



# NATIONAL COUNCIL OF THE UNITED STATES SOCIETY OF ST. VINCENT DE PAUL<sup>®</sup>, INC.

## **National Safeguarding Policy for all Member Councils for Adoption by the National Council in August 2021 Approved by Board of Directors June 11, 2021 \*With Recommendations Added March 2022\***

**NOTE TO SVDP COUNCILS AND CONFERENCES:** This document is provided for your use to create your own Safeguarding policy in coordination with local Diocesan and state requirements. Please **DO NOT** simply copy and paste from this document using your own Council/Conference name. Some local leadership research and discernment is required to create an effective policy document for your needs.

### **What is Safeguarding?**

Safeguarding is the act of protecting from harm people who are vulnerable. It involves reducing and preventing risks of harm and working to ensure that vulnerable individuals and communities are safe and empowered. Safeguarding involves recognizing the human rights of all persons and working to ensure that those rights are not violated.

In the context of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, safeguarding involves working to ensure that in seeking to assist people in need, we are committed to do no harm to their health and wellbeing or put them at risk of abuse or neglect. This policy seeks to address safeguarding as it applies to children and young people. It also applies to other vulnerable people, acknowledging that people could be vulnerable to abuse or neglect by reason of their age, physical or mental disability, or poverty and reliance on support services.

As Vincentians, the nature of our work means that there is often a power imbalance when we encounter a person in need; a person's circumstances, whereby they are seeking help, and our position as a provider of financial, material, or personal support, creates a risk and renders vulnerable the person seeking help. In committing to safeguarding, we are not just seeking to ensure that abuse is prevented, reported, and acted upon; we are also seeking to create safe and respectful environments.

### **Why is SVdP Committed to Safeguarding?**

*"The protection of minors and vulnerable persons is an integral part of the Gospel message that the Church and all its members are called to proclaim throughout the world. Christ himself, in fact, has entrusted us with the care and protection of the weakest and defenseless: "whoever receives one child such as this in my name receives me" (Mt 18:5). Therefore, we all have the duty to welcome openheartedly minors and vulnerable persons and to create a safe environment for them, with their interests as a priority. This requires a continuous and profound conversion, in which personal holiness and moral commitment come together to promote the credibility of the Gospel proclamation and to renew the educational mission of the Church."*

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- Pope Francis  
Apostolic letter issued motu proprio on the protection of minors and vulnerable persons  
26 March 2019

The National Council and its members look to our nation's Bishops for leadership guidance in the area of Safeguarding to create a safe environment for all, which can be found here:

<https://www.usccb.org/topics/catholic-safeguards>

### **The Rule, Our Mission, and Our Value**

Charity as lived by the Society's over 800,000 volunteers throughout the world is inspired by the example of St. Vincent de Paul, a great apostle of charity in his day and the Society's patron saint. SVdP members live the Gospel message by serving Christ in the poor. Inspired by the spirituality of St. Vincent de Paul, members strive to deepen their faith by meeting real needs, undertaking concrete action in neighborhoods, villages, and communities. In that work, we are called to embody these values:

**Empathy** — to listen to and understand those we assist and to work together as members to support those in need.

**Simplicity and Humility** — treating each other, and those we assist, as equals in a fraternal relationship.

**Justice** — respecting people's convictions and beliefs and helping them to regain and retain their autonomy and human dignity

### **Our Current Situation**

In many countries in which SVdP/SSVP operates, the Society is already required to comply with legislation regarding safeguarding, and to have in place stringent policies and processes around working with vulnerable people. Increasingly, this includes the requirement to ensure that partner entities — including, relevantly, other Society bodies around the world with whom we partner and offer support — are also compliant with safeguarding standards. In those countries, SSVP increasingly finds it difficult — even legally impossible — to work with the Society elsewhere if comprehensive safeguarding policies and procedures are not in place. This will continue to impede the Society's ability to engage in things like twinning, shared initiatives, cultural visits/exchanges, the funding of special projects, etc.

### **Safeguarding Understanding and Application**

There needs to be an understanding in all SVdP Councils and Conferences of:

- What safeguarding is
- Why it is important
- Why the Society is making this a priority
- What can be done to ensure safeguarding policy and application

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## **A National Commitment to Minimum Standards**

This policy recommends minimum guidelines and standards for the safeguarding of children and vulnerable people within the care of SVdP entities or personnel (defined throughout this policy as Vincentians, other volunteers, and staff), or with whom SVdP personnel might come into contact through their Vincentian works. In cases where we work through partners and vendors, they also have a responsibility to meet these minimum standards for those served in their programs.

The international and national Society are committed to protecting the rights of all people, and to ensuring that vulnerable persons of all ages are protected from physical and mental violence, injury, abuse, and exploitation, including sexual abuse.

The Society acknowledges that different jurisdictions set different definitions or age limits for children in their local legislation, e.g., laws dealing with the legal age of majority, age of sexual consent, voting age, etc. These differences do not alter the inherent vulnerability of children or other persons with whom the Society works and relates.

**Based on the forgoing, the National Council recommends that each Council develop and have in place a safeguarding policy and practices**, in alignment with local Diocesan and state/local laws, that incorporates and gives effect to the following principles:

- ***The welfare of the people we assist is paramount.***
- ***Concerns or allegations of abusive or exploitative behavior is always taken seriously, investigated and acted on as appropriate.***
- ***We support the participation of children, vulnerable persons, and all those we assist by valuing, listening to and respecting them and giving them a say in decisions that affect them.***
- ***All personnel have access to and are familiar with safeguarding policies and procedures and know their responsibilities within those policies and procedures.***
- ***All personnel and people being served, including children and vulnerable persons themselves, have access to information about how to report concerns or allegations of abuse.***
- ***Recruitment practices are robust enough to ensure that we will not recruit personnel or other representatives if they pose a known risk to the safety or wellbeing of those we assist, or children or vulnerable people with whom we come into contact.***
- ***Our practices do not create or allow conditions in which children and vulnerable people are put at risk of abuse or exploitation.***
- ***People in positions of responsibility, whether they be members, volunteers or employees, are responsible for actively promoting safeguarding and ensuring that safeguarding policies and procedures are complied with and are updated on a regular basis and circulated within their jurisdiction.***

**The National Council also recommends that the following be incorporated into or be considered in developing a policy:**

**A. Topics and Measures to be Incorporated in Every Safeguarding Policy**

Each safeguarding policy must, as a minimum, include requirements around the following:

- Creating safe environments — each Council must develop written policies and protocols designed to convey respect and the dignity of those who we serve, to include but not limited to positive and respectful language and interactions, the protection of personal information, and the obtaining of written consent before sharing personal likeness, stories, or information with anyone beyond the Vincentian direct service providers and our immediate partners.
- Participation — must establish policies, protocols and practices that include input from individual adult family members of those whom we serve. An oversight committee consisting of staff, Vincentians, and those whom we assist shall meet periodically to review policies, protocols, and services and to offer written feedback and suggestions.
- Prevention — recruitment and screening of members, volunteers, and employees to ensure, as far as possible, that we do not admit into the Society persons who are known or reasonably suspected of posing a risk to vulnerable persons due to their past conduct or criminal history.
  - a) ***Piggyback the existing Catholic Diocesan Safe Environment Training (SET) program and screening processes used in your area.***
  - b) ***Use commercial Safe Environment training & programs such as Virtus, Praesidium and Catholic Mutual and their screening process. Foundation trainings and renewals by Vincentians, volunteers, and staff need to be recorded and monitored for compliance. This can be done electronically or in hard copy.***  
***Catholic Mutual Group: [www.catholicmutual.org](http://www.catholicmutual.org)***  
***CMG Connect: <https://cmgconnect.com> for training, background checks, and record keeping***  
***Praesidium: [www.praesidium.com](http://www.praesidium.com) for Policies, Screening and Selection, Training, Monitoring and Supervision, Internal Feedback Systems, Consumer Participation, Responding, Administrative Practices***  
***VIRTUS: [www.virtusonline.org](http://www.virtusonline.org) for training***
  - c) ***Use a commercial training program such as those listed above augmented by an independent background check company/program.***
  - d) ***Develop your own SET training program and screening process.***
  - e) ***Also, many Insurers have resources available that may be suitable for your specific jurisdiction and already are working with you on other liability areas, so a discussion with them on this topic may reveal a program that can be used.***
- Risk management — ensuring that even if dangerous or inappropriate people enter our ranks, they are not in a position to do harm because we have supervision, checking, and reporting

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processes in place, e.g., members must visit in pairs, and personnel must know what to look out for and how to report suspicions of abuse and the importance of speaking up.

- a) ***In addition to visiting in pairs, supervision can include providing services in open areas, in areas with visibility, and with video or in-person monitoring.***
  - b) ***Reasons to report and how plus to whom reports should be made should be included in the initial trainings and in renewals.***
  - c) ***Information on reporting should include procedures for boundary violations as well as abuse.***
  - d) ***Training and written materials can include information on the importance of reporting, what to report and where/how to report.***
- Training — formation and training is provided both upon a person's entry into the Society and on an ongoing basis, which instills in all members, volunteers, and employees the importance of safeguarding, not just as a legal/policy requirement but also as a reflection of our values.
    - a) ***Initial or foundational training can occur at the time of entry or within a limited time frame such as within 14 days of entry provided the individual is being supervised by a SET compliant supervisor.***
    - b) ***A set schedule for renewals needs to be established such as quarterly, semiannually, annually, every two years, every three years, etc.***
    - c) ***Renewals can take place through a variety of means such as videos, in-person trainings, audio tapes, power points and/or written materials.***
  - The safeguarding program must inform all members, volunteers, and staff about the warning signs of potential abuse, the safety measures that are in place to protect others, and the means by which boundary violations and abuse are to be reported. The safeguarding program may be provided by the Council itself or in conjunction with a professional provider and/or the Catholic (Arch)Diocese in their area.
  - Reporting, responding — acting with compassion to victims and those who come forward with concerns or reports, and also showing compassion to those accused, while putting necessary measures in place (such as suspensions) while matters are investigated (i.e., accused persons are afforded natural justice and procedural fairness).

***Each Council/Conference needs to identify a person/position to whom all reporters of potential and realized abuse will communicate. This information then needs to be included in all Vincentian member, staff, and public Safeguarding materials. The Diocesan reporting mechanism does not apply to the Society as we are independent of the Church. Reporting can also be sent directly to government/law enforcement officials, but the Society should not rely on this reporting alone to investigate potential abuse situations. There may be benefits to have reporting for this purpose be consistent with the Council's Sexual Harassment policy reporting.***
  - Action — acting decisively where a person is suspected or found to have perpetuated abuse.

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## **B. Council Actions to Meet the Above Requirements are as Follows:**

### **Recruitment**

When engaging members, volunteers, or staff, there must be processes in place to ensure that risks to vulnerable persons are identified and addressed. In compliance with local Diocese and legal requirements, this might include measures such as requiring all persons to have background checks prior to commencing, fingerprinting, references checks, candidate interviews to assess their attitudes, candidate identity verification through identification documents, and providing training around safe practices.

***It is important that your organization uses clear and fair procedures to recruit all staff and volunteers. This can include a range of measures such as:***

- ***Providing application forms so that applicant information can be easily compared like for like***
- ***Checking out the gaps in a work/life/career history***
- ***Holding interviews with a consistent list of questions asked to each candidate***
- ***Asking about values as well as skills (make sure they align with the organization values)***
- ***Holding an opportunity for candidates to meet service users or demonstrate their working practice***
- ***Asking for references, right to work and qualifications evidence and always checking that this is verifiable and accurate.***
- ***Ask and verify the personal identification documents such as driver's licenses, state identification cards, fingerprinting should be done by a trusted fingerprinting resource used and recommended by your state authorities.***
- ***The use of criminal record checks is an important part of safer recruiting and should be used alongside other safeguarding practices. While a critical part of employee and volunteer recruitment, they should not be the sole criteria.***

### **Position Description**

When advertising, promoting, or documenting roles within SVdP, it should be made clear that SVdP upholds safeguarding principles and practices and that all personnel must adhere to said safeguarding policy and procedures.

***Job descriptions should include information explaining what the responsibilities are regarding safeguarding, including the need to update training as relevant. Include a criterion that reflects a commitment to safeguarding in a way that is relevant to the role and the organization.***

### **Formation and Training**

All personnel should be able and required to receive regular safeguarding training in alignment with local Diocesan requirements.

## **Two Adult Rule**

Our Rule's "two adult rule" (in the Rule Part III, Statute 8) serves to keep vulnerable persons safe, and to protect against false/malicious allegations being made against Vincentians and others providing services. Whenever possible no fewer than two Vincentians should be always present during any meeting with those we serve, and a Vincentian should not be involved with a vulnerable person in the course of the Vincentian work without another adult being present.

If for some reason a one-on-one discussion must take place, the interaction should be conducted in as open and observable a way as possible. In any circumstances where one-to-one contact is part of the role or is anticipated, it is important to consider and mitigate any safeguarding risks and to ensure that such contact is notified to leadership to ensure they are aware of it and the actions being taken to safeguard the vulnerable persons involved.

## **Visitors**

Where visitors are likely to have significant contact with vulnerable persons, especially over an extended period, it is recommended to conduct background checks as described above.

***A person who visits for reasons of family, friendship, business, duty, or other casual presence of COUNCIL DECISION HERE: RECOMMENDED LESS THAN SIX times a year shall be exempt from Archdiocesan/Diocesan Council Safeguarding policy. If the visitor continues to have significant contact with vulnerable persons over an extended period, it is recommended the Council administer a background check as described in this policy.***

***However, a person visiting a SVdP program or site for work related reasons, including consultants and donors, must be made aware of the Council's safeguarding policy either prior to or upon their arrival. The person must acknowledge they understand and will comply with the policy. The continued presence of these people, again, it is recommended the Council administer a background check as described in this policy.***

## **Media, Audio, & Visual Recordings**

If any audio or visual recordings involve interviewing a companion, always ensure that the companion is at no risk of being endangered, or adversely affected. This includes ensuring their privacy and not disclosing identifying information about a child or a vulnerable person, i.e., their full names, addresses or identifying their home, host community, or general location and being vigilant of street signs, advertising boards or any other background information that will indicate to a viewer where the person may live. Do not publish any story or image that might put a vulnerable person or their family at risk. This is the case even when identities are changed, obscured, or not used. Use only a friend in need's first name and provide a general location such as a city or county to avoid their being identified.

Still photographs and videos must never be demeaning, or disrespectful of the dignity of the persons portrayed. The rights, safety, and wellbeing of the persons being portrayed are always to be protected. The gratuitous portrayal of extreme suffering is always to be avoided. Editing should maintain the

integrity of the photographic and video images' content and context. No changes should be made that distort the context of the image, or that make a situation look worse than it actually is.

People should always be adequately clothed. They should never be portrayed in poses that could be regarded as sexually suggestive, erotic, or obscene.

### **Expectations of our Partners and Vendors**

We expect that SVdP partner and vendor organizations will operate effective safeguarding procedures. If a Council receives a safeguarding concern about a partner or vendor organization, the Council will inform them and expect the partner/vendor to respond quickly and appropriately. Councils will assist the partner/vendor to ascertain its obligations under local law to refer the matter to the police or other legal authorities for criminal investigation. Where appropriate, Councils can work with the partner/vendor to address the issue through an appropriate independent investigation which should not interfere with any criminal investigation being conducted by legal authorities. If the outcome is that abuse or exploitation has occurred, ongoing work with the partner/vendor cannot involve the perpetrator(s) concerned. If there is reason to believe that an allegation of abuse has been dealt with inappropriately by a partner/vendor, then the partner/vendor organization risks withdrawal of funding and/or ending the working relationship. Councils will expect partners/vendors to inform them of any safeguarding incidents they are dealing with where these have not come to the attention of the Society.

### **C. Communicating the Safeguarding Message**

The Council ensures that a hard or electronic copy of the safeguarding policy is provided or made available in each office or headquarters within their jurisdiction and available to and acknowledged by members, employees, volunteers, people being served.

Copies will be provided to the general public in hard copy or through email upon request. The policy will be translated into necessary local languages.

Visual posters, including language and imagery appropriate to children and other vulnerable persons, will be displayed about the existence of this policy in appropriate locations throughout our premises and field works where possible. Safeguarding will be maintained for employees, members, and volunteers by including short sessions on the policy or related safeguarding matters during meetings, other trainings and via regular communications. All material will include clear information about whom a vulnerable person or witness should report to, or seek advice from, if they feel they or another person has been violated or offended in any way.

### **D. Monitoring Compliance**

Ongoing monitoring and evaluation will indicate the extent to which safeguarding is being effectively implemented and any need in training for employees, members and volunteers.

Council records will be kept to track the process of:

- recruiting all individuals serving in and with the Society
- orientations and training provided in safeguarding; numbers attended and dates



- all safeguarding concerns and disclosures reported, including details of all follow-up action
- recording any employees, members or volunteers found to have breached safeguarding, committed abuse, or who failed recruitment processes because of risks/issues flagged about their conduct so that those people are not inappropriately engaged in some other role where they might do harm
- job descriptions and postings/ads, in order to confirm that they all contain the commitment to the safeguarding policy.

#### **E. Policy Review**

The safeguarding policy will be reviewed by the local Council at least every three years, with new processes, changes in legislation and guidelines and practices to be incorporated in accordance with lessons learned.

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