

METROPOLITAN WASHINGTON, D.C. SYNOD
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

YOUTH PROTECTION POLICY FOR
SYNOD-SPONSORED YOUTH EVENTS

A. Purpose

This policy is intended to encourage as safe an environment as possible for all participants in synod-sponsored youth events. At these events, youth are valued and celebrated and provided with opportunities for faith formation, leadership development, and service learning. While the primary concern is youth, the policy also intends to establish guidelines that protect adults from unwarranted accusations. Consistent with this purpose, and with a resolution adopted by the Synod Assembly on May 6-7, 2011, this policy sets out guidelines that will apply to all synod-sponsored youth events.

B. Definitions

For purposes of this policy, the following definitions apply:

Youth: Any person under age 18, and any person who is still enrolled in high school at the time of registration for a synod-sponsored youth event (even if that person is age 18 or older at the event).

Adult: Any person who is not a youth.

Adult Youth Leader(s): The adult participant(s) designated by a congregation to have primary congregational responsibility for youth at a synod-sponsored youth event.

Synod-Sponsored Youth Event: An event planned and implemented by the Synod's Youth and Family Ministry with youth as the primary audience, including SHEMA, Shekinah, Chi Rho, and Chrysalis. Events at a Synod Assembly may be included if specifically designed for youth as the primary audience. The following are not synod-sponsored youth events:

- Meetings of the Youth Ministry team, and any other meetings sponsored by the Synod that include youth participants. These are not considered "events," but participants should follow the general principles in this policy as appropriate for the circumstances.
- Confirmation Camp at Caroline Furnace Lutheran Camp and Retreat Center or Mar-Lu Ridge Camp and Retreat Center. This is not planned or implemented by the Synod's Youth and Family Ministry, and participants should follow the policies of the hosting facility.
- Participation of youth in the ELCA Youth Gathering. This is considered the primary responsibility of the congregation under this policy and thus is not "planned and implemented" by the Synod's Youth and Family Ministry.

Sexual Misconduct: Includes (1) sexual abuse, sexual harassment, sexual assault and other similar types of conduct prohibited under federal or state law; and (2) any contact, communication, or other activity of a sexual nature that occurs between an adult and youth.

Sexual misconduct may involve, but is not limited to, verbal suggestions or comments, leering, inappropriate touching, or the use of pornography.

C. Coverage

This policy covers all youth and adults at a synod-sponsored youth event. For congregational participants, the event begins when the congregation registers on-site and ends with the closing dismissal of worship on the final day. However, if the Synod provides transportation for travel, it is part of the event, and this policy also covers that travel.

D. Selection of Adult Participants

Congregations should exercise care in the selection of adults who work with youth and participate in synod-sponsored youth events. Adults are expected to share the good news of the gospel in word and deed, set a positive example for living, be a mentor or positive role model for youth, and organize meaningful experiences.

Congregations are encouraged to have their own youth protection policies. If a congregation has a formal policy or process for screening staff or volunteers who work with youth, it should adhere to that process in selecting adult participants for synod-sponsored youth events. Adult participants must have an established relationship with the congregation or the congregation's Adult Youth Leader.

All adult participants must have an approved background check on file with the Synod prior to the event, except as noted below. The authorization form for the [background check](#) should be sent to the synod office to the attention of the person specified in the registration materials. The authorization form must be signed by the congregation's pastor or council president in addition to the person who is the subject of the background check. Fees will be determined based on individual factors. The following are exceptions:

- If, due to unexpected circumstances (such as a last-minute substitution because of illness), there is insufficient time to complete a background check before an event, the adult may participate if he/she completes the Synod's Voluntary Disclosure Statement answering questions about past crimes or other acts involving abuse or violence against children. The Voluntary Disclosure Statement will be provided at the event.
- Adults are not required to complete a background check if they participate only as guest speakers, entertainers, or in some other capacity, provided that they are not alone with youth. This exception is subject to the discretion of the planning team, which may require these adults to complete the Synod's Voluntary Disclosure Statement.)
- Intra-day events (e.g., SHEMA). This is an exception because the event is only several hours (not overnight) and participants are kept together in groups. Usually there is a ratio of one adult for every two or three youth, and congregational groups are generally kept together.
- No background check needs to be submitted to the synod if the following conditions are met:

- the adult participant had a background check for purposes of the adult's work with a congregation;
- that background check meets or exceeds the Synod's standard for such checks (i.e., it covers the same areas as the Synod's background check, and was done by a reputable company, and was completed or renewed within the time specified by this policy);
- and the congregation's pastor or council president certifies to the Synod that the congregation maintains records of completed background checks for all listed participants, and has determined that all listed individuals are appropriate participants for the event..

Acceptable background checks will be considered valid for five years or until the adult changes congregations or accompanies youth from a different congregation, whichever comes first. The registration materials for a congregation will include a statement that all the adult participants have continued to participate with that congregation (or if not, are requesting background checks).

The ratio of numbers of adult participants needed per youth (and gender, if this is a requirement) will be specified in the registration materials. This may vary depending on the circumstances of the event and the age group involved. A congregation must designate one adult participant as the Adult Youth Leader who takes primary responsibility for the youth in that congregation.

All adult participants are expected to be familiar with this policy and agree to abide by it. Registration for the events will include a signed statement to that effect.

E. Safeguards During Events

The Synod prohibits any sexual misconduct at a synod-sponsored youth event. Such conduct may lead to dismissal from the event, further disciplinary action, or both.

It is important to maintain appropriate boundaries. Adult participants should ensure that any one-on-one contact between a youth and adult occurs in view of other adults and youth. If private conversation needs to occur, it should be done in proximity to the rest of the group with doors open and lights on.

Appropriate expressions of affection can be a manifestation of Christ's love. A kind word of encouragement or a pat on the back can be a small but significant act. Nevertheless, adult participants must use caution and common sense when physically expressing affection toward youth. Some guidelines:

- Respect a youth's refusal of physical contact.
- Never make a youth feel uncomfortable.
- Be aware of appropriate hand placement—a bear hug can be misinterpreted.
- Any type of kiss, body-to-body embrace, or touch on private areas is inappropriate.

In overnight events, males and females will be assigned separate sleeping quarters (except in the case of married couples or families). In the case of large room accommodations, male and

female sleeping areas will be clearly defined. If facility or housing limitations require youth and adult participants to share a room, a single adult must never be housed with a single youth.

The privacy of both youth and adults in dressing and showering should be respected.

Adult participants must be aware of youth activities and behavior, and must properly supervise the youth from their congregation at all times. A youth should never have anyone of the opposite sex in his or her room or sleeping quarters unless an adult is present.

Any discipline must consider the youth's dignity and well-being. Physical discipline is categorically prohibited. No one may strike or hit anyone at any time. Verbal harassment or threats are also prohibited.

No alcohol, tobacco, or drugs (other than prescribed medication) will be brought to or used at an event.

No firearms or other weapons, fireworks, or laser pointers will be brought to or used at an event.

The policy on cell phones and other electronic devices will be specified in the registration materials and covenant for the event.

If transportation is required as part of an event, the registration materials will specify the requirements for drivers and vehicles. This may include a minimum age for drivers, a requirement to provide a copy of a valid driver's license and insurance coverage for the vehicle being driven, and restrictions on the types of vehicles that may be driven. Seat belts must be worn by the driver and all passengers in vehicles equipped with seat belts. Each vehicle must carry the registration materials (including medical information) for the driver and all passengers.

Medical information (including dietary restrictions and allergies) and releases, as well as emergency contact information, are addressed in the registration materials for a particular event. For certain events, this may include permission to receive over-the-counter medication. The Synod will inform the event facility of dietary restrictions and allergies, but adult participants are responsible for monitoring this for youth and adults from their congregation.

A well-equipped and fully stocked first aid kit must be available at all events.

For all events, the planning team will make arrangements to ensure that first aid coverage is provided and that there is access to emergency care.

Arriving late or leaving early is discouraged and must be discussed with event staff in advance. Youth and adult participants are expected to remain throughout an event. If, due to an emergency it is necessary for a youth or adult participant to leave an event, an adult participant from that congregation must advise the event coordinator before the participant leaves the site.

Other requirements or guidelines for the event may be specified in the registration materials.

Signed covenants for youth and adults are required and included as part of the registration materials.

F. Reporting of Wrongdoing

Each synod-sponsored youth event will have a team designated by the Youth Ministry Chair or his/her designee, which will be responsible for reviewing any allegations of misconduct at an event and making a recommendation. The team may interview all the parties involved.

Any wrongdoing or other inappropriate behavior at a synod-sponsored youth event that appears to violate this policy should be reported to the Youth Ministry Chair or his/her designee. The Youth Ministry Chair is responsible for:

- Convening the team, as needed
- In the case of any criminal acts, making immediate contact with police or other law enforcement authorities
- Notifying and consulting with the Office of the Bishop to determine what is required for reporting any apparent child abuse according to state law; ascertaining who will make the report; and following through on making the report if requested
- Documenting the facts and actions taken.

The Office of the Bishop may determine what further action may be necessary.

The Youth Ministry Chair, in consultation with the designated team, may decide on other appropriate action for that event, which could include dismissal of the individuals involved from the event.

Actions that violate the policy may result in suspension from future synod-sponsored youth events. These decisions will be made by the Youth Ministry Chair in consultation with the Office of the Bishop.

In the event there is any alleged wrongdoing by the Youth Ministry Chair, the matter should be raised with the Office of the Bishop. Any misconduct by clergy or other rostered leaders will be addressed by the Synod. The Synod has a “Statement of Policy Regarding Sexual Misconduct by Members of the Clergy and Rostered Laypersons,” which includes a list of persons who will receive reports of sexual misconduct.

G. Miscellaneous

The Synod may make changes to this policy as needed.

This policy is not intended to be taken as legal advice, and may not be appropriate in all states or all circumstances. Congregations are encouraged to contact their own legal advisors when establishing child abuse prevention procedures.

This policy will be effective January 26, 2013.