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**Preparing for and Responding to
Allegations of Child Sexual Abuse**

A Guide for YMCAs

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INTRODUCTION

As a youth-serving organization that reaches 8 million children and teens every year, the Y's most important work is creating safe environments for youth. Child protection is a strong part of the Y's culture today thanks to YMCAs that continuously elevate their abuse-prevention policies and practices, and ensure they align with industry-best models.

Even with these ongoing efforts, all YMCAs must remain vigilant. Preventing abuse and protecting the Y's reputation as a safe place for youth is essential to preserving public trust and effectively serving our communities.

Greater attention is being paid to child sexual abuse as a critical social issue facing communities today. Support for those who have experienced child sexual abuse is improving, especially for adults who may have experienced abuse in their youth. [Many laws are changing](#) to remove statutes of limitations on abuse cases, allowing victims to hold their abusers accountable, even if the abuse occurred decades ago.

With these changing laws, **it's important that Ys are prepared to respond compassionately, swiftly and thoroughly if an allegation of abuse, whether historical or new, is reported** involving a Y staff member, volunteer, activity or facility.

This guide is designed to help YMCA leaders understand how to help their YMCAs prepare for and respond to any allegation of child sexual abuse by gathering resources and information, building a response team and protocols, and training staff. The guide also includes specific tips and guidance for preparing for and responding to historical allegations of abuse.

Y-USA's Office of the General Counsel provides legal representation to the national office on a broad array of legal issues, including contract review, litigation, intellectual property and counsel regarding state and federal laws, as well as laws impacting non-profit organizations.

As part of the service delivery model for the national office, the Office of the General Counsel shares resources that member associations may use; however, such materials are not intended to be used as a substitute for legal advice. Member associations should always obtain the advice of a lawyer who is familiar with this area of law and licensed to practice in the jurisdiction where the member association is located.

If you have additional questions regarding the application of this guidance, please contact Karyn Kirk, Executive Vice President and Chief Legal Officer for YMCA of the USA, at karyn.kirk@ymca.net for a referral to legal counsel who may be able to assist you.

Each allegation of abuse is unique and will have its own extenuating circumstances. While this guide contains best practices and resources to support YMCAs in preparing for and responding to such allegations, YMCA leaders also should consult legal counsel when responding to specific abuse allegations.

WHO SHOULD USE THIS GUIDE?

This guide is designed for YMCA leaders who are responsible for preparing their YMCAs, their board of directors and their staff to respond if an abuse allegation is made. This varies by Y association but often includes:

- CEOs
- Chief Volunteer Officers (CVO)
- Chief Operating Officers, Chief Financial Officers and Chief Human Resource Officers
- Risk Management Staff
- Branch Executive Directors

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide was developed by YMCA of the USA (Y-USA) in partnership with [Praesidium](#), [Redwoods](#) and [Ogletree Deakins](#). This guide will be updated periodically to reflect changing laws and feedback from YMCAs.

Please contact Y-USA's Vice President of Child Protection and Organizational Risk, Britt Darwin-Looney, at britt.darwin-looney@ymca.net with any questions or feedback.

PREPARING YOUR Y

It is the responsibility of any youth-serving organization to be prepared to respond compassionately, swiftly and thoroughly in the event that an allegation of child sexual abuse is made related to the organization. Taking these steps today will help you and your staff provide the best possible support to a victim of abuse, as well as to your Y members, program participants and community, if an allegation is made. Within each step you'll find a checklist of important tasks to guide you through this important process.

1 Prepare your YMCA leaders and board of directors

2 Gather Resources

3 Establish a Crisis Management Team

4 Train Your Staff

1. PREPARE YOUR YMCA LEADERS AND BOARD OF DIRECTORS

YMCA leaders and board members are ultimately responsible for protecting children from abuse while at a YMCA facility or participating in a YMCA activity. It's important that leadership and board members understand this responsibility and are ready to respond swiftly when allegations or incidents of abuse are reported.

Checklist

- Training:** Complete the [Getting Your Board on Board](#) training from Praesidium as a board to help all members understand their roles and responsibilities when it comes to preventing and responding to abuse.
- Protocols:** Adopt response protocols for board members and YMCA leaders that are consistent with the Y's values and mission.
 - **Apologies:** Historically, organizations have been reluctant to offer an apology or express empathy when an allegation of abuse is made against someone affiliated with the organization. However, industry experts today emphasize the importance of providing a compassionate response that includes an apology.

Case Study: Former USA Swimming Executive Director [issues an apology](#) for the sexual abuse that occurred within the organization for years after he refused to do so in [a television interview](#) (starts at timestamp 6:30) that garnered wide public backlash.

- **Information Sharing:** Ensure board members are familiar with your YMCA's child protection practices and the related requirements of the Child Protection and Aquatic Safety Membership Qualification of the National Council of YMCAs, as updated in 2020 to require reporting of abuse allegations to Y-USA.
[National Committee on Membership Standards Manual](#)
[Child Protection and Aquatic Safety Membership Qualification FAQ](#)
- **Considering the Big Picture:** Discuss the critical role of child protection in the Y's ability to strengthen community and its reputation as a youth-serving organization. Providing a safe environment for young people is the Y's most important work and is critical to our mission and ability to deliver on the Y's Commitment to America.

2. GATHER RESOURCES

Understanding and gathering resources to support potential victims and your YMCA will help you respond compassionately, swiftly and thoroughly if an allegation is made.

Checklist

Supporting Victims: Identify support resources to offer victims of abuse and their families. If your Y doesn't already have a relationship with a local child advocacy center or other victim support agencies, the following organizations can offer guidance:

- [Childhelp](#)
- [RAINN](#)
- [National Child Advocacy Centers](#)
- National Resource list from [Darkness to Light](#)

Insurance Records: Locate as much information about your association's insurance history as possible today. Most YMCAs have been insured through multiple companies over the years, and proactively preparing an insurance timeline of providers and coverage will help your YMCA respond to any historical allegation of abuse.

Several companies offer insurance archeology services to help gather insurance records. Learn more and get started with these resources:

- [Redwoods: Gathering Your Historical Insurance Records](#)
- Insurance Archeology Services:
 - [Insurance Archeology Group](#)
 - [Willis Towers Watson](#)
- Y Mutual: From 1986 to 2007, approximately 450 YMCAs had insurance coverage through Y Mutual. If your YMCA was part of Y Mutual, you should have received your insurance documentation from Y-USA.

If the allegation relates to the time frame where your association was insured by Y Mutual, contact [Britt Darwin-Looney](#), who will connect you to the appropriate re-insurer.

3. ESTABLISH A CRISIS MANAGEMENT TEAM

Establishing a Crisis Management Team will help your Y address potential crises as they arise. The team could include your CEO, a victim's assistance coordinator and staff with expertise in operations, legal matters, human resources, risk management and communications. Smaller associations might consider including select board members as well.

Checklist

Assign Roles: Designate a point person for the following actions:

- Establishing a clear notification process to quickly activate the team if needed (phone tree, email distribution list, etc.).
- Communicating with the victim, the alleged offender and any witnesses.
- Contacting the appropriate authorities, your insurance representatives and other licensing and accrediting organizations.
- Responding to all inquiries from the media, community members, parents and other stakeholders.

Plan for Communicating to Key Stakeholders: It is best if members, parents, volunteers and other stakeholders hear about allegations directly from the Y and not the media.

Prepare for the Media: Consider preparing a short holding statement template for the media

that can be completed and distributed quickly in the event your YMCA receives media inquiries. (See "Respond to Others Potentially Affected" on page 8 for specific guidance.)

- Seek Support:** If you need assistance forming a crisis management team, contact your State or Regional Alliance or call Y-USA's CEO Hotline (1-800-822-9622).
- Be Discerning:** Ensure any external experts on your crisis management team have experience in not only managing crises but specific experience with abuse allegations.

4. TRAIN YOUR STAFF

An allegation of abuse may be reported directly to frontline staff, YMCA leaders or even a board member. Preparing staff and volunteers to respond when an allegation is made will help them handle the situation effectively and with empathy and professionalism.

Checklist

Who to Train: Train all frontline YMCA employees and board volunteers, as well as all members of your Crisis Management Team.


What to Train:

- How to respond when abuse allegations are reported:
 - Respond with compassion. Reporting an allegation of abuse is extremely hard and can be traumatic for the reporter. Staff should be prepared to react in these situations with respect and care, whether the report is being made by the victim of the abuse or a third party. Let the reporter know that the Y takes these matters very seriously and that they will be supported.
 - Document all details provided by the reporter. Include their name (and contact information if they are comfortable providing it), when they made the report, and to whom they made the report.
 - Thank the individual for reporting the information. Explain that the information will be relayed to the designated YMCA point person (say who), and that they will follow up with additional support as soon as possible.
 - Document and report the conversation to your immediate supervisor and/or your Y's designated point person for receiving reports of abuse. This person must ensure that the information reaches the CEO or their designee.
- How to fulfill duties as [mandated reporters](#) (as applicable according to state and federal law). Most staff are familiar with mandatory reporting training for current abuse events, but they may not understand how this training applies to historical allegations. See [Praesidium's Training: Duty to Report](#)
- How to respond to media inquiries about abuse allegations. Staff should:
 - Be polite and let the journalist know that you are not the right person to answer their questions.
 - Offer to take their information down and let them know you will make sure someone gets back to them quickly.
 - Ask for their deadline.

HOW TO RESPOND WHEN A REPORT OF ABUSE IS MADE

Quick Guide for Frontline Staff

If you receive a call or an in-person allegation of child sexual abuse, please use the following steps as your guide to [responding](#) and reporting.



RESPONDING TO THE PERSON MAKING THE REPORT

1. Express compassion and empathy by thanking the individual for reporting.
"Thank you for your call/bringing this to our attention. The [Name] YMCA takes these matters very seriously. I will immediately report this to our leadership who will contact you for more information as soon as possible."
2. Document all details provided, including the name of the person making the report, their contact information, when the report was made and who took the report.
3. Follow mandatory reporting requirements and internal reporting guidelines.

RESPONDING TO MEMBERS/PUBLIC

1. Express concern and sincerity to anyone who may ask about the allegation.
"Yes, we are aware of the allegation(s) and are treating the matter with the upmost concern. Leadership is in communication with the person who made the report, and we have reported to the proper authorities."
2. Do not elaborate or provide any details about the person who made the report, the victim or the accused.
"I'm sorry, as this is an ongoing investigation, I cannot provide any additional information."
3. Take their information and let them know you will have leadership respond to them. Also, provide them with contact information for the local authorities, where they can send additional questions or information.
"If you would like to leave a message for our [title], I would be glad to take down your information and have [him/her] get back to you. Also, if you have [information](#) you feel is important to the allegation, I encourage you to contact the [authorities] at [contact info]."

RESPONDING TO MEDIA

1. Be polite and let the journalist know that you are not the right person to answer their questions.
"I'm sorry, I am not the appropriate person to answer your questions, nor am I permitted to speak to media on behalf of the [Name] YMCA."
2. Offer to take their information down and let them know you will make sure someone gets back to them quickly.
"I would be happy to take down your information and relay it to the most appropriate person to answer your questions."
3. Ask for their deadline.
"Can you please let me know your deadline? I will make sure our spokesperson replies to you before then."

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Quick Guide for Frontline Staff: Provide frontline staff with the Quick Guide at the end of this resource. It can serve as an ongoing reminder and a quick reference if and when staff receive an allegation of abuse.

HOW TO RESPOND

Once an allegation is reported to your Y and raised to the attention of leadership, it is imperative that leadership takes swift and comprehensive action. These steps can help you and your Y respond.



1. RESPOND TO THE VICTIM

✓ Checklist

- Provide a Compassionate Response.** As soon as possible, meet in person (not over the phone) with identified victims and their parents, if applicable. Include another member of your Y's leadership staff in the conversation with you. Ask the victim where they would like to meet (meeting at the Y may be uncomfortable) and ask if they would like to bring someone with them for support.*
- Be prepared** to cover the following during the meeting:
 - Reassure the victim that you are taking their report seriously.
 - Acknowledge their report with empathy and compassion.
 - Ask how you can provide support. Don't assume you know what they want and why.
 - Be prepared to explain the support you will offer.
 - Offer counseling services to staff, affected children and families.
 - Provide confidence that youth protection is your highest priority and safeguards are in place.
 - Be clear with the victim about your reporting requirements.

* Consult with legal counsel before initiating contact with anyone who is represented by counsel.

2. RESPOND TO THE ALLEGATION

✓ Checklist

- Follow all [mandated reporting requirements](#)** and contact the authorities as appropriate.
- Consult with local legal counsel** to understand any state law requirements.

If your Y does not have legal counsel and your insurance partner does not assign counsel, please contact Y-USA for support. Y-USA has a contractual relationship with the firm Ogletree Deakins, which will assist YMCA CEOs with identifying local counsel specializing in cases of sexual abuse. The firm also can provide perspective on the litigation process at no additional cost to your YMCA. Please contact Y-USA's Vice President of Child Protection and Organizational Risk, Britt Darwin-Looney, at britt.darwin-looney@ymca.net for assistance.

- Where applicable, **prevent the accused from having further access to children and teens** until a thorough investigation has been completed.
 - If they are a current employee or volunteer, follow any applicable progressive discipline

procedures.

- If an employee, suspend them from employment pending the outcome of an investigation. Exempt employees should be suspended with pay.
- If a volunteer, suspend them from service immediately pending the outcome of an investigation.
- Take appropriate action to ensure the employee's personnel file is placed in a secure location and no items are removed or added.
- If the accused is a member or program participant, suspend current membership pending the outcome of an investigation.

Activate your Crisis Management Team.

- Ensure your Crisis Management Team notifies your board of directors as appropriate.
- Ensure everyone on your Crisis Management Team is briefed on their assigned duties and ready to implement your crisis management plan for this allegation.

Notify your insurance representatives about the allegation. Ask your insurance partner if your insurance will cover victim support services. It is customary for the Y to offer to pay for counseling.

Notify licensing and any other accrediting bodies as appropriate.

Document all actions taken.

Report to Y-USA within 24 hours of learning of the allegation or event, as required under the 11th membership qualification for Y member associations. Use the designated online intake form to make the report. (The form can be found [here on Link](#).)

Seek additional support and guidance from Y-USA and third-party experts:

Praesidium Helpline: 1-855-347-0751

Y-USA's CEO Hotline: 1-800-822-9622

Y-USA has identified crisis management expert [Blue Moon Consulting Group](#) as an available resource that can support YMCAs in responding to sexual abuse allegations. (Consulting fees may apply.)

3. RESPOND TO OTHERS POTENTIALLY AFFECTED

Checklist

- If applicable, **reach out in writing to parents** of all youth participating in programs where abuse might have occurred, as well as anyone who was in contact with the accused offender in the past. The message should communicate:
- **Dedication to Safety:** Begin by stating that safety and security are a top priority to your Y.
 - **Empathy:** State that such incidents run counter to the YMCA's values.
 - **Facts:** Provide a summary of the incident, including information about the arrest, suspension, investigation, etc.
 - **Contact Request:** Ask YMCA members and parents to contact you or the specified authorities if they suspect their child may have been abused.
 - **Your Response:** Explain that the Y is fully cooperating with authorities. Describe the proactive steps being taken, such as offering resources to parents, hosting a parent meeting, training staff and conducting an independent investigation to learn from this incident so you can prevent it from happening again.

4. PREPARE FOR MEDIA INQUIRY

Checklist

Develop a reactive media statement that includes the dedication to safety, empathy, facts, contact request and your response, as outlined in the "Respond to Others" step above.

- Direct any further questions about the investigation to local authorities.

- Remind your staff and crisis management team of the protocol for managing media requests.
- Contact Y-USA’s CEO Hotline for additional support: 1-800-822-9622.

5. PROVIDE ONGOING COMMUNICATION AND RESPONSE

Checklist

- Maintain positive and open communication** with the authorities, parents, members of the community and media.
- Promote prevention** at all levels of the organization.
 - Educate parents and YMCA members on abuse prevention:
 - [Darkness to Light](#)
 - [Praesidium’s Parent Resources](#)
 - Provide a youth education program:
 - [NetSmartz](#)
 - [Monique Burr Foundation](#)
 - [Safe Secure Kids](#)
 - [Second Step® Child Protection Unit from the Committee for Children](#)
 - Train (or retrain) your staff:
 - Praesidium’s Training Resources: [Praesidium Academy](#), [CASE](#), and [Certified Praesidium Guardian](#)
 - Contact your insurance partners to inquire about available training opportunities.

RESOURCES

Y-USA has identified crisis management and legal experts that are ready and available to offer guidance and support to YMCAs preparing for or responding to allegations of child sexual abuse related to the Y. (Fees may apply in some instances.)

In addition, CEOs can always access emergency assistance for operations, media relations and communications from Y-USA 24 hours a day, seven days a week through the CEO hotline: 1-800-822-9622.

Y-USA CEO Hotline

1-800-822-9622

This hotline connects CEOs to emergency assistance from Y-USA. It is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week to YMCA CEOs.

CRISIS MANAGEMENT

Praesidium: National experts in abuse prevention who work with organizations across the U.S. and internationally to prevent the sexual abuse of children and vulnerable adults. Through its partnership with Y-USA, Praesidium provides Ys with free abuse prevention resources.

For more information, visit PraesidiumInc.com or email CAPinfo@praesidiuminc.com.

The Redwoods Group: Redwoods was founded to eradicate child sexual abuse. Their model uses insurance as the engine to do this work—gathering claims data from youth-serving community organizations and analyzing that data to understand the root causes of how children get hurt. They then develop practical tools that empower communities to keep children safe. For more information, visit redwoodsgroup.com or

call 919-462-4750.

Blue Moon Consulting Group: Blue Moon Consulting provides strategy and decision-making support during times of crisis, as well as comprehensive, stakeholder-focused crisis communications advice and counsel. A full range of services is available, including crisis plan development, exercising, leadership and media training. For more information, visit bluemoonconsultinggroup.com or call 415-316-0075.

LEGAL SUPPORT

Ogletree Deakins

The Ogletree team offers YMCAs litigation consultation, defense strategy, input on consistent talking points and discovery responses, and assistance in locating local legal counsel and expert witnesses. Ogletree is also a great resource for legal research, drafting assistance and other litigation support. For more information, visit ogletree.com or contact Bruce Griggs at bruce.griggs@ogletree.com.

INSURANCE ARCHEOLOGY

These firms can assist with locating and gathering your association's insurance history, which is especially important for Ys that multiple companies have insured over the years.

Insurance Archeology Group: For details, contact Michele Piero at 212-697-2680 or visit iagltd.com.

Willis Towers Watson: For details, contact Scott Davis at 203-410-3708 or scott.k.davis@willistowerswatson.com.

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