FACT SHEET

Protecting children and vulnerable adults in our parish community

The most important asset in the parish is its people.

Over the past decade much has been reported in the media about the abuse of children and vulnerable adults by those within the Church. While acknowledging the shame that all Catholics have felt as a result of the actions of a few, the atmosphere of distrust which has built in the community has made it challenging for the majority of priests and religious, who have not been involved, to address issues of prevention.

If we are to safeguard the welfare of the most vulnerable people in our communities we need to put our energy into the formation of positive, safe and nurturing parishes. We need to consider what we have learned in our Church and from society in general and continue to strengthen our protective practices.

Care of the most vulnerable

As a Church we aim to take special care of our most vulnerable people. This includes children or young people under the age of 18 years, a person who has suffered bereavement, marriage breakdown or other such adversity which makes them in particular need of pastoral support, a person who has an intellectual disability, mental illness or other impairment that makes it difficult for them to protect themselves from abuse or exploitation. This includes those under the influence of drugs and alcohol.

Every Church employer has a legal and moral responsibility to protect the vulnerable people in its care from exploitation and harm. In Australia, state and territory governments are responsible for the administration and operation of child protection services and legislative acts in each state and territory govern the way such services are provided.

Managing the risk

All Church organisations face risks that can affect the achievement of their objectives and their mission. In a Church environment the risks are wide and varied.

Managing the risks associated with children and vulnerable adults is about much more than providing an environment that is free of physical hazards. Parishes need to implement a robust and systematic risk management plan that aims to keep children and vulnerable adults safe from all forms of harm including physical, psychological, emotional and sexual harm as well as neglect.

It should also give clear guidelines to Church workers and volunteers to ensure they are complying with their legal and moral obligations.

As part of the risk management process, parishes should conduct a risk assessment for all activities, especially those involving children and vulnerable adults. The risk management plan should set out the measures the parish intends to put in place to eliminate, reduce or modify each risk.

Activities involving children or contact with children in a parish community may include; sacramental programs, children's liturgies, state schools catechetics, choirs and music groups, masses, Christmas, Lenten and Easter liturgies, youth groups, youth camps/retreats, school visits, parish fetes, parish family retreats, home visits and interaction via various forms of technology.

Safe recruitment of workers and volunteers

The selection, training and supervision of workers and volunteers in any ministry should be carried out with extreme care.

Safe recruitment should include:

1. Ensuring all relevant working with children or police checks have been conducted.

   Screening is one way to prevent and deter people who pose a risk to the safety of children and vulnerable adults from working with them. There is no single national framework setting out the screening or certification requirements for working with children or vulnerable people. All states and territories have legislation that requires people in certain occupations to be screened for criminal offences and this is often referred to as a working with children check. In general these checks are more extensive and more targeted than a police check. Parishes need to be aware of the requirements in their state or territory and ensure they are compliant.

   For more information visit:
   http://www.aifs.gov.au/cfca/pubs/factsheets/a141887/index.html

2. Reference checking with previous employer and/or previous parish.

3. Sighting at least two forms of identification.

4. Interviewing the applicant/volunteer.

5. In the case of visiting clergy or religious, a written statement from the Church authority is required (as per Section 45.6 and 45.7-Towards Healing).

Policies and procedures

Policies and procedures provide a valuable framework for parishes. Problems can be avoided by making sure that decisions are determined by policy and not just reactive to crisis situations.

Rather than stifling creativity and spontaneity, the reasonable application of certain policies and procedures should assist in the development of an atmosphere of confidence and harmony in the pastoral ministries of the parish community.

The development of policies and procedures is best done in consultation with those involved. The aim is to build commitment not compliance.

Each parish should develop the following:

◆ A mission statement that reflects the specific Gospel basis for all parish ministries

◆ A general code of conduct which establishes a common understanding of the standards of behaviour expected of workers and volunteers. Specific codes of conduct should be developed for higher risk activities eg camps, overnight activities, home visits, use of all forms of communication technology and social media

◆ An overview of parish structure with lines of accountability and responsibility

◆ Role descriptions for all workers and volunteers including expectations and obligations

◆ A list of statutory requirements for workers and volunteers eg working with children checks, police checks, mandatory reporting

◆ A system for storing personal details and emergency contacts for workers and volunteers which complies with relevant legislation

◆ A compliant document storage policy

◆ A record keeping procedure covering training, incidents, working with children checks, camps, etc that meets the requirements of the legislation

◆ A process for the resolution of grievances, and

◆ A structure for an annual evaluation of each activity carried out in the name of the parish.

Developing policies and procedures is important and ensuring workers and the parish community are made aware of and have access to them is equally critical. For new workers and volunteers this may be incorporated into the overall induction process. For existing workers and volunteers this may be done through meetings, intranet or email system, notice boards or other means.

Training and ongoing support

It is important to make sure workers and volunteers receive training appropriate for the tasks to be undertaken. It is particularly important that those who have access to children and vulnerable adults are carefully trained.

Training can be provided by:

◆ Parish or school information sessions

◆ Accessing the services of external training providers including online training, and

◆ Establishing a network of professional people who can provide support and assistance.

Reporting

The legal requirement to report suspected cases of child abuse and neglect is known as mandatory reporting. All states and territories have mandatory reporting requirements, however these may differ between the jurisdictions.

Workers and volunteers should understand their obligations in relation to mandatory reporting. However, everyone has a moral obligation to report child abuse or a child at risk, regardless of whether or not they are mandatory reporters.

For more information visit:
www.aifs.gov.au/cfca/pubs/factsheets/a141787/index.html

Conclusion

A parish is built around the desire to gather as a community. The sacramental, liturgical and pastoral life of a parish are all intertwined.

By adhering to the principle of the inherent dignity of all people, manifesting a high level of accountability and transparency and ensuring that the most vulnerable are assured the highest level of protection, a parish demonstrates consonance with Gospel values.

It is hoped that any attention that is given to the establishment of protocols and procedures will enhance the life of the whole community. By balancing sound administrative procedures with genuine demonstrations of kindness and compassion everyone can be cared for with dignity and mutual respect.

Practical guidance

Your state or territory government will be the best source of information and guidance regarding legislation. For information with a national focus visit:

Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, National Committee for Professional Standards
Towards Healing
Integrity in Ministry
Integrity in the Service of the Church
http://www.catholic.org.au/index.php?option=com_docman&task=cat_view&gid=38&Itemid=395

Social-Networking Protocol for the Catholic Church in Australia
http://mediablog.catholic.org.au/?p=335

The Melbourne Response
http://www.cam.org.au/Melbourne-Response/Melbourne-Response.aspx

Catholic Church Insurance
Managing risk in Catholic Organisations
http://www.ccinsurance.org.au/rm/risk-management-topics.htm

risksupport