

**Essay Title: Responsible Staffing Helps
Protect Against Harmful Acts**

Audio Essay: Disc 2 track #14

Abuse of children, youth, and vulnerable adults is an unfortunate reality in society and has even occurred in Unitarian Universalist congregations. Congregational leaders, of course, have a responsibility to do all they can to prevent such abuse.

The Unitarian Universalist Association has a new resource to help congregations meet this responsibility. A publication, “Guidelines on Responsible Staffing,” was completed recently by the Rev. John Weston, the UUA’s Settlement Director, and the Rev. Harlan Limpert, Director for District Services, with help from many others.

The guidelines are designed to protect congregations not only from sexual abuse, but also from financial misconduct from church staff and volunteers. The guidelines recommend that congregations implement uniform screening procedures when filling leadership positions.

Weston and Limpert are encouraging all congregations to adopt the guidelines for ethical and religious reasons, in addition to protecting themselves from legal liability, in a world in which organizations, and their leaders, are being held increasingly responsible for actions by employees and volunteers.

Congregations in several denominations have already been sued for not preventing misconduct, says Weston, and individual staff members will likely be next. Rev. Weston adds, “I suspect that it will not be long before a minister who is designated ‘chief of staff’ in a congregation will be successfully sued on the grounds of negligent supervision and/or negligent hiring, just as congregations have been. It is in everyone’s interest to exercise care in calling ministers, hiring church staff, and recruiting volunteers.”

The Responsible Staffing guidelines are to be used when calling ministers, hiring other professional leaders and church staff, and recruiting key volunteers. Weston emphasized that

congregations, not the UUA, have primary responsibility for screening ministers and other staff as part of congregational polity. He said that failure to responsibly investigate prospective staff members and volunteers could have serious consequences for congregations—and for ministers.

The guidelines come in the wake of two recent Massachusetts cases which hold officers of organizations responsible for actions of employees and volunteers. In one, the board of trustees of a private school was indicted on criminal charges for failing to report student-on-student sexual harassment. In another, a state judge ruled that a church can be sued for breaching its “fiduciary duty” to its members by failing to prevent the sexual abuse of a girl by a minister.

The guidelines, and background information, are available on the uua.org website. They include lists of questions and forms that congregations can use in interviewing candidates and conducting reference and background checks. Reference checks are phone calls or letters sent by church staff or lay leaders to former employers or co-workers, etc. who can speak to an applicant’s character, skills, and abilities. Background checks refer to criminal background checks by professional organizations.

The guidelines are recommended not only to boards of trustees, but also to ministerial search committees, religious educator search committees, personnel committees, nominating committees, youth and young adult bodies, and any other group charged with the responsibility to recommend or hire staff or to recruit volunteers.

For more information and resources, go to: uua.org and click on Leaders

Resources

Go to: <http://www.uua.org/leaders/leaderslibrary/responsiblestaffing/index.shtml>

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