



## National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry Safe Environment Policy: Safeguarding God's Children

Adopted and approved by NFCYM Board on April 3, 2024

### Introduction

The National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry (NFCYM) is a private, nonprofit organization. NFCYM's mission is to support and strengthen those who accompany youth as they encounter and follow Jesus Christ. In furtherance of its mission, NFCYM advocates for comprehensive youth ministry and the active participation of youth in the Catholic Church. In alignment with the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' (USCCB) 2002 Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People (USCCB Charter), NFCYM has been committed to creating safe environments free from abuse and encourages awareness and reporting of behavior that violates this Policy.

As a membership organization, NFCYM includes Catholic dioceses, youth-serving organizations, and individual pastoral workers. NFCYM demands that members adhere to accepted standards of professional conduct in pastoral ministry to youth. NFCYM acknowledges that Catholic dioceses must have safe environment policies based on the USCCB Charter's requirements. NFCYM strongly encourages organizational members to adopt policies aligned with this Policy.

### Purpose

NFCYM Safe Environment Policy: Safeguarding God's Children (Policy) aims to establish clear principles and requirements for those involved in NFCYM's work. While this Policy focuses primarily on protecting youth, NFCYM works to ensure that all participants in NFCYM programs, young and old, benefit from a safe environment that respects the dignity of all.<sup>1</sup>

The following Policy emphasizes the importance of creating and maintaining genuine, sincere professional relationships in Christian ministry, especially when ministering to youth. This Policy encompasses four key areas: education, screening, code of conduct, and reporting. NFCYM retains the right to modify this Policy at any time with or without notice. Inquiries about the Policy must be directed to its Executive Director.

### Definitions

- **Employees:** Individuals employed by NFCYM on a full or part-time basis.
- **Independent Contractors (sometimes called Vendors):** Individuals engaged by NFCYM on a contractual basis to provide goods and/or services, usually for a specific time, and where no employment relationship exists.

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<sup>1</sup> This Policy is one in a series of policies, codes of conduct, and other policies intended to ensure that all individuals participating in NFCYM programs are free from all forms of violence and abuse. Additional prevention policies and procedures can also be found in the NFCYM Employee Handbook, Harassment Policy, Retention Policy, Conflict of Interest Policy, and the Whistleblower Policy.

- **Board of Directors:** Volunteers serving for a specified term in a governance capacity for NFCYM.
- **Volunteers:** Individuals who assist NFCYM without expecting payment for their services. Volunteers may be members or non-members.
- **Group Leader:** Participant leader for a parish, school, or organization attending an NFCYM-sponsored youth program, who may also be a delegation leader. Group Leaders are participants in an NFCYM youth program, not employees or volunteers of NFCYM. They are primarily accountable to the organization that they represent.
- **Chaperone:** Adult who meets the safe environment criteria established by the group or delegation under whose supervision and coordination they are attending an NFCYM-youth program and who supervises the participation of a specific group of youth. Chaperones are participants in an NFCYM youth program, not employees or volunteers of NFCYM. They are accountable to their group leader.
- **Youth/Youth Participant:** A middle, junior, or high school (or equivalent) child participating in an NFCYM youth program.
- **Sponsoring Organization:** An entity other than NFCYM that sponsors the participation of an individual or group in an NFCYM youth program.

## Policy

The four critical elements of this Policy are detailed below:

- Education on Safe Environments
- Background Screening
- Code of Conduct
- Reporting

As a condition of participating, before anyone serves in any youth-facing capacity with NFCYM—whether volunteers from a diocese, parish, or school, as well as NFCYM employees, board members, other volunteers, and independent contractors, they must, whenever requested by NFCYM:

- Agree to background screening for safe environment concerns.
- Complete acceptable safe environment education.
- Sign a statement indicating they agree to abide by the NFCYM Code of Conduct.
- Execute a legally binding NFCYM liability waiver holding NFCYM harmless from their actions when participating in NFCYM programs.

During service or participation in an NFCYM program, all adults must:

- Continue to comply with screening, education, and NFCYM Code of Conduct requirements.
- Act in accordance with the NFCYM Code of Conduct.
- Follow all NFCYM program-specific guidelines.
- Report concerning behavior and signs of abuse or neglect to the relevant authority as described below.

## Policy Implementation Procedures

### Education

Continuing safe environment education is required to ensure that adults are familiar with best practices in youth protection, how to spot concerning behaviors, how to avoid high-risk situations, and how to report suspected abuse.

To protect youth and NFCYM, NFCYM reserves the right in its sole and absolute discretion to disqualify from beginning service or to remove from active service any adult failing to meet the safe environment education requirements:

- **Employees and Board Members**—Employees and board members must complete the safe environment education the Executive Director selects within 30 days of assuming their role. Acceptable proof of continuing compliance must be provided to the Executive Director before September 15 of all successive odd-numbered years.
- **Group Leaders and Chaperones**—USCCB Charter requires diocesan, parish, and/or school employees and volunteers to complete their diocesan-sanctioned safe environment education. NFCYM requires group leaders to certify that all employees and volunteers of the diocese, parish, school, or other sponsoring organization who are to participate in an NFCYM youth program comply with diocesan safe environment education requirements.
- **Independent Contractors and Volunteers**—The NFCYM Executive Director will assess whether any independent contractor or volunteer will have unsupervised direct contact with youth at an NFCYM program, and if so, NFCYM will incorporate a safe education requirement into the terms of service.

### Screening

To maintain the safety and integrity of NFCYM youth programs and participants, NFCYM requires background screening for employees, board members, other volunteers, independent contractors, group leaders, and chaperones. This screening is crucial for preventing individuals with a history of harmful behavior from beginning or continuing service in any NFCYM activity. Parents who register for an NFCYM event with their child(ren) and participate as a family and not in another capacity may not be required to be screened or complete a safe environment education program but must abide by the NFCYM Code of Conduct. NFCYM reserves the right to run the information of any adult through national sex offender databases.

In its sole and absolute discretion, NFCYM reserves the right to determine if information found in any screening process or from any other source constitutes a disqualifying offense. Regardless of screening by any other entity, NFCYM may bar adults from service with youth in instances such as but not limited to these disqualifying offenses:

- Where common knowledge or screening reveals a conviction of an offense NFCYM determines disqualifying, such as a felony or misdemeanor against an adult or minor, the family, or the public order.
- Individuals who are on probation, have been served with a domestic violence protective order, or have charges or civil cases pending of a disqualifying offense before a determination of guilt is made, including any person presently under deferred adjudication.
- Individuals who admit, do not contest, or are found guilty of a disqualifying offense, not just those involving youth.
- Where a settlement agreement regarding a disqualifying offense exists.
- When any other claims or information lead NFCYM to disqualify someone from service in its sole and absolute discretion.

NFCYM adheres to the following screening procedures and reserves the right in its sole discretion to disqualify from beginning service or to remove from active service any adult failing to consent to screening:

- **NFCYM Employees and Board Members**—NFCYM will conduct background screening of employees and board members before commencement of service and no less than every three years thereafter.
- **Group Leaders and Chaperones**—USCCB Charter requires diocesan, parish, and/or school employees and volunteers to be subject to screening. NFCYM requires that group leaders certify that all diocese, parish, school, or other sponsoring organization employees and volunteers who are to participate in an NFCYM program comply with their diocesan screening requirements.
- **Independent Contractors and Volunteers**—The NFCYM Executive Director will assess whether any independent contractor or volunteer will have unsupervised direct contact with youth at an NFCYM program, and if so, NFCYM will incorporate a screening requirement into the terms of service.

## Code of Conduct

To fulfill this Policy, NFCYM has developed a code of conduct. As with every aspect of this Policy, the NFCYM Executive Director may modify this code of conduct at any time with or without notice and may develop other additional codes of conduct from time to time. To participate in any NFCYM program, an individual must agree to act in accordance with the code of conduct during the program. Code of conduct violations will be reported to a proper internal or external authority, as explained below.

NFCYM's code of conduct is as follows:

As an adult or youth serving with NFCYM or participating in an NFCYM youth event, you must:

- Treat everyone with Christian respect, loyalty, patience, integrity, courtesy, dignity, and consideration, and exhibit the highest ethical standards and personal integrity.

- Honor the equality of all people, avoiding all forms of discrimination and respecting the dignity of each person.
- Follow local laws governing appropriate behavior and public conduct.
- Refrain from actions that could injure and/or damage property.
- Behave free from all forms of intimidation, harassment, and abuse.
- Avoid behavior that in any way appears inappropriate or abusive.
- Avoid taking unfair advantage of any relationship for personal benefit.
- Share concerns about suspicious or inappropriate behavior with a proper authority.
- Report to proper government authorities any suspected abuse or neglect of a minor and comply with any follow-up instructions.
- Be aware of and adhere to program-specific emergency plans and evacuation routes.
- Participate in any required training or screening procedures.
- Uphold the authority of those responsible for the program in which you are participating.
- Accept responsibility for your role in protecting others from all forms of abuse, and do not be a bystander to abuse.
- Limit your contact and interactions with other NFCYM participants to your role in the NFCYM program.
- Adhere to your sponsoring organization's ministerial and ethical standards.

As a condition of participation in NFCYM youth programs, periodic agreement to abide by a code of conduct is required as follows:

- **NFCYM Employees and Board Members**—All employees and board members must agree to abide by a code of conduct applicable to their NFCYM activity before commencing service and annually after that.
- **Group Leaders and Chaperones**—All group leaders and chaperones participating in NFCYM programs must agree to abide by a code of conduct applicable to their NFCYM activity.
- **Independent Contractors and Volunteers**—The NFCYM Executive Director will assess the individual's contact with youth and incorporate a code of conduct appropriate to their specific role into their terms of service.
- **Youth**—All young people participating in NFCYM programs must agree to abide by a code of conduct.

## Reporting

As part of abiding by a code of conduct, all participants in NFCYM programs must be aware of problematic behaviors that may suggest a risk for abuse and know when and how to report.

Some behaviors may not constitute actual abuse or neglect but can be warning signs either of ongoing abuse or situations of grooming for potential abuse. Red flag behaviors can include both adult-to-youth and youth-to-youth behaviors. These behaviors towards individual youth could include but are not limited to:

- Any violation of applicable youth protection/abuse prevention policies or codes of conduct.
- Seeking unauthorized private time or one-on-one time with youth.
- Seeing or visiting alone with youth outside of scheduled programming and/or away from program venues or after program hours.
- Buying gifts for youth.
- Sending unauthorized electronic communications through text messaging, social media, online gaming, etc.
- Making sexually suggestive language or behavior directed towards youth.
- Showing favoritism towards an individual youth.
- Accessing pornography or other inappropriate content.
- Any behaviors that breach appropriate physical, emotional, or other boundaries.

Any disclosure that an employee, volunteer, or other participant is making an individual uncomfortable must be taken seriously.

### **Responding and Reporting**

At any NFCYM youth program, any youth who feels they are being subjected to code of conduct violations or red-flag or inappropriate behavior by any person should try as quickly as possible to tell a trusted adult about this and ask for help. They can go to a parent, chaperone, NFCYM Executive Director, board member, or anyone else whose authority they trust.

At any NFCYM youth program, any employee or volunteer who observes code of conduct violations or red-flag or inappropriate behaviors must follow these procedures as quickly as possible:

- Interrupt the behavior and separate those involved.
- Report the behavior to a supervisor, director, or other authority as described below.
- If the report concerns a supervisor or administrator, the Executive Director or Board Chair can always be notified.
- Complete an internal report, but do not conduct their own investigation.

### **Legally Mandated Reporting of Abuse and Neglect**

Mandated reporting laws vary across states. Often, mandated reporters are designated by their profession, such as social workers, physicians, teachers, and counselors. In some states, all adults are considered mandated reporters. For this Policy, at any NFCYM youth program, NFCYM considers all adults present to be mandated reporters. Regardless of any actual legal requirement, anyone who has knowledge of or reasonable cause to suspect that abuse or neglect of a minor is occurring or has occurred has an absolute duty to report it.

Persons who believe that they witness or experience abuse must report it. Such abuse may include but not be limited to physical, sexual, emotional, or other types of abuse, negligence, or financial abuse. Reports by an adult must be made even when a youth discloses something in

confidence, such as disclosures from youth about harm to self or others, including self-harm, suicidal thoughts, homicidal or abusive thoughts, child abuse, intimate partner violence, bullying, harassment, serious substance problems, and all other ways youth may be at risk of serious harm.

The appropriate authority or authorities to report to can be found online by visiting <https://www.childwelfare.gov/how-report-child-abuse-and-neglect/> or searching “child protective services” and the city or county name where the incident occurred or is occurring. In case of emergency, 911 can always be called.

Once a report has been made to the appropriate authority or authorities, individuals are strongly urged to report the incident to the appropriate diocesan, parish, school, or sponsoring organization authority and the NFCYM Executive Director or Board Chair. If any NFCYM staff or board member receives a report or observes behavior that appears to indicate any form of abuse of a minor, NFCYM will report according to local reporting protocols.

### **NFCYM Internal Action**

When NFCYM receives any report of suspected abuse, neglect, or red flag behaviors, after reporting to the appropriate authority or authorities, and for violations of this Policy, NFCYM will follow such procedures as it may deem appropriate in its sole and absolute discretion on a case-by-case basis. In the case of diocesan, parish, and/or school volunteers, these procedures may include but are not limited to reporting to a diocesan chancellor, parish pastor, and/or school principal since NFCYM has no authority to investigate such persons. Further, NFCYM reserves the right to require any such person to leave an NFCYM youth program. If required to leave, the individual must do so immediately and at their own expense with no right of reimbursement from NFCYM.

The NFCYM Employee Handbook designates NFCYM as an at-will employer and may terminate employment at any time with or without cause or notice. Similarly, NFCYM volunteer service is at-will and, as such, terminable at any time with or without cause or notice.

NFCYM has no investigative power or expertise. Therefore, this investigative role is reserved for the appropriate government or law enforcement agency. NFCYM’s role is to fully cooperate with such agencies and in no way interfere with or obstruct their investigations.

### **CONCLUSION**

NFCYM is committed to creating and maintaining a safe environment for all. This policy is one element in its efforts to ensure that all participants in NFCYM programs, young and old, benefit from a safe environment that respects the dignity of all. Any concerns may be directed to the NFCYM Executive Director, or the NFCYM Board Chair if the concern relates to the Executive Director.