



Society of St. Vincent de Paul
International Council General

SSVP Safeguarding Framework

1. Introduction: what and why

1.1. What is safeguarding?

Safeguarding is the act of protecting from harm people who are vulnerable. It involves reducing and preventing risks of harm, and working to ensure that vulnerable individuals and communities are safe and empowered. Safeguarding involves recognising the human rights of all persons and working to ensure that those rights are not violated.

In the context of the St Vincent de Paul Society, safeguarding involves working to ensure that in seeking to assist people in need, we do not do harm to their health and wellbeing or put them at risk of abuse or neglect. This policy seeks to address safeguarding as it applies to children and young people but also other vulnerable people, acknowledging that people could be vulnerable to abuse or neglect by reason of their age, physical or mental disability, or poverty and reliance on support services.

As Vincentians, the nature of our work means that there is often a power imbalance when we encounter a person in need; a person's circumstances, whereby they are seeking help, and our position as a provider of financial, material or personal support, creates a risk and renders vulnerable the person seeking help. In committing to safeguarding, we are not just seeking to ensure that abuse is prevented, reported and acted upon; we are also seeking to create safe and respectful environments.

1.2 Why is SSVP committed to safeguarding?

The protection of minors and vulnerable persons is an integral part of the Gospel message that the Church and all its members are called to proclaim throughout the world. Christ himself, in fact, has entrusted us with the care and protection of the weakest and defenceless: "whoever receives one child such as this in my name receives me" (Mt 18:5). Therefore, we all have the duty to welcome openheartedly minors and vulnerable persons and to create a safe environment for them, with their interests as a priority. This requires a continuous and profound conversion, in which personal holiness and moral commitment come together to promote the credibility of the Gospel proclamation and to renew the educational mission of the Church.

-Pope Francis

[Apostolic letter issued motu proprio on the protection of minors and vulnerable persons](#)

26 March 2019

1.2.1 The Rule and our mission and values

Charity as lived by the Society's over 800,000 volunteers throughout the world is inspired by the example of St Vincent de Paul, a great apostle of charity in his day and the Society's patron saint. SSVF members live the Gospel message by serving Christ in the poor. Inspired by the spirituality of St Vincent de Paul, members strive to deepen their faith via action meeting real needs, undertaking concrete action in neighbourhoods, villages and communities. In that work, we are called to embody these values:

Empathy – to listen to and understand those we assist and to work together as members to support those in need.

Simplicity and humility – treating each other, and those we assist, as equals in a fraternal relationship.

Justice – respecting people's convictions and beliefs and helping them to regain and retain their autonomy and human dignity

1.2.2 Legal context

UNICEF identifies 17 child protection issues, including child labour, child marriage, child protection and Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), child trafficking, justice for children, psychosocial support and well-being, and sexual violence against children.

The UN also recognises the rights of all humans to life, liberty and freedom from slavery.

Around the world, in recognition of human rights and offences that have been committed against vulnerable people, jurisdictions vulnerable persons.

1.2.3 Our current situation

In many countries in which SSVF operates, the Society is already required to comply with legislation regarding safeguarding, and to have in place stringent policies and processes around working with vulnerable people. Increasingly, this includes the requirement to ensure that partner entities – including, relevantly, other SSVF bodies around the world with whom we partner and offer support – are also compliant with safeguarding standards. In those countries, SSVF increasingly finds it difficult – even legally impossible – to work with the Society elsewhere if comprehensive safeguarding policies and procedures are not in place. This will continue to impede the Society's ability to engage in things like twinning, shared initiatives, cultural visits/exchanges, the funding of special projects etc.

Examples of how children and vulnerable people can be exposed to risk of abuse or neglect through their involvement with SSVF:

- members of a school or youth conference being groomed by a SSVF member of employee who oversees or leads the conference;

- a single mother being exploited by an abuser who, in his role as a conference member, builds up a trusting relationship with her and her family through home visits wherein she becomes dependant on the material support provided by the conference and does not feel that she can confront him or address his behaviour;
- a child on a buddy day or kids' camp being abused by a volunteer in a one-on-one scenario;
- elderly or infirm persons being neglected or subjected to abuse in a SSVP-run facility by staff who are not appropriately screened, trained or supervised;
- failure of a conference to ensure that all home visits are done in teams of two, allowing a member to develop an inappropriate relationship with a person or family, unobserved and undetected;
- volunteers in an SSVP-run dining hall who are not properly trained and can subject some of those we serve to verbal abuse, or worse.

2. What does SSVP need to do internationally to ensure that safeguarding is understood and applied in all places where we operate?

There needs to be an understanding in all SSVP countries of:

- What safeguarding is
- Why it is important
- Why CGI is making this a priority
- What can be done to ensure safeguarding

2.1 An international commitment to minimum standards

This framework establishes minimum guidelines for the safeguarding of children and vulnerable people within the care of SSVP entities or personnel, or with whom SSVP personnel might come into contact through their Vincentian works. In cases where we work through partners, these partners also have a responsibility to meet these minimum standards for those served in their programmes.

SSVP is committed to protecting the rights of all people, and to ensuring that vulnerable persons of all ages are protected from physical and mental violence, injury, abuse and exploitation, including sexual abuse.

SSVP acknowledges that different jurisdictions set different definitions or age limits for children in their domestic legislation, e.g. laws dealing with the legal age of majority, age of sexual consent, voting age, etc. These differences do not alter the inherent vulnerability of children or other persons with whom SSVP works and relates.

The Society internationally agrees that each National/Superior Council must have in place a safeguarding policy and framework that incorporates and gives effect to the following principles:

- The welfare of the people we assist is paramount.
- Concerns or allegations of abusive or exploitative behaviour are always taken seriously, investigated and acted on as appropriate.
- We support the participation of children, vulnerable persons and all those we assist by valuing, listening to and respecting them and giving them a say in decisions that affect them.

- All personnel have access to and are familiar with safeguarding policies and procedures and know their responsibilities within those policies and procedures.
- All personnel and beneficiaries/clients/companions, including children and vulnerable persons themselves, have access to information about how to report concerns or allegations of abuse.
- Recruitment practices are robust enough to ensure that we will not recruit personnel, volunteers or other representatives if they pose a known risk to the safety or wellbeing of those we assist, or children or vulnerable people with whom we come into contact.
- Our practices do not create or allow conditions in which children and vulnerable people are put at risk of abuse or exploitation.
- People in positions of responsibility, whether they be members or employees, are responsible for actively promoting safeguarding and ensuring that safeguarding policies and procedures are complied with and are updated and circulated within their jurisdiction.

2.2 Topics and measures to be incorporated in every safeguarding policy

2.2.1 Each safeguarding policy must, as a minimum, include requirements around the following:

- Creating safe environments – the way we talk to and about those we assist and vulnerable persons within our Society emphasises their human dignity and rights; this might include things like getting companions’ permission before taking/using photos of them, ensuring personal details are protected, inducting and screening visitors, and not doing or allowing overseas what we wouldn’t do or allow in our own countries.
- Participation – giving vulnerable persons a say in our organisation and in decisions that affect them.
- Prevention – recruitment and screening of members, volunteers and employees in order to ensure, as far as possible, that we do not admit into the Society persons who are known or reasonably suspected of posing a risk to vulnerable persons due to their past conduct or criminal history.
- Training – formation and training is provided both upon a person’s entry into the Society and on an ongoing basis, which instils in all members, volunteers and employees the importance of safeguarding, not just as a legal/policy requirement but also as a reflection of our values.
- Risk management – ensuring that even if dangerous or inappropriate people enter our ranks, they are not in a position to do harm because we have supervision, checking and reporting processes in place, e.g. members must visit in pairs, and personnel must know what to look out for and how to report suspicions of abuse and the importance of speaking up.
- Reporting, responding – acting with compassion to victims and those who come forward with concerns or reports, and also showing compassion to those accused, while putting necessary measures in place (such as suspensions) while matters are investigated (i.e. accused persons are afforded natural justice and procedural fairness).
- Action – acting decisively where a person is suspected or found to have perpetuated abuse.

2.2.2 Examples of measures that Councils should enforce in order to meet the above requirements are as follows:

2.2.2.1 Recruitment

When engaging members, volunteers or staff, there must be processes in place to ensure that risks to vulnerable persons are identified and addressed. This might include measures such as requiring all persons to have police checks prior to commencing, checking references, interviewing candidates to assess their attitudes, confirming candidates' identity through identification documents, and providing training around safe practices.

2.2.2.2 Job Description

When advertising, promoting or documenting roles within SSVP, it should be made clear that SSVP upholds safeguarding principles and practices and that all personnel must adhere to our safeguarding policy and procedures.

2.2.2.3 Formation and training

All personnel should be able and required to receive regular training and reminders about safeguarding. This will include how to ensure a person's own behaviour is appropriate, but also how to recognise problematic behaviour in others or signs that a person might be the victim of abuse.

2.2.2.4 Two Adult Rule

The Two Adult Rule serves to keep vulnerable persons safe, and to protect against false/malicious allegations being made against Vincentians. Wherever practical no fewer than two Vincentians should be present at all times during any meeting with companions, and a Vincentian should not be involved with a vulnerable person in the course of the Vincentian work without another adult being present. It is best that these two adults not be related. Adherence to this rule:

- drastically reduces the risk of an incident of abuse, as any potential abuser will lose interest if constantly in sight of another adult;
- protects the adults against false allegations;
- sends a clear statement that vulnerable persons are important and valued;
- allows a more effective visit, as one person can focus on the interview and gathering and sharing of required data while the other person can pay more attention to the environment and potentially observe signs of abuse.

If for some reason a one-on-one discussion must take place, the interaction should be conducted in as open and observable a way as possible. This can be contributed to by one or both of the following:

- leaving doors to offices and interview rooms open; and/or
- putting glass windows in the doors.

In any circumstances where one-to-one contact is part of the role or is anticipated, it is important to consider and mitigate any safeguarding risks and to ensure that such contact is notified to line managers to ensure they are aware of it and the actions being taken to safeguard the vulnerable persons involved.

2.2.2.5 Visitors

Any persons visiting a SSVP program or site for work related reasons, including consultants and donors, must be given a copy of the safeguarding policy either prior to their arrival or upon their arrival and acknowledge they understand and will comply with the policy.

Where visitors are likely to have significant contact with vulnerable persons especially over an extended period, it is necessary to conduct background checks as described above.

2.2.2.6 Media, Audio & Visual Recordings

If any audio or visual recordings involve interviewing a companion, always ensure that the companion is at no risk of being endangered, or adversely affected. This includes ensuring their privacy and not disclosing identifying information about a child or a vulnerable person, i.e. their full names, addresses or identifying their home, host community, or general location and being vigilant of street signs, advertising boards or any other background information that will indicate to a viewer where the person may live. Do not publish a story or an image which might put a vulnerable person or their family at risk. This is the case even when identities are changed, obscured, or not used. Only use a companion's first name and provide a general location that is wide such as a city or province to avoid them being identified.

Still photographs and videos must never be demeaning, or disrespectful of the dignity of the persons portrayed. The rights, safety, and wellbeing of the persons being portrayed are always to be protected. The gratuitous portrayal of extreme suffering is always to be avoided. Editing should maintain the integrity of the photographic and video images' content and context. No changes should be made that distort the context of the image, or that make a situation look worse than it actually is.

People should always be adequately clothed. They should never be portrayed in poses that could be regarded as sexually suggestive, erotic, or obscene. Images which are not intended to be sexual can be 'sexualised' when viewed and/or shared by certain individuals, particularly online.

2.2.2.7 Expectations of our Partners

We expect that partner organisations of SSVP operate effective safeguarding procedures. If we receive a safeguarding concern about a partner organisation, we will inform them and expect the partner to respond quickly and appropriately. We will assist the partner to ascertain its obligations under local law to refer the matter to the police or other statutory authorities for criminal investigation. Where appropriate, we can work with the partner to address the issue through an appropriate independent investigation which should not interfere with any criminal investigation being conducted by statutory authorities. If the outcome is that abuse or exploitation has occurred, ongoing work with the partner cannot involve the perpetrator(s) concerned. If there is reason to believe that an allegation of abuse has been dealt with inappropriately by a partner, then the partner organisation risks withdrawal of funding or ending the partnership. We also expect partners to inform us of any safeguarding incidents they are dealing with where these have not come to our attention.

2.2.2.8 Communicating the Safeguarding Message

Access to the policy: each National/Superior Council will ensure that a hard copy of the safeguarding policy will be available in each office or headquarters within their jurisdiction and available to members, employees, volunteers, companions and the general public online and/or upon request. The policy will be translated into the local language. All personnel with active email addresses will be emailed the safeguarding policy.

General Awareness: Visual posters, including language and imagery appropriate to children and other vulnerable persons, will be displayed about the existence of this policy in appropriate locations throughout our premises and field works where possible. The policy will also be circulated to other stakeholders and opportunities will be taken to promote the policy and keep safeguarding front of mind for everyone by including short sessions on the policy or related safeguarding matters during staff meetings, other trainings and via regular communications. All material will include clear information about whom a vulnerable person or witness should report to, or seek advice from, if they feel they or another person has been violated or offended in any way.

2.2.2.9 Monitoring Compliance

On-going monitoring and evaluation will indicate the extent to which safeguarding is being effectively implemented and any need in training for personnel.

Records will be kept tracking:

- recruitment processes and details of all personnel engaged by SSVP
- inductions and training provided in safeguarding, numbers attended and dates
- all safeguarding concerns and disclosures reported, including details of all follow-up action
- any personnel found to have breached safeguarding, committed abuse or failed recruitment processes because of risks/issues flagged about their conduct, so that those people are not inappropriately engaged in some other role where they might do harm
- job descriptions and adverts, in order to confirm if they all contain the commitment to the safeguarding policy.

2.2.2.10 Review

The safeguarding policy will be reviewed by the National/Superior Council at least on a three-yearly basis, with new processes, changes in legislation and guidelines and practices to be incorporated in accordance with lessons learned.

2.3 Supporting, encouraging and ensuring Councils' commitment to these minimum standards

We will ensure that National/Superior Councils are supported through the international structure to develop policies and processes, and ensure they are kept accountable. This will include:

- National/Superior Councils reporting to their ITVPs on the development and maintenance/operation of their safeguarding policies and procedures.
- Safeguarding being incorporated into CGI Training and Formation plans. Training can include regular Vincentian training but can also include a video (DVD), or even having a training program on YouTube for more remote councils.

- ITVPs and Training and Formation delegates actively working with National/Superior Councils to ensure they have an appropriate safeguarding program in place.
- Sessions (reporting and training) on safeguarding being included at permanent section gatherings and annual meetings.
- Updating the Rule to incorporate safeguarding.

Paris, 4 October 2020



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