

**Horizon Texas Annual Conference  
of The United Methodist Church**

**Conference and District Events  
Children, Youth and Vulnerable Persons  
Abuse Prevention and Protection Policy**

**2025**

***Adopted at HTC Unifying Conference, September 2024***

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## **INTRODUCTION**

**Dear Volunteer or Staff Member,**

The Horizon Texas Conference of the United Methodist Church (HTC) takes our responsibility to care for children, youth, and vulnerable adults very seriously. These policies and procedures are intended to facilitate a safe and nurturing environment in which children, youth, and vulnerable adults can grow in relationship with Jesus Christ. Our goal is to protect them, you, and the mission of the conference. Consequently, the HTC will strictly enforce these policies and procedures. After you have carefully read this policy manual, please sign and return the agreement form near the end.

## **PURPOSE, OBJECTIVE AND SCOPE**

### **Purpose**

Our calling and mandate is to ensure a safe haven for all of God's people.

Throughout the gospels, Jesus taught about providing a peaceable kingdom for all of God's people, including our most precious gifts, our children, and youth (Matthew 5:9, Luke 18:15-17). The peaceable kingdom begins with sanctuary. Scriptures provide examples of how sanctuary is to be a community of protective nurture and harmony (Psalms 20:1-2, 27:4-5).

As Christians, we are called to create a protective environment in our ministries. They must be holy, safe and protective communities for all of God's children, regardless of age or ability. The purpose of this policy is to address the communal responsibility of our children, youth, and vulnerable persons at all local churches, and at all district or annual conference sponsored events.

## **Objective**

The HTC recognizes the need to have a formal, written policy with procedures in place in order to:

- help prevent the opportunity for the occurrence and/or the appearance of abuse of children, youth, and vulnerable persons
- help provide safeguards for workers from false accusations and/or suspicions
- hold accountable all those who minister in the name of Jesus Christ.

The following policies and procedures are intended to protect our children, youth, vulnerable persons, workers, employees, volunteers and the entire church body. Careful and confidential documentation is essential to show compliance with policies, to verify information as needed, and to have an accurate record in the case of an incident.

## **Policy Scope**

This policy and its provisions shall apply to all workers, including all paid and unpaid persons, whether lay or clergy who have any direct or indirect contact with children, youth, and other vulnerable/protected persons who participate in any activities or events sponsored by the HTC.

This policy shall apply to all district and conference events. A local congregation may strengthen the Horizon Texas Conference policy but may not alter the minimum standards established by the Horizon Texas Conference or those standards mandated by the State of Texas' licensures. It is required that a review of this policy be conducted with all leaders by the Event Leader or Safety System Administrator prior to each event involving children, students, and vulnerable adults.

# **DEFINITIONS AND TERMS**

## **Regarding Individuals/Persons:**

- **Protected Persons:** all children, youth, and vulnerable adults participating in, and served by, programs and activities of the HTC.
- **Minor:** In the state of Texas, any person under 18 years of age and has never been married or declared an adult by a court.
- **Vulnerable Adult:** Any person 18 years or older who is in need of special care, support, or protection due to diminished physical, mental, or emotional capacities that increase the risk of maltreatment or abuse.
- **Adult:** anyone over 18 years of age and/or declared adult by a court.
- **Worker:** Any individual aged 18 years or older, whether paid or unpaid, who is involved in the leadership, supervision, or management of an event, program, or ministry that involves Protected Persons. All Workers must have completed the Abuse Prevention Certification process and remain current.
- **Event Leader:** Primary organizer and contact for any event or gathering
- **Safety System Administrator (SSA):** when used herein, refers to the person/s who is responsible for administering the Abuse Prevention system within the district or HTC.
- **Registered or Reported Sex Offender:** (UMC definition from GCSRW)- Someone who has admitted guilt to a sex offense or guilt has been proven. Sex Offender- In the state of Texas: An individual who has been convicted or adjudicated of a sexual offense as outlined in the Texas Penal Code and includes a wide range of offenses, from rape and sexual assault to possession of child sex-abuse material/child pornography. It extends beyond those incarcerated and includes individuals released on probation or parole.

*Note: For HTC programming purposes, someone who has been arrested for or has charges pending for a sex offense should be kept from serving vulnerable persons until the criminal investigation has been completed and found not guilty. A similar protocol should pertain to those with charges for lesser sex offenses and/or those sex offenses settled through deferred adjudication, where/when records can be sealed or expunged.*

- **Professional:** According to the state of Texas, a professional is any person licensed by the state or who works in a facility operated by the state who has direct contact with children in the course of their job. Clergy and staff in this policy are considered professionals.  
*Some examples are: doctors, nurses, medical aides and other health care workers, principals, teachers, aides and school personnel, coaches, child care staff, program staff serving children and youth, counselors, therapists, social workers, attorneys and law enforcement officers, clergy and church staff.*
- **Mandatory Reporter:** According to the state of Texas, any person who has reasonable cause to believe that a child's physical or mental health or welfare has been adversely affected by abuse or neglect by any person.

**Regarding Abuse/ Misconduct:**

- **Abuse:** any act or omission that endangers, injures, or impairs a person's physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual health; whether threatened or inflicted, intentional or due to negligence; adult to adult, adult to protected person, or protected person to protected person, protected person to adult.

**Regarding Supervision**

- **Two Worker Rule:** At any given time, there are two currently certified, unrelated adult Workers.
- **Conference Safety Committee:** This committee includes the Director of Child and Youth Empowerment, and representatives from across the conference including representation of children, youth, camping, and parents as selected by the Board of Trustees.

## **WORKER SCREENING AND TRAINING REQUIREMENTS**

Careful screening of applicants is one way to prevent abuse. Screening calls for a careful gathering and review of information in search of those who can provide safe and caring supervision in a safe environment.

- **Church to Church and Church to Conference Workers**
  - A Worker who has been screened and trained through an HTC church can have their certification recognized for conference and district events if their church certifies to the HTC in writing that the Worker has completed and maintained all requirements. The Church-to-Church compliance form must be used for this purpose.
- **Application Requirements**
  - Applicant must have been an active participant for at least six months in an HTC church before serving in any area involving Protected Persons as a volunteer. Employees are exempt from this provision.
  - Applicant must sign a consent for background and reference checks.
  - Applicant must sign a statement as to whether or not they have ever been accused of, participated in, or been convicted of sexual misconduct.
- **Screening Requirements**
  - Multi-jurisdictional searches and sex offender background checks must be conducted on all employees and volunteers who work with Protected Persons. Workers who may drive Protected Persons should also have a motor vehicle records report.
  - A minimum of two references must be contacted for previous places served or worked. Emails and notes should be kept on file.
  - Persons with a criminal history of any of the following types of offenses shall not be allowed to serve in any ministry with Protected Persons:
    - Child abuse, whether physical, emotional, sexual, or neglectful
    - Violent offenses, including murder, rape, assault, domestic violence, etc.
    - A drug-related conviction within the five years immediately prior to application.

- Persons having a criminal history of DUI or DWI conviction within the ten years immediately prior to application shall not be allowed to act as a driver.
  - Deferred adjudications regarding any of the above.
- **Training Requirements**
  - Applicant must complete the MinistrySafe Sexual Abuse Awareness Training (live or online) or a Horizon Texas Conference approved alternative which should address the following:
    - The definition and recognition of child abuse
    - HTC policy and procedures on child abuse and the reasons for having them
    - Appropriate behavior for teachers and leaders of protected persons including appropriate interpersonal boundaries
    - Characteristics of an abuser, including addressing stereotypes and false narratives of a majority of abusers being unknown to the victim, and barriers
    - The grooming process, including behaviors that are not normal or acceptable
    - Key indicators of child sexual abuse, and includes regressive behaviors and key effects on the victim
    - Why protected persons do not report, including current reporting statistics
    - Abuse reporting responsibilities and procedures, including what requires reporting to supervisors and possibly outside authorities and education on the state requirement to report reasonable suspicion
    - Applicants must read the abuse prevention policy and receive training on procedures. The applicant must sign a statement that they have read the policy, received appropriate training, and agree to adhere to the policy.
- **Requirements to Maintain Certification**
  - Each year, Workers must review the abuse prevention policy, and sign a statement that they have read the policy, received appropriate training, and agreed to adhere to the policy
  - Background checks must be renewed every two years.
  - Workers must renew MinistrySafe Sexual Abuse Awareness Training (live or online) every two years.

## **SAFETY COMMITTEE**

### **Safety committee**

Recognizing the importance of providing and maintaining a safe environment for Protected Persons, the HTC trustees will appoint and maintain a Safety Committee, which will meet once each quarter.

### **Mission Statement**

The purpose of the Safety Committee is to enable the HTC to carry out appropriate ministry activities while safeguarding program participants against emotional, physical or sexual abuse.

### **Composition**

The HTC trustees will determine the composition of the Safety Committee. Attention should be given to include those from a diversity of ministry contexts and experiences.

### **Meetings**

Meetings will be chaired by the Safety System Administrator (SSA) or another committee designee. Meetings of the Safety Committee will be held on a quarterly basis to discuss risk management practices and updates. The Safety Committee will also meet on an emergency basis upon the recommendation of a member or following the report of any incident or allegation.

### **Responsibilities**

The Safety Committee will be charged with the following duties:

1. Applying existing policies and procedures related to the safety of Protected Persons and risk management issues.
2. Monitoring all ministries with Protected Persons for ongoing compliance with safety policies.
3. Making recommendations to the HTC trustees regarding safety issues.

## **PROCEDURES AND COMPLIANCE**

### **Supervision Basics, Including Ratios**

The HTC is committed to providing adequate supervision in ministries with Protected Persons.

- **Unrelated adults** - meaning more than one separation of family ties, therefore cannot be spouses, parent and child, or siblings

**Ratios:** Any required State of Texas childcare minimum standards must be followed. The chart below shows the minimum number of workers and the pattern required for care and supervision

Workers	Infants	Toddlers	Preschool	Elementary	Youth
2	5	8	10	15	30
3	7	12	15	22	45
4	10	16	20	30	60
5	12	20	25	37	75

### **Supervision of Protected Persons**

#### **Requirements:**

- Two unrelated Workers must always be present and actively monitoring any rooms or areas with Protected Persons
- There should be two Workers per:
  - Every five infants (0-1 year)
  - Every eight toddlers (1-3 years)
  - Every 10 preschoolers (3-5 years)
  - Every 15 elementary school students (5-11 years)
  - Every 30 youth (12-18 years)
- For nursery care, at least one Worker should be present who is trained and certified in First Aid and CPR.
- Unauthorized visitors will not be allowed to remain at the event.

#### **Whenever necessary:**

- Any one-to-one mentoring or consulting shall be conducted in sight of another Worker.
- For youth (6th-12th): Understanding that there is safety in numbers, one Worker can be in contact with multiple youth so long as they are in line-of-sight of other Worker(s).
- Primary youth event leaders must be at least five years older than the oldest Protected Person being served, and all additional youth Workers must be one year post-high school or equivalent and five years older than the oldest Protected Person under their direct supervision.
- For groups larger than the ratio above students, a minimum of three unrelated Workers will supervise at the standard in the chart above.

### **Building Safety**

The Event Leader must ensure that any area designated for ministries with Protected Persons is monitored during programming or classes. This will include unobserved monitoring of Workers and Protected Persons.

- After every programming event, Workers must ensure every room and restroom is checked prior to leaving.
- No Protected Person will ever be left unattended or unsupervised.
- Workers are prohibited from being alone with an individual Protected Person in any room or building. In the event a Worker finds themselves alone with a single Protected Person, that individual will take the Protected Person to a room or building occupied by others, or to a location easily observed by others  
*Examples: a Protected Person is the last to be picked up by a parent, move to an adjoining room where other workers are present. In the case of a Protected Person wishing individual conversation or counsel with a Worker, move to an adjoining room where other Workers are present.*
- Workers are to circulate, watching Protected Persons, giving particular attention to the areas that are not easily seen from all viewpoints (Examples: under slides, in corners, behind structures, empty classrooms)
- Any two Protected Persons together in an unseen or less easily viewed area should be redirected to another, more open, area.

## **Restroom and Showering**

### **Adult Restroom**

Due to the nature and required privacy for adults to maintain the appropriate boundaries, it is highly recommended to have a restroom reserved as adults only for the term of the event. It is recommended to have clear signage for all Protected Persons and ways of notifying adults of the location.

### **Nursery children**

Because nursery children may require complete assistance with their bathroom activities, all Workers will observe the following policies:

- Diapering
- Changing of diapers should be done in plain sight of another Worker.
- Children will never be left unattended on changing tables.
- Children should be re-diapered and re-clothed immediately upon the completion of changing their soiled diaper.
- Any special needs child, youth or vulnerable adult (over the age of 4 years) should be changed by the child's parent or legal guardian.
- Toilet training
- When young children are utilizing the bathroom, the door will be left partially open.
- Young children will never be left unmonitored in bathrooms.
- If a Worker must enter a single-use restroom or stall to assist a child, the door should remain open.
- Any assistance with the straightening or fastening of garments should be done in the presence of another Worker.

### **Elementary-age children**

Elementary-age children may be accompanied to the restroom for supervision and assistance when needed. However, children should receive the minimum amount of assistance needed based upon their individual capabilities.

- A Worker should never be unmonitored with a child in the restroom.
- If a Worker must go into the restroom to check on an individual child, they should seek out another Worker to accompany them.
- If another Worker is not available to accompany, they should go to the exterior restroom door, knock, and ask if the child needs assistance. If the child requires assistance, the worker should leave the exterior bathroom door open when entering the bathroom area and try to

- verbally assist the child in completing their activities, while the child remains behind the door of the bathroom stall.
- Any assistance with the straightening or fastening of garments should be done in the presence of another Worker.
- In public contexts, the “rule of three” - one Worker and at least two Protected Persons should be followed when going to the restroom.
- Be aware if a student repeatedly leaves to use the restroom and stays there for unusual periods of time. Report unusual behavior to a supervisor.

### **Showering**

- Workers must shower separately (either at a different time or different location) from Protected Persons.
- When Protected Persons shower, a Worker should stand within earshot to assist, as needed.
- If the child requires assistance in the shower, the Worker should stand in the open doorway and try to verbally assist the child in completing their activities, while the child remains behind the door of the stall.  
*It is recommended that a second Worker be within line of sight at all times. It is also recommended that anytime safety is compromised in a situation like the one above or other times, please document with the designated leader(s) of your event.*
- Any assistance with the straightening or fastening of garments should be done in the presence of another Worker.

### **Discipline Process**

It is policy that Workers are prohibited from using physical discipline in any manner to manage the behavioral needs of Protected Persons. No form of physical discipline is acceptable. This prohibition includes spanking, slapping, pinching, hitting, or any other physical force as retaliation or correction for inappropriate behaviors by Protected Persons. Uncontrollable or unusual behavior should be reported immediately to parents/guardians and the Event Leader. Therefore, Event Leaders and Workers must always have contact information for each Protected Person.

For children, the following best practices are recommended:

- Children are to be disciplined using time-outs and other non-physical methods of behavior management once removed from other children.
- Verbally redirect the child before physically intervening. With younger children some physical redirection may be necessary (for example, removing a toy from the hands of a child that is hitting another).
- If the behavior does not cease, remove, or direct the child away from the group to a corner of the room where the group is meeting (avoid being alone with the child).
- Provide the child with a simple, understandable reason for the time-out, and provide the child with a clear explanation of your expectations. (“Jamie, you didn’t stop hitting Chris when I asked you to, so you need to sit quietly in the blue chair for three minutes.”) In addition, be verbally reassuring, as being removed from the group will likely upset the child. Do not physically hold the child in time-out.
- Provide the child with a chair to sit in or a “spot” to sit on (using a pillow, blanket, carpet square, etc.) until their time-out is complete.
- Follow the rule of thumb that a time-out is ineffective if it lasts longer than one minute for every year of the child’s life (3 years old, 3 minutes).
- Monitor the child through the entire time-out without giving your undivided attention. For longer time-outs, give intermittent praise to reassure the child and keep them on task. (“Jamie, you’re doing a great job of sitting quietly – just 2 more minutes.”)
- Praise the child once they have completed the time-out and tell them that their reward is being able to rejoin the group. Remind them that repeating their initial behavior will result in further time-out. Follow this with praise.

For youth, the following best practices are recommended:

- If a youth is unruly or fails to comply with verbal warnings or instructions from Workers, that youth will be asked to leave (if not endangered by doing so), or the youth's parent/guardian will be contacted to pick up the youth. In the event of a fight or physical altercation, a Worker will verbally redirect students involved and will try to avoid physical intervention. Uncontrollable or unusual behavior should be reported immediately to parents/guardians and the Event Leader.

## **Illegal Substance Use**

### **Intoxicants**

Both Workers and Protected Persons are prohibited from the use, possession, or being under the influence of alcohol or any illegal drugs (including marijuana) while participating in any HTC-sponsored events, while traveling with Protected Persons, or while working with or supervising Protected Persons. Workers are responsible for monitoring Protected Persons. If a Worker encounters any alcohol or illegal drugs, the Worker must report to the Event Leader.

### **Tobacco Use and Vaping**

HTC-sponsored events are tobacco-free. The HTC requires Workers to abstain from the use or possession of tobacco or vaping products while in the presence of Protected Persons or their parents/guardians, or during any HTC-sponsored events. If any Worker encounters a Protected Person using or in possession of tobacco or vaping products, they must report to the Event Leader.

## **Medication**

Prescription medication will be given to a Protected Person by a Worker designated by the Event Leader with a doctor's prescription. All medication, including over-the-counter medication, must be in the original packaging, and a health information sheet must be signed by a parent or guardian. The only exceptions to this policy are diaper ointment and insect bite cream. Workers may keep their own prescription medication as long as it is kept away from all Protected Persons.

## **Release of Children Returning to Appropriate Adults**

### **Release of Children**

At any time that a child has been entrusted to our Workers, the HTC incurs responsibility for the safety and well-being of the child. Workers must act to ensure the appropriate supervision and safety of children in their charge. Workers are responsible for releasing children in their care only to parents, legal guardians, or other persons designated by parents or legal guardians at the close of HTC-sponsored events. It is presumed a person who drops off a child has the authority to pick up the child. In the event that Workers are uncertain of the propriety of releasing a child, they should immediately locate or contact the Event Leader before releasing the child.

### **Teen Drivers**

Students who are licensed drivers will not be allowed to drive themselves from the event to an off-site HTC event. Occasional exceptions may be made in consultation between the Event Leader, Parents/Guardians, and student.

## **Sleeping Arrangements**

### **General Requirements for all Overnight Events:**

- All programmed overnights must be approved by the HTC Director of Child and Youth Empowerment and receive permission from parents.
- At least two screened, unrelated Workers (based on age-appropriate ratios) must be present for all overnight trips or events with Protected Persons.
- The Event Leader will carry signed permission slips, including permission for emergency care for each Protected Person.
- No overnights are allowed on district or conference property unless part of a ministry-sponsored event.
- No overnight between any Worker and an *unrelated* Protected Person may occur in any context. If family relationships exist wherein overnights may occur between 'family friends', these relationships must be communicated to a ministry supervisor.

- For any overnight event, the Event Leader will provide the parents/guardians with safety plan information (activity, travel, location, other groups present) before the event.
- Appropriate sleeping attire must be worn.
- There is *never* an appropriate time when *one* Worker should room with an unrelated Protected Person.

**Additional considerations for dormitory or large room-style housing settings:**

Requirements:

- As long as Protected Persons are awake, at least one Worker must also be awake and monitoring.
- “One-person-to-a-bag or blanket” rule. All Workers and Protected Persons will use single sleeping bags and/or blankets.

Whenever Possible:

- There should be at least one Worker of each gender identity represented among the youth participants. Care and attention should be given to the unique gender makeup of the group.
- At events where one gender identity is present, at least one of the Workers should be of the same gender identity as the Protected Persons present.
- At least two Workers should sleep in the same room as the full group of Protected Persons. They should choose spaces near doors, windows, or other entrances and exits. It is best for Workers not to congregate together but to be spread out throughout the room to be an established presence. However, the Worker’s sleeping area should be a five-foot distance from the sleeping areas of the protected persons.

**Additional considerations for hotel-style housing settings:**

Requirements:

- All Workers will be in separate keyed rooms from Protected Persons.
- Workers will make random monitoring hall trips.
- One Protected Person per bed.

Whenever Possible:

- Hotel doors should open to an interior building, not to the outside.
- All hotel rooms should be on the same floor.
- At least one Worker room before the elevator/exit for Protected Persons.
- A Worker’s room should be between two Protected Persons’ rooms.
- Place tape over the door opening to confirm if Protected Persons have exited their rooms outside of expected hours.

**Additional considerations for all gender sleeping arrangements:**

Requirements:

- If possible, offer selection for parents to choose between the “cabin” that corresponds to the camper’s gender, or select “all gender.”
- Parents should be informed in advance of booking the trip if all gender sleeping will be possible.
- Protected Persons will sleep 5+ feet away from each other.
- Workers will sleep 10+ feet away from Protected Persons.

**Additional considerations for personal home housing settings:**

Requirements:

- Hosts of the home will be screened, even if they will not attend the overnight event.

Whenever Possible:

- Hosts of the home should sign a covenant regarding the safety of protected persons. This should include information regarding medications, drug paraphernalia, guns, alcohol storage, and pool access and safety.

**Social Media and Digital Contact Post HTC Events**

The HTC strongly recommends that these social media and digital communications practices are implemented in ways that best fit the HTC's ministry context.

Seeking to provide a safe environment for Protected Persons, it shall be within the scope of our ministry to educate parents/guardians, youth, and children on the safe use of social media platforms. It is recommended that parents/guardians always monitor their child's/student's social media interactions.

In today's digital age, the omnipresence of images on the internet raises critical considerations regarding privacy, consent, and long-term consequences, particularly for Protected Persons. Once an image is uploaded, it can propagate endlessly across various online platforms, often beyond the control of the individual who uploaded it. This perpetual visibility underscores the urgency of implementing robust safeguards to protect the privacy and dignity of Protected Persons, ensuring that their images are not exploited or used inappropriately. As responsible stewards of online content, it is imperative for individuals, organizations, and internet platforms to prioritize respect for privacy, obtain informed consent before sharing images, and empower minors with the tools and knowledge to navigate the digital landscape safely and securely.

For HTC events, a photography/videography release form for parent/guardian consent shall be part of the registration paperwork. HTC events shall also designate representatives to photograph and/or video during the event.

To the best of the HTC's ability:

1. Workers and any adults shall NOT use social media of any type to share photographs or video of Protected Persons anywhere on the internet except with specific written permission by 1) the HTC or designated media representatives; and 2) the parents/guardians of the Protected Persons.
2. Workers and any adults shall NOT post personal or identifying information of Protected Persons, with or without photos or videos, anywhere on the internet without specific written permission by 1) the HTC; and 2) the parents/guardians of the Protected Persons.  
*For example, pictures of Protected Persons will not have names posted or have parents "tagged." If a testimony of a Protected Person is used, source it as a camper or youth of XYZ camp or event name.*
3. Workers and any adults shall NOT ask a Protected Person to be a "friend" using any type of social media, such as Facebook or others mentioned above. If a worker receives a "friend" request from a Protected Person, confirm that it is with the knowledge and permission of their parents/guardians. Keep conversations out of direct messages since this creates a one-on-one environment.
4. Workers and any adults shall NOT ignore or fail to act upon any material that raises suspicion that a Protected Person has been or will be abused/neglected/exploited. The Event Leader should be contacted immediately in compliance with Texas law and this policy. If the suspicion is determined after the event, any adults shall contact the chair of the HTC's Safety Committee.
5. Workers and any adults shall NOT use email, texting, phone calls, or other social media to communicate with Protected Persons in inappropriate ways. Inappropriate communication may involve, but is not limited to, discussions of a sexual nature, sexting, sharing inappropriate pictures (including but not limited to memes, pictures, GIFs, etc.), manipulation, harassment, intimidation, or grooming issues. Prolonged private discussions between an adult and a Protected Person are also inappropriate, much like it is inappropriate for a face-to-face discussion of this type to take place with no additional supervision. Therefore, direct digital conversations should be in group chats or group messaging. Conversations through social media should always be conducted by means that can be recoverable (e.g., email, text message, voicemail, Facebook). It is always strongly recommended that parents/guardians be aware of communication that exists between their child and any adult.
6. To the best of the conference's ability, special care should be used to protect the identity and images of foster children or children protected under a court order.

## Transportation

Workers may, from time to time, be in a position to provide transportation for Protected Persons. The following requirements must be strictly observed when transporting Protected Persons to and from events:

- Drivers must have the proper training for volunteering and a background check that includes a motor vehicle record search. These documents should remain on file and up to date per HTC and insurance policy requirements.
- Drivers must have a valid driver's license for the vehicle being operated. For example, a commercial driver's license is required to drive a HTC bus with a certain number of seats. A copy of the driver's license should be on file in the HTC office.
- When a Protected Person is transported in any vehicle, the driver must be either the Protected Person's parent/guardian or a Worker.
- Drivers must meet the age and other requirements of the HTC insurance regulations.
- Protected Persons should be transported directly to their destination. Unauthorized stops in a non-public place must be avoided.
- Avoid transportation circumstances that leave only one Protected Person in transport.
- Avoid physical contact with Protected Persons while in vehicles.
- Absent an emergency, drivers may not use cell phones while transporting Protected Persons (other than navigation applications for directions). In an emergency, stop the vehicle to use the cell phone unless a stop cannot safely occur. Texting or other cell phone use is strictly prohibited while driving.
- In transportation, the **TWO-WORKER RULE** or **RULE OF THREE** must be followed.
- Never instruct a student to drive other students to a ministry event.
- Transport only the number of Protected Persons for whom you have seatbelts.
- Seatbelts must be worn at all times while in the vehicle.

When necessary

- Drivers should receive training for any HTC-owned vehicle being operated.
- Youth who drive their own vehicles should be reminded regularly of the importance of vehicle safety.
- Any use of a ride-share service should be scheduled by a parent or guardian and drop-off/pickup confirmed by the parent/guardian with the Event Leader.
- Vehicles used should be properly maintained and receive proper safety inspections.
- Emergency Procedures should be in place in the event that assistance is required while transporting Protected Persons.
- A protocol should be established for reporting and documenting any incidents or accidents that occur during transportation, including whom to notify and how to document the event.
- Care should be taken to make sure that accessibility is considered for transporting individuals who may need special accommodations.

## **REPORTING OF INCIDENTS/ABUSE**

1. When a Worker suspects that abuse or any suspected violation of the Texas Penal Code is taking or has taken place, they must call 911 and report the abuse to the appropriate local law enforcement agency and/or the **Department of Protective and Regulatory Services (800-252-5400)**.
  - The Worker must contact the Event Leader immediately and cooperate fully with the investigation conducted by law enforcement officials or child protective services.
  - Texas Department of Family and Protective Services: 1-800-252-5400  
[www.dfps.state.tx.us/Contact\\_Us/report\\_abuse.asp](http://www.dfps.state.tx.us/Contact_Us/report_abuse.asp)
  - National Sexual Assault Hotline: 1-800-656-4673
2. If sexual assault, consider going to a Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner (SANE).
3. Address any needs the Protected Person may have, medical or otherwise.

4. Report to the Event Leader and the HTC Director of Youth and Children Empowerment.
5. Report to the parent(s) and/or legal guardians(s).
6. The person suspected of abuse (respondent) shall, if present, for the safety and well-being of the Protected Person(s), be removed with dignity from further contact with the Protected Person(s) until an appropriate investigation has taken place. The matter shall remain confidential. If the Event Leader is the respondent, then the report should be made to that person's supervisor.
7. Following the report of an incident, the Event Leader or supervisor shall speak with the alleged victim and document the report.
8. All such conversations shall be documented. Careful and confidential documentation is essential. The documentation should include the following:
  - The name of the Worker observing or receiving the disclosure of abuse, including the date, time, and place and any action taken by this person.
  - The alleged victim's name, age, and date of birth.
  - Any statement made by the alleged victim.
  - Name of the person suspected of abuse (respondent), the date, time, and place of any conversation, or any statement made by the person suspected of abuse (respondent).
  - Any action taken, i.e. suspension of the respondent.
  - The date and time of any call to the appropriate agency, name of worker spoken to, content of that conversation, and case number assigned.
  - The date and time of any call to a law enforcement agency, the name of the officer spoken to, and the content of that conversation.
9. Date and time of any other contacts made regarding this incident. Notify the HTC leadership and pertinent authorities immediately.
10. It shall be the goal to provide supportive care to both the victim and the respondent and to restore such persons to wholeness. Supportive care can include the procedures of the criminal justice system, provisions of the current *Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church*, appropriate counseling referrals, and continued pastoral visitation.
11. Confirmed reports of conviction of abuse shall be retained by the HTC and shared with the Horizon Texas Conference Oversight Committee, or similar program, and file for future screening purposes.

### **Reporting Suspicious or Inappropriate Behaviors**

The HTC is committed to providing a safe, secure environment for Protected Persons and their families. To this end, any report of inappropriate behaviors or suspicions of abuse will be taken seriously and will be reported, in accordance with this policy and state law, to the HTC's Safety Team and the Police Department, Child Protective Services, or other appropriate agencies.

An element of the safe environment referenced above includes the fostering of a culture of reporting relevant information to the HTC Director of Youth and Children Empowerment, a supervisor or a member of the HTC's Safety Team. Because sexual abusers 'groom' children for abuse, it is possible a Worker may witness behavior intended to 'groom' a Protected Person for sexual abuse. Workers are asked to report 'grooming' behavior, any policy violations, or any suspicious behaviors to the HTC Director of Youth and Children Empowerment, the Event Leader or a member of our Safety Team.

### **Reporting Policy Violations**

In order to maintain a safe environment for Protected Persons, Workers must be aware of their individual responsibility to report any questionable circumstance, observation, act, omission, or situation that is a violation of these policies. All questions or concerns related to inappropriate, suspicious, or suspected grooming behavior should be directed to the HTC Director of Youth and Children Empowerment, an immediate Event Leader of the sponsored event or the Safety Team.

### **Consequences of Violation**

Any person accused of committing a prohibited act or any act considered by the HTC to be harmful to a Protected Person will be immediately suspended from participation in HTC-sponsored events. This suspension will continue during any investigation by law enforcement or Child Protective agencies.

Any person found to have committed a prohibited act should be prohibited from future participation as a Worker in all activities and programming that involves Protected Persons at an HTC-sponsored event. If the person is a staff member or employee, such conduct may also result in termination of employment from the HTC.

Failure to report a prohibited act to the designated person is a violation of this policy and grounds for termination of employment of a staff member or employee. Volunteers who fail to report a prohibited act may be restricted from participation in any activities involving Protected Persons at HTC-sponsored events.

### **Reporting Suspicions of Abuse to Law Enforcement Agencies**

Under Texas law (Texas Family Code — Chapter 261), all adults are required to report suspicions of child abuse or neglect to the appropriate authorities. It is not the job of the worker to try and investigate suspicions or allegations. Suspicions and information regarding child abuse/neglect shall immediately be turned over to the proper authorities to investigate. This responsibility is not discharged until the matter is actually reported. Accordingly, all workers of the HTC are required to report suspicions of child abuse or neglect. This also applies to situations where a Worker hears second-hand information from another child, youth, or adult.

A Worker must report to an immediate supervisor or the HTC Director of Youth and Children Empowerment and may allow supervisory personnel to make the appropriate report to law enforcement agencies on their behalf. In no way is any provision in this policy meant to discourage any Worker from personally reporting a suspicion of abuse or neglect to the appropriate law enforcement agencies. If the matter is communicated to a supervisor, it remains the underlying Worker's responsibility to ensure the matter is reported to the appropriate authority.

Workers at HTC-sponsored events are required to report any inappropriate behavior or policy violation to the HTC Director of Youth and Children Empowerment, the immediate supervisor of the area, the Event Leader, or a member of the Safety Team. These are behaviors that do not necessarily rise to the level of suspicion of abuse or neglect but DO constitute behaviors that should be communicated to leadership.

### **Licensed Professionals**

Different obligations may exist if the worker is a 'professional'. Under Texas law, a professional who has cause to believe that a child has been or may be abused or neglected must make a report no later than 48 hours after the professional first suspects that the child has been or may be abused or neglected and may not delegate to or rely on another person to make the report. Under Texas law, a "professional" includes any individual who is licensed or certified by the state. Also included are workers who, in the normal course of their duties in a program or facility for which licensure is required and has direct contact with children. Professionals include:

- Teachers or daycare employees
- Nurses, doctors, or employees of a clinic or health-care facility that provides reproductive services
- Juvenile probation officers or juvenile detention or correctional officers

### **Supervisor Response**

Workers — whether or not a professional — are required to verbally report an incident to supervisory staff as soon as possible after the incident. After receiving a report from a worker in a ministry with Protected Persons, the Event Leader will speak with the person or volunteer to whom the Protected Person spoke in order to get detailed information about the entire conversation. The HTC Director of Youth and Children Empowerment will be notified as soon as reasonably possible.

If appropriate, the HTC Director of Youth and Children Empowerment or the Event Leader will inform the appropriate law enforcement agencies or Child Protective Services. The HTC's Safety Team will take appropriate action on behalf of the HTC when a report of abuse occurs.



## **COMMUNICATION POLICY ON MEDIA COVERAGE OF INCIDENTS INVOLVING PROTECTED PERSONS**

**Do not give out any information; simply state that all inquiries will be answered through the Office of the Bishop.**

### **Media Relations Protocol**

The Bishop, Conference Chancellor and Assistant to the Bishop shall be informed of all investigations or allegations of abuse. If investigations or allegations of abuse should come to the attention of the media, a response shall come from the Office of the Bishop.

The primary objective of this communication policy is to ensure the protection, privacy and well-being of Protected Persons involved in incidents, while also maintaining transparency and accountability to the public.

### **Guiding Principles**

- The welfare and privacy of Protected Persons involved in incidents takes precedence over media coverage considerations.
- Respect the privacy rights of Protected Persons and their families, including avoiding the disclosure of identifying information unless consent is obtained or it is deemed necessary for public safety.
- Provide accurate and timely information to the media while being transparent about limitations imposed by legal, ethical and safety considerations.
- Communicate with empathy and sensitivity towards Protected Persons and their families, recognizing the potential psychological impact of media coverage on them.
- Ensure compliance with relevant laws, regulations and industry standards regarding the protection of Protected Persons and the dissemination of information.

### **Recommendations for response include but not limited to:**

- Designate a spokesperson or communications team responsible for interacting with the media regarding incidents involving Protected Persons.
- Initial response should also come from the Office of the Bishop and emphasize the protection of the Protected Persons involved and the ongoing investigation, if applicable.
- Interviews and statements should only be conducted with the consent of the Bishop's office and the Protected Person's legal guardians, prioritizing the well-being and best interest for the Protected Person.
- Manage media access to the Protected Persons in a manner that minimizes disruption and potential harm, considering factors such as age, emotional state and legal considerations.

### **Recommended content guidelines includes but not limited to:**

- Refrain from sensationalizing incidents involving Protected Persons, and exercise caution in selecting language and visuals to minimize distress to affected individuals.
- Conceal or blur the faces, voices and other identifying features of Protected Persons in media coverage, unless authorized by their legal guardians or required by law enforcement.
- Include educational messages or resources in media coverage to raise awareness about adult or child protection issues and support services available to Protected Persons and their families.

- Monitor and moderate social media platforms to prevent the spread of misinformation or harmful content related to incidents involving Protected Persons.
- Cooperate with external oversight bodies, such as regulatory agencies, adult or child protection authorities, to ensure compliance with legal and ethical standards in media coverage of incidents involving Protected Persons.

### **Education and Training**

It is recommended that the Horizon Texas Conference provide training and educational resources to staff involved in media relations to ensure compliance with this policy and promote best practices in communicating about incidents involving Protected Persons. It is recommended that the Horizon Texas Conference hold individuals and organizations accountable for adhering to this communication policy. It is also recommended that each local church of the Horizon Texas Conference adopts this communication policy and expands it as needed to better serve and protect their ministry context. This communication policy aims to strike a balance between the public's right to information and the protection of Protected Persons' rights and well-being. By following these guidelines, we can fulfill our responsibilities to both the community and the individuals involved in sensitive incidents.

## **STATEMENT OF ACKNOWLEDGEMENT AND AGREEMENT**

I have received and read a copy of these Policies and Procedures and understand the importance of the material. I agree to abide by these policies and procedures while serving or working at the HTC.

I understand the policies and procedures may be modified, amended, revised, or eliminated by the HTC. Any changes will be made public.

I understand I may choose to end my employment or voluntary service at any time. (If possible, I will provide two weeks' notice to my supervisor).

I acknowledge and understand that these policies and procedures in no way express or imply a contractual employment relationship between me and the HTC. If applying as a volunteer, I acknowledge and agree that I will receive no monetary compensation for hours worked.

I understand it is my responsibility to review new policies and procedures which may be created and distributed as well as policies and procedures that are changed or deleted.

I acknowledge receipt of these policies and procedures.

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Worker's Name (Please Print)

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Worker's Signature

Date: \_\_\_\_\_