

# **First Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Hunterdon County**

## **Safe Congregation Policy**

The First Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Hunterdon County, as a spiritual community, believes that the safety and well-being of our members and friends, both children and adults, is paramount to everything that we do and stand for as a liberal religious community. As stated in our first principle, “the inherent worth and dignity of every person,” we take the responsibility to provide a safe and nurturing environment for all very seriously, and to this end have established this policy for our congregation.

The First Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Hunterdon County strives to be an inclusive community, affirming our congregants’ varied beliefs, opinions, and life experiences. However, concern for the safety and well being of the congregation as a whole must take priority over the privileges and inclusion of any individual.

Right relations with and openness to a wide variety of individuals are two of the prime values held by our congregation and expressed in our denomination’s purpose and principles. We believe, however, that our congregation must maintain a secure environment where right relations can flourish. Behavior that compromises our ability to fulfill our ministry and undermines our sense of community cannot be tolerated. When any person’s physical and/or emotional well-being, safety or freedom to safely express her or his beliefs or opinions is threatened, the source of this threat must be addressed firmly and promptly.

There are three main components of this policy:

- First is our commitment to protect the most vulnerable among us, namely our children. The reality and prevalence of child abuse and neglect in our society is such that as a liberal religious community, we must be open to discuss, support and ultimately prevent such acts from occurring within our congregation.
- Second, the policy will outline how the Safe Congregation Committee will educate adults, youth and children in the congregation about these issues, and will provide guidelines for promoting a healthy and safe physical, spiritual, emotional and sexual environment.
- Third, this policy will provide clear definitions for a wide range of inappropriate behavior, including but not limited to harassment, disruptive behaviors, abuse, neglect and exploitation. The policy will also outline steps that will be taken, using the newly formed Safety Response Team (SRT) to respond appropriately to any untoward event. The Safety Response Team is a subset of the Safe Congregation Committee, each member appointed, and is comprised of the minister, DRE, chairperson of the Safe Congregation Committee, and one other designated member of the committee. The SRT will serve to handle conflicts and disruptive behavior, investigate allegations of misconduct or actions against children and youths, and will make recommendations to the Board of Trustees as needed.

# **First Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Hunterdon County** **Safe Congregation Policy: Procedures and Guidelines**

## **I. Recruitment, Training and Supervision of Staff and Volunteers**

**A. Selection and Screening of Staff & Volunteers:** The FUUFHC will carefully screen all applicants for paid and volunteer positions. The FUUFHC will utilize four screening documents, which applicants must complete, sign and submit as a condition of employment or appointment, both for initial hire and ongoing work. During the recruitment process, which is conducted for each position by the immediate supervisor or supervising committee, additional screening inquiries will be made. **Paid or volunteer staff known to have criminal charges pending or who have been convicted of or pled guilty to any sexual or physical abuse or assault charge will not be allowed to work with children or youth.** For any applicants under the age of 18, the parent or guardian must also sign each of the forms described below.

The four documents are as follows, copies of which are found in the Appendices of this policy (Appendices1-4):

1. Primary Screening Form
2. Criminal Records Request/Authorization
3. Code of Ethics form
4. Reference Form (two per applicant)

These documents will be used for the Minister(s), Director of Religious Education, church staff, paid nursery staff (over 18 years of age), Youth Advisors, including OWL and COA teachers and mentors, and members of the Safety Response Team. Nursery staff under 18 will be exempt from background checks, but will be required to complete the self-disclosure form and have it signed by a parent/guardian. Starting in September 2007, RE teachers will be required to complete the Criminal Records Request and Authorization form, a number of which be randomly checked. RE class assistants will receive the RE Class Assistant Responsibilities and Guidelines as well as the Code of Ethics forms and will be required to read and sign both forms prior to volunteering in RE.

For all religious-education related positions, including youth leaders, advisors, mentors, and religious education teachers, in addition to the documentation stated above, candidates must attend teacher/mentor workshops as provided and a one-day training given by the DRE and RE committee on related fellowship policies and procedures. Youth group

leaders must be at least 21 years of age; Senior High Leaders must be at least 25 years of age.

**B. Screening Process and Documentation:** The Search Committee and/or the DRE shall be responsible for overseeing completion of the appropriate paperwork, and for checking references. The immediate supervisor and/or the DRE shall follow up to ensure that the reference checks have been completed and submitted appropriately. If the applicant is not known to the DRE or Search Committee, confirmation of identity will be requested.

For all RE-related positions, including teachers, advisors and mentors, the applicant shall have been a congregant for at least six months, or have been a member of another Unitarian Universalist Congregation and be able to supply two non-familial references to the Religious Education Committee and DRE. References must include the name, phone number and address of the reference, type and duration of the relationship, and a general character overview, including the person's ability to work with children/youth.

The church administrator will keep records of the screening and related forms in a confidential file. When criminal records checks are performed, they will be initiated and reviewed by the immediate supervisor and kept confidential. *Access to such information will be limited to the Search Committee, Minister, DRE, and Safe Congregation Committee as necessary.*

The Safe Congregation Committee will complete an annual review of the state's known sex offender list, and check it against the FUUFHC mailing list. If any names appear on both, they will be brought to the attention of the SRT for investigation, following the guidelines in Section 8 of this policy.

**Paid or volunteer staff that are known to have criminal charges pending or have been convicted of or pled guilty to any sexual or physical abuse or assault charge will not be allowed to work with children or youth.**

If it is determined that a potential volunteer should have restricted access to children, he/she shall be requested to sign a Limited Access Agreement, as described in the Section 8 of this policy. If the same is determined for a potential church staff person, the person shall not be hired.

**C. Training and Supervision of Staff and Volunteers:** Upon hire and at New Member classes, every person shall receive a copy of this Safe Congregation Policy and acknowledge receipt in writing (Appendix 5). This policy will be reviewed with the entire congregation at least annually. The Religious Education Committee (REC), DRE, and/or Minister will include a discussion of this policy and related procedures to families during orientation to the RE

program. The Safe Congregation Committee will provide education, awareness and support to all adults, youth and children as needed throughout the year.

As described in this policy and using supplemental materials, staff and volunteers working with children and youth shall be trained to understand the following:

- Definition of child abuse, neglect and exploitation
- Sexual and physical abuse symptoms
- What constitutes inappropriate conduct
- Church policies that govern working with children or youth
- The civil and criminal consequences of misconduct
- Reporting procedures for observed or suspected misconduct
- The rationale behind screening procedures.

## II. Supervision of Children and Youth

The supervision of children and youth while on church grounds and during fellowship functions is a very important aspect of maintaining a safe congregation. Everyone in the congregation needs to understand that proper supervision of children will prevent many incidents and accidents from occurring. Parents or guardians of children and youth must supervise their children at all fellowship functions and outings, unless specifically left in the care of a childcare volunteer or staff.

During normal Sunday services, parents may bring their children into Dodd Hall for Religious Education no more than 10 minutes prior to the start of services. Children in Dodd Hall before this time remain under the supervision of their parent or guardian. Immediately following services, parents are expected to pick up their children from the respective teacher or nursery staff. At this time parents again resume supervision responsibility for their children until leaving the grounds. No child will be dismissed from religious education without an appropriate parent or guardian. Junior youth will not be dismissed until service has ended. Senior youth may be dismissed on their own.

During coffee hour, and before or after any function for which childcare is provided, children must be supervised by their parent or guardian. For non-RE activities, the buildings (Dodd Hall and the Old Stone Church) will not be open to children or youth for any activity until at least two adult group leaders are present. Parents are responsible for supervising their children or youth until two adult supervisors are present in the building.

During religious education, nursery time and fellowship functions for which childcare is provided, two appropriately screened persons as defined above will be present in the classroom or facility involving children/youth. Every attempt will be made to ensure that both will be present at all times, but there may be times when one will temporarily be out of the classroom (snack run, walking child to bathroom, first aid situations). No other non-parent adults will be allowed in the class, unless approved in advance by the DRE.

Adults are not permitted to shut the door of a classroom or bathroom if alone with a child who is not related to them. Assistance may be given to a child with clothing or hand-washing, with the door open and the knowledge of the DRE or other roaming supervisor.

A roaming supervisor (DRE or designee) will be present in the RE area during religious education to provide supervision for children going to the bathroom or removed from class for disciplinary or other purposes. This supervisor must meet the requirements listed in Section 2 of this policy.

For fellowship-related field trips and off-site functions, the following guidelines must be adhered to:

- Volunteers and employees are not allowed to pick up children/youth to/from home, from FUUFHC, or to be alone in a car with one child/youth except by prior parental arrangement and notification of DRE via email, fax or phone.
- Permission slips and medical release forms for each child/youth must be signed and submitted to the activity supervisor prior to the start of the trip/activity.
- Group leaders must have a list of participant names, emergency contacts, medical conditions and allergies with them at all times.
- Proof of 100/300 auto insurance for every driver must be submitted to the DRE prior to the start of the trip/activity.
- Every person transported in the vehicle must wear a seatbelt.
- A First Aid Kit must be brought to every function by the group leader. There is a fully stocked first aid kit in Dodd Hall that is labeled RE Field Trips.
- For Staff/Volunteer meeting alone with a child: with as much advance notice as possible, the volunteer or staff is required to inform the DRE as to the date, time, location and purpose of any private meeting.

### **Nursery-Specific Information**

The FUUFHC Nursery is offered to families with children aged three and under for childcare during regular Sunday services and other specified fellowship functions. The FUUFHC will hire and train two paid Nursery aides, who will work alongside volunteers to properly staff the nursery. The following guidelines shall be applied to regular nursery time and other events as well.

The primary role of the Nursery Aides and volunteers is to provide a safe and nurturing environment for children. In order to accomplish this, the Nursery Guidelines document, (Appendix 6) which is posted in the nursery and provided to parents upon request, must be followed by all parties involved, including staff, volunteers and parents who use the nursery. The nursery guidelines include safety and supervision related information, including use of the bathroom, diapering, and transferring children from the nursery back to their parents at the end of the day.

### III. Physical Safety of Children and Adults

Proper attention to and management of physical safety concerns is another important aspect of maintaining a safe congregation. The FUUFHC has established a Buildings and Grounds Committee that meets regularly to address all physical safety related issues that arise, and to discuss future project and planning needs. In order to protect everyone's physical safety, all congregants are asked to be aware of their surroundings, and to bring any physical safety concerns immediately to the attention of the DRE, Buildings and Grounds or Safe Congregation Chairperson for action. Any area of our grounds may be a potential safety risk if children are left unsupervised, and again proper supervision is extremely important.

In addition to taking action on immediate safety issues that arise, the following steps will be implemented to routinely monitor physical safety:

- In August and March of each year, a semi-annual safety inspection will be performed of both the interior and exterior grounds of Dodd Hall and the OSC, by the DRE, Chairperson of Buildings and Grounds Committee, and designee of Safe Congregation Committee. These inspectors will pay special attention to child safety areas of plant and playground.
- This Safety Checklist (Appendix 7) will be completed for both of these sites and submitted to the Buildings and Grounds Committee for review and recommendations as needed. The Safe Congregation Committee will receive a copy of the checklist as well.
- CPR classes will be offered to congregants throughout the year. Teachers and staff are required to attend this class annually; all members of the congregation are encouraged to attend as well. Participants of the 20 minute class will receive a certificate of completion, and may renew their certificate annually. Staff, teachers and other RE volunteers are expected to maintain this certificate for the duration of their volunteer/paid time. Registration for the CPR class will be done in New Member classes, during the Annual teacher workshop in September, and then via sign up sheets during regular services throughout the year.

#### **IV. Disruptive Behavior**

The management of disruptive behavior is another important aspect of maintaining a safe congregation. All members of the congregation are reminded to conduct themselves in a respectful, courteous manner during fellowship functions, including social settings. This type of communication is encouraged in person to person communication, correspondence, while on the phone, and even on the fellowship's list serve or via email. If a disagreement or controversy arises, congregants are asked to maintain a calm demeanor and respectful tone. Such self restraint will serve to minimize disruptive behavior and untoward events. Requesting assistance from another person, either the minister or another congregant, is a safe alternative to losing control.

In the event of a disruption, a member of the Safety Response Team, if present, will approach the disruptive person(s). Persons identified as disruptive will be dealt with as individuals; stereotypes will be avoided. During regular Sunday services, the minister or leader will signal to a member of the Safety Response Team to approach the pulpit/disruptive person if assistance is necessary. During other Fellowship functions, a similar system will be utilized to handle situations that arise. If a member of the SRT is not present, the group leader will be designated in charge and will handle the situation. The DRE will handle any conflict that arises with a child during RE or at an RE-related event, and will receive assistance from the SRT if needed.

If an immediate response or outside assistance is required, the group leader will assess the situation, and take immediate action as necessary. There will be no tolerance for physical violence of any type, and anyone involved in such a dispute will be asked to leave or escorted off the premises immediately. Depending on the nature of the disruption, immediate action may include temporarily suspending the meeting or activity until it can safely be resumed, asking the offending person or persons to leave, or any other action deemed appropriate at that time. If further assistance is required, the police may be called. The group leader will make this call, and will be the primary communicator with EMS. Anytime such actions are undertaken without a member of the Safety Response Team or the DRE present, he/she must be notified as soon as the emergency has been alleviated.

Any time a disruptive event occurs, the person in charge is expected to and will handle the situation with a courteous, respectful tone, and will deal individually with the person in conflict. It is imperative that others present, especially children, are protected from harm, and are removed if necessary in a calm and dignified manner. The guidelines in Section seven of this policy will assist to aid in the evaluation and decision-making for the incident, and also details documentation requirements.

## V. Sexual Harassment/Hostile Environment

Because the Fellowship should be a safe environment for all, no form of sexual harassment can be tolerated. Accordingly, complaints of sexual harassment will be taken seriously and dealt with in a spirit of compassion and justice. A standard procedure will be followed by those who have a complaint relating to any incident of sexual harassment.

Sexual harassment is defined as:

- Any sexual solicitation or advance directed at an individual or group by another individual or group of the same or opposite sex who knows (or ought reasonably to know) that this attention is unwanted, or
- Any implied or expressed promise of reward for complying with a sexual solicitation or advance, or
- Any threat of reprisal for refusing to comply with an implied or expressed sexual solicitation or advance, or
- Repeated behavior, verbal or physical, that, by denigrating an individual or group on the basis of sexual orientation or gender, interferes with the environment appropriate to a religious community.

Sexual harassment can be verbal or physical. Examples include:

- Demeaning remarks, jokes, or other types of verbal abuse of a sexual nature directed at an individual or group, or
- Inappropriate and uncalled for comments about an individual's dress or body, or
- Inappropriate and uncalled for display at the Fellowship of sexually suggestive objects or pictures, including material obtained from the Internet and /or displayed on a computer, or
- Unwelcome touching, offensive gestures, etc., or
- Compromising invitations or demands for sexual favors, or
- Sexual assault (a criminal offense).

All reports of harassment will be handled in a prompt, confidential manner, following guidelines in Section seven of this policy.

## VI. Prevention of Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation

Prevention of abuse, neglect and exploitation at FUUFHC is addressed through education of children, parents and staff members. This includes educating people on the prevalence of child abuse, programs for parents to educate their children about healthy relationships, and ensuring that staff, lay leaders and volunteers properly handle a suspected case of abuse of any kind -- sexual, physical, or emotional abuse or neglect.

A quality sexuality education program such as the UUA curriculum *Our Whole Lives* (OWL) is one of the best methods to prevent or decrease the risk of sexual abuse. OWL or another similar program will assist children and youth to recognize when someone is behaving in an inappropriate manner toward them.

It is equally important for children and youths to develop a learned response in the event that anyone tries to engage them in inappropriate behavior. A child who understands that their body belongs to them and that no one else should touch any part of it without their permission is less likely to be vulnerable to abuse. Every child from the age of three can learn “No, Go, Tell.” For children attending RE program at FUUFHC, we will offer:

- Sexual abuse prevention as a part of our religious education program, once during early elementary school (k-2), once during later elementary (3-5), once during middle school, and again during high school.
- Our Whole Lives (UUA program) – The DRE will establish a scheduling for this program, which will be made available to families and communicated to congregants in the fellowship’s newsletter, order of service, and website.

Primary prevention is the key. The Safe Congregation Committee is committed to develop relationships with local organizations and experts for education and consultation as needed. The committee will work with the Board of Trustees to offer as much education as is needed, including but not limited to the following:

- Sermon on child sex abuse
- Order of service insert
- Healing service for survivors
- Minister’s letter to members
- Newsletter articles
- Adult RE Class
- OWL
- Open congregation meeting
- Annual training classes
- Special topic speakers

## VII. Response to Situations/Allegations

The fellowship will take seriously all allegations and reports of mistreatment, misconduct or any other incident deemed unsafe. Based on the nature of the allegation or report, specific action will be taken, as described below. Action and follow-up will differ based on against whom the allegation is made, i.e., minister to congregant, congregant to congregant, adult to child, youth to child, the reverse of any of the above, or a physical safety related issue. All reports, allegations, findings, results and action taken will be kept strictly confidential unless deemed necessary for the congregation or any subset to be made aware.

The FUUFHC has established a Safety Response Team (SRT), specifically trained to handle issues and incidents involving safety, abuse, harassment or neglect. The Safety Response Team is comprised of the Minister, the DRE, the Chairperson of the Safe Congregation Committee, and two other appointees. The SRT will work together, with at least two members of the team handling each situation, first to alleviate any immediate concern, and then to investigate allegations and make recommendations for action and follow-up as needed.

Physical Safety Issue: In the event that a physical safety issue is brought to the attention of the SRT, the team member to whom the report is made will first ensure the immediate safety of the area or persons, complete an Incident Report, and will then decide on action to be taken, including but not limited to the following:

- Request parental involvement to alleviate the issue
- Request remediation from the Building and Grounds Committee
- Bring the issue to the Safe Congregation Committee for discussion and recommendation to the Board

Allegation/Report of Abuse, Neglect or Exploitation: FUUFHC strongly encourages those who have reason to believe that any form of mistreatment is occurring within our congregation to report it. Reporting of such issues helps to assist the victim in obtaining support, attempts to guide others to treatment, and affirms the inherent worth and dignity of all. To report such a situation within the fellowship, contact any member of the Safety Response Team (SRT), the names and pictures of who are posted on the bulletin board in Dodd Hall.

The SRT member to whom the report was made will be responsible to inform either the Minister or DRE (if a child is involved) and begin the investigation process. An investigation must be conducted as promptly as possible, and shall be comprised of gathering information about the incident or allegations, requesting statements from witnesses, if appropriate, and requesting that an Incident Report (Appendix 8) be completed by the person making the report or allegation.

During all investigative contact, the SRT will maintain the highest standards of compassion and professionalism, and will utilize the seven UU principles as a guide during interactions with all parties. All meetings, conversations and information must be clearly documented and kept confidential.

**New Jersey state law mandates that any person who “has reasonable cause to believe that a child has been subjected to child abuse, including abuse, neglect or exploitation, physical, sexual or mental, by a child’s parent, guardian, or other person having his custody and control” must make a report to the Division of Youth and Family Services (DYFS). For any Fellowship-related incident, the call to DYFS will be made by the President of the Board of Trustees or designee.**

FUUFHC will utilize this method of communication with any governmental agency or outside entities, including the media, police, neighbors, etc, in order to protect all parties involved to the greatest extent possible. Any congregant who is approached regarding an accusation or situation should direct the caller to the Board President.

For incidents which may have occurred outside of the church setting, meaning events unrelated to our Fellowship (e.g., threatening or harmful behaviors, or accusations of child endangerment which have become public knowledge), the SRT may act to protect youth from potential dangers.

The SRT will handle each complaint on a case-by-case basis, using the guidelines in the Appendix 9. As a general rule, the SRT will direct opposing parties not to have any contact with each other during the investigation process, until an outcome is decided upon. After speaking confidentially with all those concerned, the SRT may recommend any number of actions or follow-up, based on the nature of the situation. These responses may include but are not limited the following:

- restriction or ban on contact or communication between the parties involved, either temporary during the investigation or on a permanent basis once the investigation is complete
- a recommendation for counseling
- suspension, withdrawal or limited access of the accused party,
- Dismissal of the complaint.

Any limited access or expulsion from congregation functions requires the approval of the Board of Trustees prior to implementation.

Should either the complainant or the accused wish to pursue the matter within the Fellowship, the matter may be brought to the Board of Trustees/Executive Committee, which shall appoint an additional response team of 3-5 members to

investigate the concern. All persons appointed to the committee must be acceptable to both the complainant and the accused.

If the accused person is a paid staff or volunteer, that person shall be suspended from all activities involving children, pending investigation and resolution of the complaint.

Reinstatement of a paid staff member or volunteer will occur only after all allegations have been cleared to the satisfaction of the Board of Trustees. The Board will receive a recommendation from the SRT before making the final determination.

Contact with the Media: In the event that the media contacts FUUFHC regarding an incident of abuse involving the Fellowship, only the Board President will speak for the Fellowship. Members and friends are asked to defer any questions asked of them to the Board President. The Board President may issue a statement or basic information such as steps that have been taken to guard against further incidents, but will not divulge any confidential information including the name of any involved parties.

Allegations involving the Minister: Any allegation of misconduct by the Minister must be brought to the attention of the President of the Board of Trustees and to the UUA District office. The investigation will follow UUA guidelines.

## VIII. Restricted Access/Limited Access Agreements

From the seven principles of Unitarian Universalism:

“The inherent worth and dignity of every person”

“Justice, equity and compassion in human relations”

“Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth”

With these principles in mind, the inclusion into our Fellowship of someone who has committed a crime or is a known sex offender is a reality that this policy must address. However, protecting our children and youth must be our highest calling. It is our hope that this Fellowship be a place of reconciliation, a supportive environment for individuals with varied backgrounds and experiences. However, in order to fully embrace the supportive aspect of our Fellowship, everyone must be aware of not only their rights as participants, but also their responsibilities to greater community of the Fellowship.

The Limited Access agreement, (Appendix 10) will be used to welcome either known sex offenders, or individuals that have had an incident within the Fellowship, to specified Fellowship services, functions and events, under specified conditions. The Limited Access Agreement will be implemented using following the guidelines:

- The terms and conditions of the Agreement will be decided by the SRT and Board of Trustees prior to implementation
- The Agreement must be signed by the individual and by a witness on the Board of Trustees. Failure to sign the Agreement in a timely manner will result in refused admittance to all services, events and functions.
- The individual must participate in a non-Fellowship related rehabilitation/therapeutic program, and must be willing to communicate the details of such to the SRT. Failure to participate in such a program or to communicate details of the program with the SRT will result in refused admission to all services, events and functions.
- The Agreement will be reviewed and signed annually.
- Any violation of the Agreement is grounds for expulsion from the Fellowship
- There may be additional unforeseeable events or circumstances that warrant a revision or termination of the Agreement. Any such change is at the discretion of the SRT with approval by the Board of Trustees.
- The Agreement will be kept confidential, with access limited to members of the SRT and Board of Trustees.

<b>Acronym</b>	<b>Term/Definition</b>
COA	<i>Coming of Age</i> UU program for youth between the ages of 14-16 to mark the transition from child to adulthood. The program utilizes a mentoring relationship and ends with a ceremony in front of the congregation.
DRE	Director of Religious Education
DYFS	Division of Youth and Family Services A NJ state department charged with investigating allegations of abuse, neglect and exploitation, especially of children.
FUUFHC	First Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Hunterdon County
RE	Religious Education
REC	Religious Education Committee
SCC	Safe Congregation Committee A standing committee which meets regularly to address safety policy and issues.
SRT	Safety Response Team A subcommittee of the Safe Congregation Committee comprised of the Minister, DRE, SCC Chair and 1-2 other appointees; tasked with investigating allegations or incidents of harassment, abuse or neglect.
OWL	<i>Our Whole Lives</i> UUA-sponsored sexuality education program for children and parents.

### **Appendices**

<b>Appendix</b>	<b>Form Name</b>
1	Primary Screening Form
2	Criminal Records Request
3	Code of Ethics form
4	Reference form
5	Safe Congregation Acknowledgement
6	Nursery Guidelines
7	OSC/Dodd Hall Safety Checklist
8	Incident Report
9	Investigation Guidelines
10	Limited Access Agreement