

# NORTHSTAR LEARNING CENTERS

53 Linden Street  
New Bedford, MA 02740  
(508) 207-7681 | <http://www.northstarlc.org/>

## Child Sexual Abuse Prevention and Response Policy

NorthStar's Child Sexual Abuse Prevention and Response Policy has been developed in light of the organization's mission and circumstances. Consistent with our responsibilities in preventing child sexual abuse and in identifying and appropriately responding to incidents of abuse, our policies contain these components:

- Careful staff screening and selection;<sup>1</sup>
- Policies, procedures and/or guidelines for preventing and responding to incidents or alleged incidents of child sexual abuse;
- Regular, frequent training for staff to ensure that they understand, prevent, recognize and respond to child sexual abuse in accordance with the organization's policies and procedures and/or guidelines;
- Monitoring of behavior of staff for compliance with the organization's policies and procedures.

In defining child abuse, the Massachusetts Department of Children and Families (DCF) regulations (110 CMR, Section 2.00) refer in general terms to sexual abuse:

the non-accidental commission of any act by a caretaker upon a child under age 18 which causes, or creates a substantial risk of, physical or emotional injury; or constitutes a sexual offense under the laws of the Commonwealth; or any sexual contact between a caretaker and a child under the care of that individual. This definition is not dependent upon location (i.e., abuse can occur while the child is in an out-of-home or in-home setting).

Massachusetts is among the states that specifically include the term "sex trafficking" in their civil definitions of child abuse.

### A. PREVENTION

#### **Balancing risk and benefits**

We at NorthStar recognize our responsibility to provide a safe environment—that is, one where children/youth do not fear physical or emotional harm while participating in the child/youth development experience, whether it is from the learning environment, from adults, from their peers, or from others. We acknowledge some situations pose more risk for inappropriate or harmful behavior than others. For example, interactions during off-site supervised family visitation

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<sup>1</sup> We use the generic term "staff" to cover all employees, student interns, volunteers, and other members of the community whose potential employment or volunteer service involves direct contact with, and/or the potential for unmonitored access to children (including any individuals who regularly provide transportation to children). While our policy and practice is for them to not have unmonitored contact with children or youth, all student interns and volunteers are given thorough reference and background checks, including review of criminal and sexual offender records.

are harder to monitor than interactions in a supervised family visitation center. Interactions during an overnight educational trip are more difficult to monitor than interactions in a facility at home.

So, why would we take the extra risk? Because evidence suggests some of the “higher-risk” strategies such as supervised family visitation in naturally-occurring settings offer benefits that visitation in specially-constructed centers may not. While the literature on off-site family supervision is limited, it seems that this arrangement of supervised family contact finds widespread support among parents, staff, and program coordinators—and older children and youth, who generally lack age-appropriate facilities. The need for off-site supervision has been suggested as part of providing comprehensive transition possibilities, as in a report on staff and parent views at three New Zealand family supervision centers:

For visiting parents this wish was expressed just as wanting to be in a more normal situation, and to have the opportunity to connect with extended family and other intimates not part of the ‘supervised’ setting. Some coordinators were very keen to develop such an off-site service and many parents identified this as a significant gap in the service possibilities. The provision of such a service could also meet needs for culturally specific arrangements and allow exploration of the wider environment within the safety of a monitored situation.<sup>2</sup>

NorthStar’s off-site supervised visitation program has been developed with the specific goal of keeping children, youth, and families safe given the special safety and security issues associated with off-site supervision, and services are provided only when specifically approved by the referring agency, the Department of Children and Families (DCF). To promote safety and preparedness, family supervision sites are selected in advance of the visit and are preapproved by the NorthStar program coordinator.

Similarly, the literature makes a strong case that one-to-one mentoring programs promote positive outcomes by helping children and youth develop a healthy sense of identity while strengthening self-regulation skills. Our one-on-one mentoring program for DCF-referred children and youth has been developed in close conjunction with the referring agency with the specific goal of keeping referred children and youth safe given the special risk issues associated with one-on-one interaction. In short, the service provider (NorthStar) and the referring agency (DCF) agree that the benefits of one-on-one child/youth mentoring by an appropriately trained, carefully screened, well-supervised case manager outweigh the potential risks of the services being largely delivered in one-to-one settings.

### **Screening and selecting potential staff**

The first and most effective means of preventing child abuse is screening out potential abusers before they come to the child/youth-serving organization. The screening process provides the basis for a mutual understanding of the position and the expectations of both the organization and applicant. NorthStar uses a variety of screening tools such as reference checks, interviews, and criminal background checks to identify individuals who are the best possible people for staff and to protect increasingly vulnerable populations from harm. In conducting screening, we do not make exceptions for people we know or have worked with in the past. We screen all applicants, both adults and adolescents, for all positions in the organization.

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<sup>2</sup> (Anita Gibbs and Margaret Mckenzie, Department of Social Work and Community Development University of Otago (August 2006). Blue Skies Report No 9/06 *Supervised Contact: The Views of Parents and Staff at Three Barnardos Contact Centres in the Southern Region of New Zealand*. Retrieved from <http://www.superu.govt.nz/sites/default/files/BS-supervised-contact.pdf>)

Screening for child sexual abuse prevention is integrated into the general screening and selection process that NorthStar already employs to choose the best possible candidates for positions:

Informing applicants early on about our child/youth protection policies. It has been suggested that by letting applicants know at the outset that our organization is serious about protecting children and youth, we may deter some people at risk of abusing children and/or youth from applying for staff positions. Inform applicants about our organization’s policies and procedures regarding child abuse prevention in the context of sharing our code of ethical conduct.<sup>3</sup>

Written application. The written application provides information we need to assess the background and interests of applicants. We include a disclosure statement to ask applicants about previous criminal history of sexual offenses, violence against youth, and other criminal offenses and a “statement of suitability” requiring a signature stating that the applicant knows of no reason or prior circumstance that would preclude them from working safely with children or youth. The applicant may not disclose past offenses, but the inquiry will demonstrate our organization’s seriousness about protecting youth and potentially discourage applicants at risk for perpetrating child sexual abuse.

- Personal interview. The personal interview provides an opportunity to meet applicants, determine if they are a good match for our organization, and ask additional questions to screen for child sexual abuse risk factors. Questions are developed to help u determine whether applicants have mature, adult relationships as well as clear boundaries and ethical standards for their conduct with children and youth. For example:
  - *What makes you a good candidate for working with youth? What would your friends or colleagues say about how you interact with youth?*
  - *What hobbies or other activities do you enjoy?* [Assess if applicants have mature, adult relationships—not just relationships with youth.]
  - *What age/sex of youth do you want to work with? How would you feel about working with a different age/sex?* [Be wary if an applicant seems fixated on one age/sex. It may be, however, that the applicant has experience or is gifted with working with certain age groups. Asking follow-up questions about why an applicant has a strong preference can help you determine if there is cause for concern.]
  - *Why do you want this job?*

A single answer is unlikely to decide whether an applicant is selected or rejected. Along with other forms of information, answers to these questions can help you build a more complete picture of an applicant.

Background checks. With the written application, we provide a permission form for contacting personal references and performing a criminal background check. NorthStar administrators also reserve the right, and make clear to staff, that they will conduct additional background checks any time after employment has begun—and do so periodically. Massachusetts requires CORI checks no less than every 3 years for individuals who have the potential for direct and unmonitored contact with children. We also make clear to all applicants that any misrepresentations, falsifications, or material omissions in the information provided by the applicant, whenever discovered, may result in disqualification from, or termination of employment or volunteer service.

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<sup>3</sup> Described in NorthStar’s *Employee Handbook* in introduction to Chapter 5 “Workplace Expectations” and section 5-1 “Relationships with Families and the Public.”

We also note that unless otherwise provided by law, a criminal record will not automatically disqualify an applicant. In general, if a background check indicates that there is adverse or criminal activity in the applicant's background, the office responsible for screening (i.e., Business Office) can bring the adverse or criminal information to the executive director for final determination and possible appeal (with criteria for disqualification determined by the organization). It will be explained that certain types of background checks are accompanied by state-regulated criteria for disqualification that have been predefined.

### **Orientation and training**

Consistent orientation and training are powerful tools that prepare staff to provide safe environments, make appropriate decisions, and take appropriate actions in their roles in the NorthStar organization and its programs. A completed new employee orientation checklist is placed in their personnel file to ensure that the orientation occurred.

New employee orientation. New employees receive training on the child abuse policy and reporting procedure in their initial orientation. The training refers to our organization's interaction policies and what has been defined as inappropriate or harmful behavior so that the new employee clearly understands the professional boundaries our organization has established and identify when someone has crossed them. The orientation also makes clear that all staff should be prepared to respond immediately to inappropriate or harmful behavior, potential risk situations, and potential boundary violations.

Mandatory reporting of child abuse and neglect. As stated in the "Child Abuse Policy and Reporting," section 1-5 of the *Health and Safety Manual*, all staff are "mandated reporters" and therefore have "a legal obligation to immediately report their observations or suspicions of child abuse or neglect" to the Department of Children and Families. This policy clarifies roles and responsibilities: "A mandated reporter's duty to report known or suspected child abuse and/or neglect is an individual responsibility." That is to say:

When an employee reasonably believes that a child under the age of 18 years old is being abused and/or neglected, there may be occasion when the director does not concur and considers that filing a 51A report would be baseless or disproportionate to the circumstances. If you remain reasonably sure that the child continues to at great risk without DCF intervention, you should file a 51A report on your own. In making such a report, you must immediately inform the director or next-in-line supervisor and provide them with a copy of the written report as soon as they complete it.

The agency's reporting policies and procedures include provisions requiring staff members to inform their supervisor or appropriate program personnel whenever they make a report, as well as the need to consult with their supervisor whenever they have concerns regarding the need to report.

Critical incident reporting form and procedure. More broadly, our policies require employees to report any harmful, unsafe, or concerning behaviors or practices through our critical incident reporting procedure. "Abuse/maltreatment" is a category on the critical incident reporting form. The procedure and form provide a clear reporting structure within the organization so staff know who to contact if they observe potentially inappropriate or harmful behavior. Besides creating a climate that encourages people to question confusing or uncertain behaviors and practices, we have a "no wrong door" policy that enables staff to byway direct-line notification to report incidents to any administrator. Contact information is posted conspicuously in each NorthStar facility.

Critical training content. All staff at all levels of responsibility in the organization need to understand how to prevent child sexual abuse. To this end, we provide training to all staff on:

- *General information about child sexual abuse*
- *Importance of preventing child sexual abuse*, including how child sexual abuse policies protect children/youth from sexual abuse, adults and youth from allegations of sexual abuse, and organizations from being accused of not doing enough to prevent child sexual abuse.
- *Personal conduct*, including acknowledging the power differential between staff and youth.
- *Healthy development of children and youth*, including how to distinguish between healthy and inappropriate or harmful behaviors when monitoring interactions.
- *Protective factors* that protect children/youth from child sexual abuse and foster their healthy development.
- *Handling disclosures*, including how to respond appropriately to the person making the disclosure.

**Guidelines on interactions between individuals**

Aimed at ensuring the safety of children/youth in their interactions with staff and with each other, our guidelines on interactions between individuals are determined by our organization’s mission, our goals for children and youth, and our program activities to support those goals.

Appropriate and inappropriate/harmful behaviors. Appropriate, positive interactions among youth and between staff and children/youth are essential in supporting positive child and youth development, making children and youth feel valued, and providing the caring connections that serve as protective factors for children and youth. Conversely, inappropriate or harmful interactions put children and youth at risk for adverse physical and emotional outcomes. In orientation and training, we identify behaviors that fall into the broad categories of appropriate and inappropriate.

The following chart of appropriate and inappropriate/harmful behaviors and interactions with children and youth is illustrative and by no means all-inclusive.

<b>Inappropriate/harmful</b>	<b>Appropriate</b>
<p><b>Physical Contact</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Touch or speak to a child/youth in a sexual way.</li> <li>2. Inflict any physical abuse such as striking, spanking, shaking, slapping.</li> <li>3. Frontal hugs and bear hugs.</li> <li>4. Pat on the head (demeaning in some cultures)</li> <li>5. Restrain a child/youth (unless they are an immediate danger to self or others).</li> <li>6. Be rough with children/youth in behavior management—e.g., yank arm, grab shoulder.</li> <li>7. Roughhouse (aggressive physical contact, often for fun, where child/youth not in control of their body).</li> </ol>	<p><b>Physical Contact</b></p> <p>Appropriate physical behavior includes contact that maintains physical boundaries at all times and only comprises touches that are public and non-sexual such as:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Pats on the back or shoulder;</li> <li>2. Child-initiated side hugs;</li> <li>3. Fist bumps, shaking hands, high fives, hand signs and greetings;</li> <li>4. Holding hands to safely cross the street.</li> </ol> <p>Even physical contact that is considered “appropriate” must be consented to by the child/youth, and be appropriate for the situation.</p>

Inappropriate/harmful	Appropriate
<p><b>Other Actions</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>8. Inflict any emotional abuse such as humiliating, ridiculing, threatening, or degrading children and/or youth.</li> <li>9. Use inappropriate consequences for behavior—e.g., deny snack or other comfort.</li> <li>10. Tell a child/youth not to divulge to a parent what a staff member said or did.</li> <li>11. Spend inappropriate amounts of time with a particular child or youth.</li> <li>12. Overstep other professional boundaries—e.g., have very personal conversations with a youth, accept or give gifts to a child or youth without the knowledge of their parent or guardian.</li> </ol>	<p><b>Other Actions</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5. Use praise and positive reinforcement rather than criticism, competition, or comparison when working with children and/or youth.</li> </ol>
<p><b>Procedures</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>13. Supervisory staff instruct employee in mandatory reporting situation not to make a report.</li> <li>14. <i>Unauthorized</i> off-hours contact—e.g., babysitting, movies, foster care, weekend trips, dating, social networking and texting.</li> <li>15. Fail to fully cooperate with an investigation by program staff, DCF, or a law enforcement agency.</li> </ol>	<p><b>Procedures</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>6. Comply with the state mandatory reporting regulations and agency policies and procedures to report suspected child abuse.</li> <li>7. Cooperate fully in any response of abuse of children and/or youth.</li> </ol>

**Physical contact.** Physical contact is a complex issue that requires staff training and discussion. Talking points should include public/private contact, gender awareness, age awareness, frequency and the "needy" children/youth, awareness of one's own needs, the role of horseplay, etc. Physical contact between staff and children/youth should only take place in a public setting where other staff are present. Appropriate touching avoids contact with private body parts and should be in response to the needs of the child—not initiated by the staff member.

**Ratios of employees to youth.** The goal of setting ratios for the numbers of staff to children/youth is to ensure the safety of the children/youth. There is, however, no standard ratio for all situations. When making decisions about ratios, we consider contextual variables such as:

- Age and developmental level of participating children/youth. If they are young, we may need a lower ratio, that is, fewer children/youth per staff member.
- Risk of the activity.
- Location of the activity. Is it in a classroom that is easy to monitor or at a park, where it is easier to lose track of individuals?

Staff are consistently expected to actively interact with participating children/youth to maintain adequate supervision and monitoring.

**Protective practices for staff in their one-on-one interactions with children and youth.** A blanket policy limiting one-on-one interactions whenever possible by having at least two staff members present at all times with children/youth would unduly undercut the nature, strategies, and effectiveness of our mentoring programming. Our program for DCF-referred children/youth

assigns appropriately trained, carefully screened case managers to engage in one-on-one mentoring activities with an assigned child or youth, including transporting them in a car to appointments and other appropriate destinations. While this situation elevates the risk for child sexual abuse, the nature and purpose of the mentoring activities requires one-on-one time between staff and child/youth. To effectively manage the risk of abuse or false allegations of abuse, this program is dependent on staff observing the following guidelines:

- Limit meeting one-on-one with child/youth to qualified staff. Generally, only an appropriately trained, carefully screened case manager (never a student intern or volunteer) can meet one-on-one with a child or youth.
- Make it public as possible. When meeting one-on-one with a child or youth, the more visible, public and busy the location the better. If meeting in a room or office, leave the door open or move to an area that can be easily observed by others passing by.
- Inform the child's/youth's parents; secure their written consent.
- Notify one's supervisor or another member of the NorthStar community about the one-on-one meeting—preferably in advance, but granting case managers on-the-scene, time-sensitive decision-making power within the referral agency's (DCF) service plan.
- Make it timely. As far as possible, provide support during normal work hours. Extended activities (such as overnight field trips) with youth take place in a team context (meaning at least two staff).
- Avoid physical affection that can be misinterpreted. Limit affection to pats on the shoulder, high-fives, and handshakes.
- Document and immediately report any unusual incidents, including disclosures of abuse or maltreatment, behavior problems and how they were handled, injuries, or any interactions that might be misinterpreted.

Guidelines for transporting individual children/youth. NorthStar's *Employee Handbook* contains a section "Vehicle and Safe Driving Policy" (7-2):

NorthStar's legal obligation to provide a safe program and working environment extends to transporting people we serve and all other work-related driving. Employees whose jobs involve driving must maintain a safe driving record during work and outside of work.

*Driver requirements.* Any employee driving on NorthStar business needs to be "authorized to drive," with an approved driver's authorization form on file in the Business Office. A list of authorized drivers is sent to our agency's automobile insurer on an ongoing basis. Our insurer reserves the right to monitor or refuse to insure an individual driver if that driver fails to meet its driver acceptability requirements:

- 1) No more than 2 moving violations or "at-fault" accidents within the past 3 years;
- 2) No more than 2 suspension/reinstatements within the past 3 years;
- 3) No convictions for driving while under the influence of alcohol or drugs or reckless driving or careless driving within the past 5 years;
- 4) No felony convictions involving the use of motor vehicles;
- 5) Possession of a valid, current driver's license

Drivers are evaluated on an ongoing basis to assure they maintain a safe driving record. If our automobile insurer declines coverage of any driver, they will not be authorized to drive for NorthStar purposes. Any requests for an exception should be submitted to the executive director. In approving and disapproving drivers, NorthStar reserves the right to use guidelines that are stricter than our insurer's.

*Safe driving practices.* Any employee driving a NorthStar vehicle or driving on NorthStar business must observe all safety, traffic, and criminal laws and regulations. All authorized drivers are expected to operate vehicles safely and with great care for the safety and well-being of those aboard and others on the road.

Guidelines for interactions between youth program participants. Staff responsible for supervising a group of children/youth must remain in sight and hearing of that group until relieved by another appropriately qualified staff member. Exceptions to visual supervision include bathroom or changing room use. In this situation, staff should respect child/youth privacy but stand outside the bathroom door—close enough where they can quickly intervene if necessary. Each program develops age-appropriate procedures to ensure the safety of children and youth using restrooms or changing rooms.

Generally, staff should avoid placing children/youth of widely differing ages (more than 3 years) in the same group. If this is not possible, staff should closely supervise the group to ensure a safe social environment for all. Avoid sending younger children to bathrooms when they are in use by older children.

Out-of-program contact restrictions. Staff should not have unauthorized off-hours contact with children/youth in our programs, including but not limited to: babysitting, movies, weekend trips, dating, social networking and texting. That is, staff aren't allowed to engage in internet social networking with minors for *personal* reasons or through personal profiles. Networking through approved program sites/profiles may be used when the contact is related to programming.

*Authorized off-hours contact* would be responding to family crisis situations at any time to reduce removal of youths from their home if off-hours crisis intervention is part of a staff member's job description. In a crisis situation or its aftermath, the responding staff member would be expected to report the incident and interact with other systems (e.g., DCF) administratively as needed to ensure that the child/youth receives necessary services and protections.

*A note of working in local communities.* Staff working in their community may face additional challenges in managing professional boundaries. They are more likely to have social relationships with the parents of the children/youth with whom they work and are, therefore, more likely to share social and sports events or membership at various community associations. This means they will have legitimate reasons, on occasions, to attend social events with the children/youth with whom they work, to visit their homes or to be visited by them in the company of their parents. These social engagements are an important part of community life and a positive contribution to the well-being of staff working in local communities. Following the recommendations below will assist staff to enjoy these social engagements without compromising their professional responsibilities. The guiding principles in managing these situations are that:

- Social contact should be generated via the relationship the staff member has with the parents of children/youth or by an event (such as a sports event);
- Staff should avoid being alone with the children/youth in these situations;

- Staff should conduct themselves in a way that will not give others reason to question their suitability to work with children/youth and that will not create discomfort for children/youth in their helping relationship with them.
- Staff should politely decline to discuss matters relating to the workplace and should not discuss children/youth's learning or developmental progress other than at times specifically set aside for that purpose.
- Any concern a staff member has about whether or not a situation may be compromising or breaching a professional relationship should be discussed with their supervisor and an approved plan of action followed.

### **Strategies for ensuring safe environments**

A critical strategy for protecting children and youth is always knowing their whereabouts when they are participating in our programs.

Visibility. Choosing or creating spaces open and visible to multiple people can create an environment where potential offenders do not feel comfortable abusing. We use the following methods to increase visibility:

- Have clear lines of sight throughout our facilities.
- Secure areas not used for program purposes to prevent children/youth from being isolated (e.g., lock closets and storage rooms).
- Maintain bright lighting in all areas.

Privacy when toileting, showering, changing clothes. Our organization reduces risk by providing children and youth with privacy during activities such as toileting, showering, and changing clothes (mostly in the context of off-site activities, particularly overnight educational excursions). The policies and procedures should consider not just the risk of employee/volunteer sexual abuse, but also the risk of inappropriate or harmful contact among children and youth. [See above *Guidelines for interactions between youth program participants*].

Access control. In our facilities, we monitor who is present at all times and have procedures for admitting people outside of our organization and under what circumstances. For the protection of the people we serve, visitors, and staff, we control entry to our facilities. At our facility entrances, the doors have latches that can be electronically controlled from an office or reception area. These access-controlled doors, used in conjunction with an intercom, allow visitors to be screened before being "buzzed in."

Transportation. We provide transportation to some people participating in our programs. In two programs, staff use their personal vehicles:

- Our Supervised Family Visitation Center staff transport DCF-referred children to and from supervised visits.
- Case managers transport youth in an agency van or personal vehicle to appointments, court appearances, community meetings, events, etc.

Maintaining a safe cyber-environment. As we seek to create safe environments, it is important to remember that the Internet may also be used to exploit children and youth by those who seek to sexually abuse them. In addition, cyberbullying has become a problem among peers. Therefore, we at NorthStar must be careful that any online interactions with children and youth in our

programs do not in any way replicate the traumatic experiences they may have already had. Guidelines and codes of conduct related to the use of social media are included in section 6-5 “Employee Use of Social Media” in our *Employee Handbook*.

### **Off-site guidelines**

Our recommended supervision ratio for overnight or off-site events is one staff member for every five children/youth. For overnight or other extended off-site events, staff should avoid situations where they are alone with one unrelated child/youth. A “two deep” strategy having two or more staff supervise children/youth is highly recommended. Another staff should be made aware prior to an unavoidable one-on-one situation.

Conducting home visits. Staff must ensure they follow the specific home visiting protocols that apply to their sector or service. The key principle is that a home visit should place no one at unreasonable risk and that identified minor risks are consciously managed. A summary of general expectations is provided below.

<b>Inform</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Home visits must be authorized and documented by the supervisor and the program must have information about when and where visits are being undertaken and the expected return times.</li></ul>
<b>Prepare</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• All available information about the safety of the proposed visit must be considered and risks managed.</li><li>• Mobile phones must be taken, ID should be visible.</li><li>• Inform parent of intended visit, where appropriate.</li></ul>
<b>Protect</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Do not enter the house if the parent is not at home.</li><li>• Speak with the child/youth where the parent is present or clearly visible. do not interview the child/youth in their bedroom.</li><li>• Have a colleague accompany if problems are anticipated</li><li>• Document the visit.</li></ul>

The safety issues of working in community settings are spelled out in greater detail in “Working Off Site Safely” (section 4-5(e)) in our *Health and Safety Manual*.

### **Monitoring staff behavior to reduce risk**

No less important as monitoring the physical and procedural elements of our organization’s safe environment efforts, monitoring the behaviors and interactions within the organization demands vigilance and building an organizational culture that encourages people to speak up if they see something appropriate (thus acknowledging and reinforcing positive, supportive and healthy behaviors and interactions) or inappropriate (understanding the boundaries the organization has set for inappropriate or harmful behaviors and immediately responding themselves, and/or reporting their concerns to management).

Monitoring behavior and interactions within our organization is everyone’s shared responsibility. While training should ensure that supervisors are equipped to know when to look more closely at a situation as having potential for inappropriate boundary crossing, line staff are often in a better position to know what is happening on a day-to-day basis within programs. Staff should report what they see in the workplace as it relates to behaviors defined as unacceptable.

Monitoring methods. NorthStar uses multiple monitoring methods to get a good picture of how staff are interacting with children/youth. We use:

- Formal supervision, documented in performance reviews (conducted at least annually)
- Informal supervision in the context of “work environments where employees and their supervisors engage in ongoing, two-way discussion about work” and receive feedback at least monthly.

Both are described in Performance Feedback and Evaluations, section 4-3 in the *Employee Handbook*.

Supervisors maintain frequent contact with staff and children/youth who interact off-site. Supervisors are responsible for maintaining written records that monitoring has occurred.

Finally, monitoring enables supervisors to identify progress toward achievement of outcomes. In response to more serious incidents, an action plan may detail what action is required, together with timeframes and the name of the persons responsible for the action. The supervisor is expected to monitor for progress to ensure that actions are fully implemented—thereby minimizing the potential of recurrence.

## **B. RESPONSE**

The ultimate aim of child sexual abuse prevention efforts within child- and youth-serving organizations is to prevent child sexual abuse from ever occurring; however, an organization needs to have communicated clearly what it and its staff should do if an allegation of child sexual abuse occurs.

### **What to respond to within the organization and what to report to the authorities**

It is often difficult to find the balance between being vigilant and protective of children/youth and being so hypervigilant that the positive parts of programs (e.g., relationships between staff and children/youth) are compromised or lost. The need for this balance entails recognizing the tension between overreacting and underreacting.

Making a decision regarding action may not be a one-time event. It may be necessary to make a series of decisions, based on the continuous monitoring of a situation that causes concern. For example, a person may observe certain warning signs in a child’s behavior, but decide that there are insufficient grounds for making a report to DCF. Later, there might be more information, such as a crisis event, which confirms the need to file a report with DCF.

Charting appropriate and inappropriate behavior, NorthStar has delineated behaviors we will respond to internally and behaviors requiring a report to the authorities. If a youth tells a sexually inappropriate joke, our staff may inform a direct-line supervisor and/or the youth’s case manager; provide the youth with guidance, redirection, and instruction; and/or file an incident report. However, if a youth or staff member engages in sexual contact with a youth, this violation should always be reported to the appropriate authorities.

Inappropriate staff behavior. Staff may also observe behaviors in other staff that they view to be inappropriate rather than abusive or that borders on violating a professional boundary. Staff must ensure that the staff concerned is made aware of the potential of their actions to impact negatively on children and youth, and on themselves. Professional advice of this kind may be particularly valuable to newly appointed staff. The observing staff member may go through their supervisor.

All staff must take action if children and youth disclose information about inappropriate behaviors of other staff. It is not acceptable to minimize, ignore, or delay responding to such information. If abuse is suspected, it should be reported to the authorities immediately.

That said, it is crucial that we act on infractions of our organization's child sexual abuse prevention policy. If a staff member has violated the organization's code of conduct, such as having contact with youth outside of your organization, we must take action, even when child sexual abuse is not suspected. The consequences of violating policies should be explicit and violations should be addressed in a timely manner. However, if abuse is suspected, it should be reported to authorities immediately.

### **Responding to allegations and suspicions of child sexual abuse**

What to do and not to do. Clarify it is not the role of a staff member of our organization to investigate an allegation or suspicion of child sexual abuse.

- Let DCF and/or law enforcement investigate allegations or suspicions.
- Help staff understand an inappropriate response to an allegation can harm the child/youth or the legal investigative process.
- To support this division of responsibilities, we have formed partnerships with DCF and local law enforcement.

Child abuse reports must be made immediately, or as soon as practically possible, by phone.

Reporting process. As stated earlier, NorthStar staff are mandated reporters and are, therefore, required to report suspected child abuse *irrespective of who is implicated*: a colleague, friend, senior staff member, volunteer, parent, visitor or other child or youth. The complexities of these situations are acknowledged. Nevertheless, staff must manage their sensitivities or discomforts because their duty of care to the child or youth remains their paramount legal, professional and moral responsibility.

Supervisory staff are barred from:

- Instructing staff in a mandatory reporting situation to not to make a report.
- Failing to report suspicion of abuse or neglect internally and, when required, to DCF.

As stated in the "Child Abuse Policy and Reporting" section (1-5) of our *Health and Safety Manual*:

- If a report is filed alleging that a child/youth was abused or neglected while participating in one of our programs, NorthStar will fulfill all applicable mandated reporting requirements (who must report and to whom, in compliance with applicable law is specified in the policy), take immediate steps to protect all children/youth attending the program, promptly conduct an internal investigation, and fully cooperate with any external investigation.
- A staff member accused of abuse or neglect of a child/youth will not work directly with children/youth until DCF renders a finding that does not support the allegation.
- Even if an allegation of child abuse/neglect against a staff member is not substantiated, the agency may enact environmental, personnel, policy, and/or procedural changes based on findings of the internal and/or external investigation.

Internal records. All child sexual abuse reports are referred to the executive director. Although our organization should not investigate allegations or suspicions of child sexual abuse in lieu of reporting them to the authorities, it should develop a system to review and track allegations and suspicions of child sexual abuse cases.

- Include child sexual abuse as a category on general incident reporting forms for significant physical injuries. These forms should be completed by staff who first learn of the abuse through hearing an allegation or making an observation.
- Review the general incident reporting forms with a supervisor. The individual who received the information regarding the allegations should be the one who initiates the report to DCF and/or law enforcement.
- After investigation by DCF and/or law enforcement, the executive director and other staff they may enlist to participate on the organization's response team will conduct an incident review to determine what went wrong and how a similar scenario could be prevented in the future. For example, was a policy or a procedural step not followed? How could the organization's procedures be modified to prevent a recurrence?
- Record the resolutions of child sexual abuse cases if the information is available.

NorthStar's internal Performance and Quality Improvement (PQI) Committee may also track incidents, allegations, and suspicions of child sexual abuse and make recommendations to the executive director for change in these areas—the goal being reducing risk and system process improvement.

Confidentiality policy. Because of the sensitive nature of child sexual abuse cases, NorthStar management should decide in advance what information will remain private and what information can be made public.

- Withhold the names from the public of potential victims, the accused perpetrator, and the people who made the report to the authorities.
- Ensure our organization's confidentiality policy is consistent with state legal requirements.

Response to the press and the community. The executive director will decide on a strategy for responding to the press and the community before an allegation has been made. If the executive director is the subject of the allegation, the board president will be the designated spokesperson:

- Designate a spokesperson for questions and inquiries.
- Inform staff to direct the press to appropriate persons.

Behavior of children and youth toward staff. Should a child or youth engage in inappropriate behavior of a sexual nature, then immediate respectful steps must be taken to discourage the child or youth. The matter should be reported and documented promptly with the supervisor and a plan of action developed to support the child/youth and relevant staff member. Depending on the age/developmental capacity of the child/youth and contextual information, this plan of support may involve:

- Communication with parents
- Referral to and liaison with specialist counselling

- Formalized support, which may include closer monitoring or supervision of the child/youth in their interactions with other children/youth
- Referral to and liaison with an appropriate agency with disability-specific expertise.

Sometimes the inappropriate sexual behavior of younger children towards staff can elicit a suspicion that the child in question has been sexually abused. In these situations, staff must:

- Consider the safety of other children/youth with whom the child has contact
- Develop and document a plan of action and communication with all relevant parties (including other agencies).

Some children and young people may actively seek a relationship with a staff member that would constitute an inappropriate relationship. In such circumstances, staff are advised to immediately report the information to their supervisor and seek assistance from a senior staff member or agency clinician to actively manage the situation in a way that respects the emotional well-being of the child/youth and provides support to the staff member.

Support for the child and parents. Where NorthStar is a trauma-sensitive organization, our policies, procedures and guidelines for responding to incidents and suspected incidents of child sexual abuse are trauma-informed and victim-centered. NorthStar staff are often in a unique position to provide valuable support to maltreated children/youth and their families. The expertise needed to assess special needs and deliver clinical services to fit those needs already exists within NorthStar. Highly trained clinicians, already deployed at our mental health clinic and in the schools and skilled in working with children/youth and parents, can be of great help to maltreated children/youth and their families.