



The Massachusetts Legislative Task Force on the Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse



**Guidelines and Tools for the Development of Child
Sexual Abuse Prevention and Intervention Plans by
Youth-Serving Organizations in Massachusetts**

Executive Summary - June 2017

REPORT OF THE MASSACHUSETTS LEGISLATIVE TASK FORCE
ON CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE PREVENTION¹

Co-Chairs:

Maria Mossaides, Director
Massachusetts Office of the Child Advocate

Suzin Bartley, Executive Director
The Children's Trust

“There is no task more important than building a world in which all of our children can grow up to realize their full potential, in health, peace and dignity.”

Kofi Annan, 7th Secretary-General of the United Nations (1997 – 2006)

FOREWORD

Children grow in communities, and developing new skills and relationships is deeply important. Youth Serving Organizations (YSOs) across the Commonwealth provide opportunities to dance, play, run, sing, learn and succeed. These organizations are committed to providing children and youth with safety and security. Ensuring that YSOs have the knowledge, tools, and incentives to prevent child sexual abuse is the responsibility of all who care for the children of the Commonwealth. This report is the first step in opening a dialogue and taking actions that will provide all children with safe places to grow.

The Massachusetts Legislative Task Force for the Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse is a statewide, multi-agency collaboration utilizing the collective experience of both public and private youth-serving agencies, offices, and organizations to create new frameworks, guidance and tools building on existing best practices and research for the safety and protection of our children, and the prevention of child sexual abuse. It was created by the Massachusetts Legislature (Section 34, Chapter 431 of the acts of 2014) and designated to be co-chaired by the Commonwealth's Child Advocate, and the Executive Director of the Children's Trust. The legislation designates as members nearly thirty organizations, offices, and elected and appointed officials, all of whom have given generously of their time, talent, expertise and perspectives to fulfill the important promise of ensuring that children are safe in our great Commonwealth.

¹ Prepared and Submitted Pursuant to MA Session Laws: Chapter 431, Acts of 2014

This report recommends policies and procedures for the implementation and oversight of the guidelines as well as strategies for incentivizing YSOs to develop and implement sexual abuse prevention and intervention plans. In the coming months, the Task Force will develop a specific implementation plan from the key recommendations of this report. The plan will include using community education and other strategies to increase public awareness about child sexual abuse, including how to recognize the signs, minimize opportunity, and act on suspicions or disclosures of such abuse.

We need the support of many to ensure that children are safe, healthy, and free from harm in their homes and at the many YSOs that support their healthy growth and development. We want the adults at all places that interact with young people – including sports clubs, recreation programs, dance studios, child and family service programs, educational facilities, etc. – to have all the skills, tools, and knowledge they need to ensure that children are thriving and free from harm. Violence against children can be prevented. As adults, it is our responsibility to keep all children safe from sexual abuse. We believe this report is an important step toward that goal.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report, *Guidelines and Tools for the Development of Child Sexual Abuse Prevention and Intervention Plans by Youth-Serving Organizations in Massachusetts*, is the product of a two-year collaboration by the members of the Massachusetts Legislative Task Force on the Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse.² The report is intended to fulfill the Task Force's mandate by introducing readers to the realities of child abuse, neglect and exploitation, with an emphasis on child sexual abuse, and by providing guidance on the development of organizational policies and procedures, interventions, strategies and tools that youth serving organizations (YSOs) throughout the state can develop, adapt and employ – both to prevent the children and youth in their care from being harmed, and to recognize abuse that is occurring and intervene appropriately and effectively at the earliest possible time.

The Task Force has purposely taken an inclusive approach to the types of YSOs it wishes to address with these guidelines. Thus, rather than working with a singular focus on larger YSOs, or YSOs that have specific functions and/or membership, or on YSOs that are subject to licensure and certification by the state, the report attempts to address the child protection needs and concerns of any organization, establishment, facility, small business or club that provides services and activities for children and youth. This includes schools; medical and treatment facilities; youth groups; faith-based organizations; municipal and private camps, recreational and sporting clubs; mentoring services; and privately owned businesses and studios that provide instruction, personal development and skill-building services to children and youth (e.g., dance, martial arts, drama, tutoring, gymnastics, art, music, hobbies, etc.) to name a few.

Because of this inclusive focus, the goal of this document is not to present a set of prevention and intervention plans to be adopted as written, or a list of implementation and oversight practices to be employed in their entirety, or even a set of tools to be used as presented. Whether serving a single teen, 10 dancers, or 100,000 students, there is no “one-size-fits-all” answer to keeping children and youth safe. Rather, the goal is to present a *process* - grounded in best practices - by which YSOs can be presented with the various building blocks of a comprehensive child abuse prevention program, know which of those elements represent (and why) a set of minimum required safety practices and standards, and receive guidance on the decisions and thought process that will help them use the concepts and resources in this report to assess and strengthen their current safety practices, and/or to craft a safety program best suited to their individual community, function, culture and circumstances.

² See Appendix 2 of the report for the Legislative Mandate, and Section VI and Appendix 3 for committees and membership.

We know that child abuse can be prevented. But before we can prevent it, we must understand what it is, how to recognize it, and how it occurs. The introduction to the report provides a basic tutorial on the numbers and types of child abuse victims both nationally and in Massachusetts, and provides the state-specific definitions of the different kinds of child abuse, neglect and exploitation.

Also included are the physical and behavioral symptoms exhibited by children and youth who are being subjected to physical, sexual, or emotional abuse or neglect. Unfortunately, by the time these symptoms are noted, the abuse has likely already taken place. Prevention strategies must therefore be aware of precursor or “grooming” behaviors exhibited by those who would harm children and youth. Since these behaviors can take place for significant periods of time before the actual abuse takes place, they are a prime focus for intervention. These behaviors are defined and categorized. Research results on the long-term effects of child abuse and neglect are also summarized.

As mentioned above, the bulk of the report is focused on presenting the elements of effective abuse prevention and intervention practices and tools, and a decision-making process that can be used by individuals or groups to tailor them to the needs of a variety of YSO types, sizes, and functions. The elements address the establishment of:

- An overarching set of abuse prevention policies and procedures;
- A screening and hiring process for employees and volunteers that can help to detect and deter applicants who should not be placed in positions of trust with minor children;
- A code of conduct that details the expected and prohibited behaviors and interactions between employees, volunteers, children and youth;
- Methods and concepts that help to create and maintain a safe physical environment, and establish safe boundaries for the use of social media and other electronic technologies;
- Protocols that guide employees and volunteers in responding appropriately to a child/youth who discloses abuse, and that identify the internal and external persons and agencies to be contacted when abuse is suspected, observed or disclosed, and;
- An onsite and/or online child abuse prevention training and education program for all staff, employees, and volunteers (and for some YSOs this may include personal safety education for children and youth) that includes training in the policies and procedures specific to the YSO.

Each of the elements is addressed in conceptual as well as in practical terms, and includes a combination of definitions, examples, scenarios, sample and model documents, tools, reference materials, and guidance on potential issues and recommended implementation strategies.

Finally, the report addresses the basic elements of organizational change and the critical role of leadership – not only in making the case for the new safety initiatives, but in ensuring a wide collaboration among all those who will be affected by them (e.g., managers, supervisors, employees, volunteers, parents, and children and youth). That collaboration must consider both the strategy for implementing the programs, and the organizational culture in which the changes and new processes are going to take place. Maintaining forward movement in the safety program will depend on monitoring, assessment, feedback, open lines of communication, encouragement, and sustained engagement – all focused on the desired outcomes. But sustaining such an achievement into the future, and the permanent behavioral changes it requires, will demand a sense of individual and group ownership.

Beyond providing guidelines and tools for the development of child sexual abuse prevention and intervention plans for YSO's in Massachusetts, the Task Force was charged with recommending strategies for incentivizing the YSOs to develop and implement abuse prevention and intervention plans. The group was also tasked with creating a 5-year plan for using community education and other strategies to increase public awareness about child sexual abuse, including how to recognize signs, minimize risk, and act on suspicions or disclosures of such abuse as a community responsibility.

Various ideas are presented as to how the Task Force will accomplish these tasks, including a community outreach and “listening session” (to be conducted prior to publication of this Report) that will pave the way for a series of regional consultations with both large and small, public and private YSO businesses and communities to solicit feedback on what they would need in order to facilitate a successful implementation of the recommendations contained in the Task Force report. That feedback will help to guide and inform the ongoing implementation focus the Task Force envisions as the basis of our future work.

INTRODUCTION

Children are our most precious resource. When we look into the face of a child we love, we see wonder at every new experience, an openness to the world that is fearless, and a response to human interaction that is both trusting and inviting. We also see an innocence and dependency that make us want to guide, to defend and to protect the child unconditionally – without regard to personal consequence. All children have the right to be protected, to grow, to thrive and to be

educated in a safe, secure, and caring environment until the time comes for them to “leave the nest” and establish their place in the wider world. Our children’s/youth’s health, development, survival and dignity are both our legacy and our future.

For many reasons, however, not all children and youth experience their communities, their schools or their homes as safe places. Child abuse, neglect and exploitation affect millions of children in every community in the United States annually and tens of millions more around the globe. Sexual violence against children and youth, in particular, is a reality that lives outside the consciousness of most people and inside a web of silence, secrecy and stigma – until the bold headlines in our newspapers remind us that it still exists.

No one *likes* to talk about child abuse. It is a difficult topic that reveals sides of human nature that are hard to acknowledge, and pathologies that are hard to understand. And yet, it has been around throughout recorded human history and most likely even before that. We know that child abuse happens without regard to ethnic, racial, religious, or cultural grouping or socio-economic status. No population is immune. This report will not attempt to provide a comprehensive explanation of why child maltreatment exists. Rather, it will focus on the fact that it does exist, and can take place anywhere under the right conditions and circumstances – but, most importantly, child abuse can also be prevented.

There are an estimated 1.4 million children and youth in the Commonwealth under the age of 18³ who are served daily by a variety of educational institutions, day care facilities, youth development programs, camps, medical facilities, recreation centers, clubs, studios, and faith-based programs to name a few. These “youth serving organizations” (YSOs) can range from a small privately owned business in a rented storefront with a single owner, a small number of employees and tens of children; to a city or town run sports league with hundreds of coaches, assistant coaches and participants; to a state school system with tens of thousands of teachers, employees and volunteers and hundreds of thousands of children. What they all have in common is a desire to teach, mentor, train, inspire and otherwise engage children while at the same time trying to ensure that they are safe and without injury or harm while doing so.

What we know, however, is that children and the organizations that serve them can be vulnerable. Individuals who wish to harm children sometimes succeed in joining YSOs – bypassing the safeguards that are in place, and using the opportunity to cultivate relationships with both the adults and children in the organization that eventually allow them to succeed.

³ <http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/PST045215/25>

The Massachusetts Legislative Task Force on Child Sexual Abuse Prevention has worked together to better understand how this situation happens, on the conditions and circumstances that can allow it to occur, and on the challenges that both large and small organizations face in the detection and prevention of child sexual abuse. The Task Force has used this work to develop a set of strategies, guidelines and tools that can address the conditions that lead to sexually abusive behaviors in YSOs. The resulting prevention framework consists of a combination of raising public awareness, education and training, a prevention toolbox, and on strength-based models and strategies to detect and prevent abusive behavior in the organizations that serve Massachusetts children (See Figure 1 below). Practical guidance is also offered on the implementation of these strategies, and on leadership’s role in building an organizational culture of oversight and accountability.

Figure 1

