

# Major youth groups make headway against sex abuse

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NEW YORK — The Boy Scouts have labored for decades to curtail sexual abuse of scouts by adult volunteers. But when their name was evoked in a lawsuit linked to the Penn State abuse scandal, the reference was not to problems — it was acknowledgment that the Scouts' current prevention policies are considered state of the art.

While the local youth charity in the Penn State case has been accused of lax policies, experts in abuse prevention say most of the national organizations serving young people — such as the Boy Scouts of America, Big Brothers Big Sisters, the YMCA, and Boys & Girls Clubs of America — have performed commendably in drafting and enforcing tough anti-abuse policies even as they're sometimes faced with wily and manipulative molesters.

"I'd give them all an A-plus," said Portland State University psychologist Keith Kaufman, who has studied and treated child sex abuse victims.

If there's a systemic problem, Kaufman and other experts say, it's lack of data — from the organizations themselves and from law enforcement agencies — that could illustrate progress by youth groups. The Scouts, for example, said, "We simply do not track or have data that would help quantify trends."

Nonetheless, several independent child-protection experts told The Associated Press that the Scouts — though buffeted in the past by many abuse-related lawsuits — are now considered a leader in combatting sexual abuse.

"The Boy Scouts have the most advanced policies and training," said Victor Vieth, a former prosecutor who heads the National Child Protection Training Center in Minnesota. "With even slight violations, there's no debate. Someone who transgresses one of these rules is moved out — you don't need to give them a second chance."

In the Penn State case, former assistant football coach Jerry Sandusky is charged with sexually abusing 10 boys over a 15-year period, including many engaged in a youth-oriented charity he founded called The Second Mile. Sandusky, who maintains his innocence, has acknowledged showering with boys — an interaction banned by the Boy Scouts and other major groups.

Attorneys for one of Sandusky's alleged victims, in a lawsuit filed in November, said they intend to charge The Second Mile with failing to follow preventive policies used by the Scouts and other organizations, such as the "Two-Deep" rule that requires at least two adults to be present at all activities.

One of the lawyers handling that suit, Jeffrey Fritz of Philadelphia, is the father of a scout and was impressed that the handbook his son brought home included detailed child-protection information that parents are required to read and discuss with their children.

"It's not just adopting the policies, it's educating members, volunteers, parents about them," Fritz said, "I applaud the Boy Scouts' efforts in going so far as that."

Dating back to the 1920s, the Scouts have been keeping secret files about potential molesters — files it refuses to disclose on the grounds that they contain some unverified allegations and that informants expect confidentiality.

Prevention efforts have intensified in the past 30 years, with the Scouts prohibiting one-on-one adult-youth activities, mandating criminal background checks for all staff who work with youth, and including an insert for parents about child protection in the handbook issued to new scouts.

Nonetheless, the Scouts' public image took a blow in April 2010 when an Oregon jury ordered the organization to pay \$19.9 million in damages to Kerry Lewis, who had been abused in the 1980s by an assistant scoutmaster in Portland. The jury decided that the Boy Scouts were negligent for allowing the abuser to associate with Lewis and other boys after admitting to a Scouts official in 1983 that he had molested 17 boys.

Within a few months of that judgment, the Scouts announced that all adult volunteers — now numbering 1.2 million — would be required to take child-protection training when they join the Scouts and repeat the training every two years. The Scouts also created the full-time position of youth protection director, and filled it with Michael Johnson, a former police detective from Plano, Texas, who is an authority on child abuse detection and prevention.

Last year, in one of his first major directives, Johnson stipulated that all adult Scout staff are mandated to report suspected child abuse to law enforcement authorities and Scout leaders, even if this would not be required by state law.

"That's one of the things we're most proud of," Johnson said in an interview. "I don't want our people wondering if they're mandated reporters."

Gary Schoener, a Minneapolis-based therapist and expert on sexual misconduct, testified at the Oregon trial that the Scouts could have been more proactive in the '80s in using their secret files to warn about pedophiles.

Now, Schoener said, the Scouts' prevention program is "considered somewhat the gold standard" — though he suggested that the training material could more clearly show how the Scouts learned from past problems.

"They need to shout loud and clear, this has happened in the Boy Scouts — here are examples," Schoener said.

Johnson indicated he agreed, saying, "There are some Scout-specific situations that should be addressed in the training going forward."

Since the trial, Paul Mones, one of Lewis' attorneys, believes there has been a fundamental shift in the way the Boy Scouts view abuse. "They had programs in place before, but in terms of taking control from the top, there's been a change of vision," he said. "They could become the model for what the rest of the youth-serving organizations could do."

Indeed, the Scouts are planning to host a first-of-its-kind symposium for youth organizations this fall to share the latest strategies on abuse prevention.

Lewis himself said at the end of the trial: "Other children in the future will have more protection than I did." He declined to comment on the Scouts' recent policy initiatives.

Though each major youth-serving organization has its own policies for abuse prevention, they tend to follow a common, three-pronged approach — stressing screening of would-be staff and volunteers, training and education, and explicit rules on such matters as adult/youth interaction and reporting of suspected abuse.

The basic standards are summarized in a document issued by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in 2007, based on recommendations of child-protection experts for numerous youth organizations. It's available online, and more than 18,000 printed copies have been distributed.

CDC research psychologist Janet Saul, the lead author, said the document has been useful in convincing some organizations that criminal background checks weren't sufficient — that training and firmly enforced prevention policies also were essential. But she said flexibility also is needed.

"We acknowledged that one size doesn't fit all," Saul said. "The mission of these organizations is to nurture young people, and you don't want to go so far in protection that you're no longer fulfilling that mission."

Among the major organizations, Big Brothers Big Sisters of America has a distinctive challenge. Its mission is to provide one-on-one mentoring to children facing adversity, so it cannot utilize the "two deep" policy.

To maximize the safety of the roughly 210,000 children it serves, Big Brothers Big Sisters advises its nearly 370 local affiliates to screen would-be mentors carefully — even checking their Facebook pages. Then it requires the mentor, mentee and parent or guardian to meet at least once a month with a professional staff member.

Julie Novak, the organization's national director of child safety, said it's essential to educate staff and parents about possible warning signs and to be aware that potential abusers often are clever people with no criminal record.

"We have to be willing to talk about it," Novak said. "Silence perpetuates child sex abuse."

Like other national organizations, Big Brothers Big Sisters says incidents of abuse are rare but does not have publicly available statistics. Recent abuse cases that ended with criminal convictions illustrate the challenge of screening volunteers with seemingly admirable resumes.

In California, a retired Air Force officer, Jon David Woody, was sentenced in July to 226 years in prison for molesting girls he met through his role as a Big Brothers Big Sisters volunteer. In 2010, a former middle school science teacher in Tulsa, Okla., John Gisler, was sentenced to life in prison for molesting a teenage boy he was mentoring.

"Pedophiles are slick," said Judy Spangler, chief program officer of Big Brothers Big Sisters Southeastern Pennsylvania. "They groom everyone — the agency, the parents, the child ... If someone seems too good to be true, that's a red flag."

Spangler, who has been with Big Brothers Big Sisters since 1999, says she's dealt firsthand with only one sex abuse case in that span — involving a boy whose mother, against the organization's rules, allowed him to stay overnight with his mentor.

"Child safety is something we think about every day," Spangler said. "It keeps me awake at night."

Like Big Brothers Big Sisters, the YMCA of the USA relies on its locally run affiliates to implement and enforce child-protection policies, although the national office provides support and guidance.

"Our Y's have to be diligent on this issue every second of every day," said Kent Johnson, the national Y's chief operating officer.

Johnson said about 40 YMCA affiliates are expanding their efforts by working with the Charleston, S.C.-based nonprofit Darkness to Light on programs aimed at raising awareness about sex abuse among adults with no direct connection to the Y. In Delaware, the program has gone statewide, with a goal of training 35,000 people.

"If we're going to protect kids, we have to engage everyone in their community," said Cindy McElhinney, director of programs at Darkness to Light.

While heartened by the efforts of the YMCA and other large organizations, McElhinney said many smaller local organizations — notably church-affiliated groups — are behind the curve, with inadequate or unenforced youth-protection programs. Cost is sometimes a problem; so is reticence about raising the subject.

Ernie Allen, president of National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, said youth groups must overcome the temptation to avoid publicity about abuse-related problems.

"When something happens, what you can't do is what many groups used to do — 'If you'll resign quietly and leave under cover of darkness, we won't bring charges,'" Allen said. "What happens then, these guys just move group to group."

He praised the Boys & Girls Clubs of America for progress in this regard.

"They want it to be known — if you harm a child in one of their facilities, they're going to throw the book at you," he said. "The only way it's going to work is if everybody does this."

Les Nichols, the Boys & Girls Clubs' vice president of club safety, noted that the large majority of convicted child molesters had no previous criminal record, and thus would not have been detected by background checks. This makes training and strict enforcement of rules all the more vital, he said, especially in an organization that serves about 4 million children with a constantly changing staff.

"You have a lot of new people coming into the system who don't necessarily have knowledge of child protection," Nichols said. "Training staff is a constant challenge."

Like officials from other major youth groups, Nichols said the screening and training is rarely a deterrent to those applying for positions.

"It shows that the goal is to create a safe place for kids," Nichols said. "The good people like that."

Tico Perez, an Orlando, Fla., attorney and former scout who serves as the Boy Scouts' national commissioner, works with Scout volunteers and parents nationwide and says most welcome the precautions.

"The only regret I hear is regret our country has got to a place where we have to do this," he said.