work, volunteer, or ministry) references.
 - 2. Applicants should be active in the local church/ministry for a minimum of six months prior to the event or provide additional references affirming their positive leadership with Participants in another ministry setting. In the case of new staff hires, references deemed adequate by the hiring supervisor will replace the six-month waiting period. In the case of Adult Ministry Leaders or Assistant Leaders, previous ministry experience within the Rio Texas Conference may be transferred in lieu of the six-month waiting period pending approval of Rio Texas Conference office.
 - 3. References shall be checked by conference, district, or local church staff responsible for Applicants.
 - 4. Adult Leaders shall:
 - a. Submit a signed authorization form for a criminal background screening to be completed by the Rio Texas Conference office every two years. This will include a signed statement that they are not aware of any allegations that would prevent them from working with Participants.

- b. If results of the screening raise questions about fitness of the Applicant, the Rio Texas Conference office shall disapprove the application and notify the event leader and/or local church. Results of criminal background screenings shall be kept confidential. Applicants can request that the conference office share the results of their criminal background screening with another district or local church in the Rio Texas Conference via a signed request authorization form.

B. TRAINING AND CERTIFICATION

All Adult Leaders and Assistant Leaders must be certified for their work at conference, district, and local church events. Certification includes:

1. Evaluation of and submission of the local church, district, or event policy every year.
2. Completion of Abuse prevention training every year.
3. Safety Certification every two years. Certification will include the following modules:
 - a. Overview of Rio Texas Conference policy.
 - b. Abuse prevention.
 - c. Creating safe spaces, best practices for ministry, sexual ethics and appropriate leader behavior.
 - d. Overnight/extended hour ministry training.
 - e. The certification process will be designed by the Rio Texas Conference and will be offered by trained persons in every district.

C. ACCOUNTABILITY

1. Every ministry of the Rio Texas Annual Conference, district, and local church shall have a policy that is compliant with the minimum standards of this Rio Texas Policy and must review their policy annually.
2. The Mission Vitality Center at the Rio Texas Conference office will work alongside district staff to ensure that policies are adopted and followed.
3. The Rio Texas Conference Uniting Table in consultation with the Conference Mission Vitality Center shall be responsible for reviewing and revising the Rio Texas Child, Youth and Vulnerable Adult Safety Policy.
4. Local churches shall submit their policy and a report on how they are in compliance with their policy annually to the District Superintendent at their charge or church conference.
5. Clergy shall document the date and facilitator when they complete safety certification to their District Superintendent annually via the annual inventory/clergy consultation form.
6. District staff will annually submit a report to the Mission Vitality Center and Office of Intergenerational Discipleship, identifying churches who are in compliance with this policy and/or those still in need of a policy or training.
7. The Mission Vitality Center will work with districts and local churches to keep track of and ensure all conference, district, and local church ministries are in compliance with this policy.
8. A copy of the conference procedures shall be retained in the Rio Texas Conference office.

REPORTING ABUSE

- A. Conference, district, and local church ministries shall have procedures for reporting Abuse included in their policy.
- B. All reports of alleged Abuse should be documented in writing and brought immediately to the attention of the persons designated by the church or sponsored event to receive such information. Texas is a mandatory reporting state. Reports of Abuse shall be made within 48 hours of suspicion. Adult Leaders shall report all abuse by anyone- No Abuse should be considered trivial and not reported. Incidents that involve Abuse, Neglect, Exploitation or Sexual Exploitation of Participants mandate reporting through the Texas Abuse Hotline: 1-800-252-5400 or www.txabusehotline.org.
- C. Any Adult Leader or Assistant Leader accused of Abuse shall be immediately relieved of duties related to any conference, district, or local church event.
- D. In the case of Abuse allegations, the senior pastor, District Superintendent, and/or Bishop shall be notified immediately. Parents or legal guardians should be notified in appropriate circumstances.
- E. It shall be the goal to provide supportive care to both the victim and the accused and to restore such persons to wholeness. The church should provide a supportive atmosphere to all those who are affected, offering both objectivity and empathy as it seeks to create a climate in which healing can take place. Supportive care can include the procedures of the criminal justice system, provisions of the current Book of Discipline, appropriate counseling referrals and continued pastoral visitation.
- F. Statement to the Media: The Conference Coordinator of Communications shall provide conference and district ministry groups with guidelines for communications with media about the incident(s) which may have been reported.

EXCEPTION FOR CHILD CARE FACILITIES SUBJECT TO STATE REQUIREMENTS: It is recognized that some churches operate licensed childcare facilities that come within the purview of the State of Texas. Nothing in this policy is meant to alter or change any requirements imposed by the State. This policy exempts those facilities from its requirements because the State requirements are deemed sufficient.

It is a privilege to work with children, youth, and vulnerable adults. Great responsibility is required. Those who violate this policy shall immediately be removed from contact with children and youth. Appropriate authorities shall be notified immediately.

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

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