

## **Safe Steps Program Policy**

### ***Purpose***

Toronto First has the moral, legal, ethical and spiritual “Duty of Care” to its members, friends, volunteers, staff members and visitors.

The Board of Trustees supports and ensures ongoing operations of a Safe Steps Program, which has as its purpose:

- To provide a safe environment for children, youth and vulnerable adults by preventing harm to those in our care;
- To protect our volunteers from false allegations; and
- To declare and make clear that there will be no tolerance for abuse, harassment or neglect of any member of the congregation.

### ***Policy***

Therefore, in order to address its Duty of Care, the First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto endorses a policy of risk assessment, training and screening for positions, ministries and activities which place people in a position of trust such as, but not limited to, Religious Education teachers and Lay Chaplains.

Screening and reference checks are also done for those who have signing authority for the organization.

### ***Procedures***

The Safe Steps Program is run by a committee that is chaired by a member of the Board of Trustees and includes, as a committee member, the Director of Lifespan and Religious Education (DLRE). The committee is responsible to the Board of Trustees.

The Safe Steps Program has five major components:

1. Screening and Checking References
2. Training
3. Creating a Safe Environment
4. Reporting Abuse
5. Internal audit, including a report to the Board of Trustees, once every two years. (Revised January 2016)

### **Screening and Checking References**

Volunteers interested in working with children, youth and/or vulnerable adults require a signed referral from the DLRE or other staff member at a similar level of seniority within the organization. This referral is only to be made following an interview with the DLRE and after the volunteer has attended First for a minimum of six months. (This six month wait can be waived if the individual joins First from another UU congregation and is

referred by the DLRE, congregational leader or other staff member at the initial congregation).

Upon receiving the referral from the DLRE, we screen all staff, and volunteers for any position involving work with children, youth or vulnerable adults. Our screening process includes the following:

- Criminal Records Check excluding checks related to the Mental Health Act but including Vulnerable Sector Verification (VSV), done every five years through the Canadian Police Information Centre (CPIC). (Revised January 2016)
- Personal Reference Checks, three personal references are to be provided and eligible references do not include family members, spouses or staff members at First
- A signed Employee/Volunteer Application indicating agreement with the Safe Steps policies and procedures

The screening results are confidential. Documentation is kept on file indefinitely for all workers, including original Criminal Record Checks.

If the police check does uncover something, a member of the Safe Steps Program committee and the DLRE will discuss the findings with the volunteer. The volunteer is not automatically disqualified from participating.

## **Training**

We train all children's and youth ministry workers in the Safe Steps Program policies and procedures, so they understand their Duty to Report actual or alleged incidents.

We provide initial training and annual refresher training for all volunteers working with children, youth and vulnerable adults.

In addition, RE reps visit all classes at the start of the program year to remind children and youth of our routine safety practices.

## **Creating a Safe Environment**

To provide a safe environment for children in religious education programming on Sunday mornings, the following steps are taken:

- The DLRE or a designate circulates the hallways and visit class rooms during Sunday mornings;
- We have installed windows in all classroom doors; (Revised January 2016)
- For doors that do not have windows, we maintain an "open door policy – doors are closed only if two adults are present and a closed door is required to reduce sound traveling;<sup>1</sup> (Revised January 2016)
- All children use the buddy system or are accompanied by an adult if they leave the classroom;

- Children are encouraged to use the “single stall” washrooms;
- Children in grade 3 and under are released only to parents/guardians from their classroom; and
- Written parental / guardian permission is required for any offsite travel or overnight activities; and
- Volunteers are not to be alone in vehicles with children.

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<sup>1</sup> Insurance requirements change and First should revisit policy / check insurers recommendations when making future physical plant decisions.

To provide a safe environment for youth in our programs, volunteers are trained to take the following steps:

- Mentors should not be alone with youth;
- Youth should not travel alone during evening / night time hours; and
- Mentors should meet with youth in public places, easily accessible by public transit.

Volunteers are taught to minimize risk by:

- Reducing the risk factor;
- Avoiding physical situations that are unsafe or uncertain; and
- Recognizing physical situations that are safe.

## **Reporting Abuse**

Child abuse, according to the Child and Family Services Act of Ontario, is physical and/or emotional, and includes neglect.

Volunteers are trained to know that any adult in a position of responsibility for a child – including volunteers – is obligated to report suspected cases of abuse, including neglect, to the authorities. In this case, reports are to be made to the police or the Toronto Children’s Aid Society. The case will be investigated. The reporter’s name will remain confidential – adults investigated for possible child abuse will not know who reported them.

In cases of suspected or alleged child abuse, including neglect, our steps at First include:

1. We will immediately complete an incident reporting form;
2. We will fulfill statutory reporting obligations to the Toronto Children’s Aid Society or the Toronto police;
3. Without admitting legal liability or making public statements prior to obtaining legal counsel, we will assure a compassionate response to the alleged victim and their family;
4. We will maintain confidentiality for the alleged victim and alleged perpetrator;

5. We will immediately suspend the alleged perpetrator pending outcome of investigation; and
6. We will consult with a lawyer and will report the incident to our insurance company.

Cases of abuse of vulnerable adults will be investigated and may need to be substantiated. The church will investigate and encourage people to report to the police for further investigation.

Action will be tailored to the situation. For example:

- We may meet with parties involved – individually or (if warranted) together to ensure NO is clearly heard. Recognize it may not be understood or accepted.
- If we have several complaints about inappropriate actions of someone, it will be considered differently than if it is a single incident.

## Definitions

The following definitions are provided to support a common understanding among all concerned individuals involved.

**Abuse:** Abuse can be of a sexual, physical and/or emotional nature; in the context of child abuse it includes neglect. The use of corporal punishment is considered as abuse in our congregation.

**Child Neglect:** Neglect occurs when insufficient care is taken to provide for a child's needs.

**Harassment:** Harassment is repeated unwanted, unwarranted behaviour in which the person making the approach should know not to continue, usually (but not always) because the person has been told to stop the unwarranted behaviour. Harassment is illegal. Common types of harassment include:

- Sexual, physical and / or emotional (bullying, threatening) harassment;
- Financial harassment, which may fall along a spectrum of asking / begging for money for coffee or a meal to repeatedly asking or demanding larger sums of money; and
- Domestic abuse and elder abuse.

**Improper Discipline:** Discipline should always be done in a manner that shows respect for the child. Physical force, berating or belittling are all improper means for discipline.

**Inappropriate Behaviour and Inappropriate Touching:** It is inappropriate for adults (volunteers and/or staff members) working with children, youth, or vulnerable adults to:

- Make any sort of remark, comment or joke to/ regarding a child/youth/vulnerable adult that is in any way suggestive, explicit, or overly personal;
- Engage in any sort of physical contact with a child/youth/vulnerable adult that makes the child/youth/vulnerable adult feel uncomfortable or that violates reasonable boundaries;

- Offer any “special” treatment that falls outside the normal course of responsibilities, or that may (or may appear to) place a child/youth/vulnerable adult in any sort of risk of exploitation.

**Vulnerable people:**

- Children and adolescents – minors up to and including 18 years of age
- Vulnerable adults – adults of any age who have difficulty protecting themselves from harm temporarily or permanently and are at risk because of age, activity limitation (disability), or participating restriction (handicap) or circumstances such as emotional distress or uncertainty.

**Non-Compliance policy:** The DLRE, with support from the board, is responsible for escalation of instances of non-compliance with this policy up to and including suspending the non-compliant individual from active service in their role until they are in compliance. Addition July 2017 Board

**Procedure: Non-Compliance:** The DLRE would undertake a series of actions and then if resolution is not achieved, the Board of Trustees would move into an in-camera session at which the DLRE would request the Board’s support in suspending the individual’s participation until they were in compliance and the Board minutes would note “the DLRE presented the actions taken to help bring a (staff or volunteer member) into compliance. The Board supported the action taken of informing the individual that they will be suspended from their role until they are in full compliance, at which time they can return to active service.”

Addition July 2017 Board SRP