Developing a Sexual Abuse & Molestation (SAM) Prevention and Reporting Policy

By Jean Knaack, RRCA Executive Director, with assistance from K&K

One of the greatest challenges to persons working with children in youth sports is when a child confides that they have been abused, whether it is sexual or otherwise. The trust they put in their coach or youth program volunteer and the deep feeling that they may share must be respected. Your youth program volunteers should know how to respond if confided in, and respond they must. Whatever the case may be, the child’s immediate interest must be a top priority. Accompanying the serious concern of responding to disclosure of abuse is the concern among good coaches and volunteers of youth sports that they may be wrongfully accused of child molestation. The RRCA insurance program includes basic coverage against sexual abuse and molestation claims for members hosting youth running programs and events.

Ideally if your organization hosts a youth running program or event, your organization has already adopted written policies and procedures for how such a situation will be managed. If not, it is very important to do so.

1. Written Policies and Procedures: Any program that attracts minors away from the custody and control of their parents should have written policies that confirm their position against “child sexual abuse” in any form and procedures that enable reasonable effort to be made to minimize any occurrences in the program. These procedures should include methods of selecting, training supervising, investigating and removal of employees or volunteers.

2. Point Person: The program should appoint and give authority to one person and one alternate to be the point person for representing the organization, confidentially and within its policies, if a sensitive issue arises or is reported. The point person should be fully vetted to ensure they have no history of abuse. All complaints, concerns, and reporting to authorities and legal counsel should be managed by the point person to ensure action and to maintain confidentiality to the best of their ability. The lead coach or program director may be appointed as the point person or another volunteer may be appointed, but this role and the responsibilities should be made clear to the point person.

3. Staff/Volunteer Selection: All paid employees or program volunteers must be made aware of the club’s position against child sexual abuse and all staff and volunteers will be required to undergo a criminal background check prior to working with youth. Also consider reviewing your local sex offender registry to ensure none of your program volunteers are on the list.

4. Training: Be sure to train your volunteers and staff on your policies and procedures and how to contact the point person and/or local authorities if abuse is reported. Training should outline what to do if a child confides in a volunteer as a trusted adult. Local agencies can provide training but a few important items to keep in mind are to sit at eye level with a child and move the conversation away from being overheard by others. Take what is said with quiet concern, don’t panic or scare the child, and never try to dissuade them that they might have misunderstood what has happened. Let the child know that you will get an expert involved that can help with what was disclosed. Contact the point person immediately.

5. Reporting: Any complaint must be investigated immediately. The complainer should be informed that their disclosure is taken seriously and a confidential investigation will be made. The point person should report all actions in a confidential manner to the Board of Directors after law enforcement has been contacted.

6. Removal: Volunteers or staff accused of wrongdoing should cooperate with local law enforcement and legal counsel to respond to allegations before action is taken. If law enforcement feels a complaint is founded, the volunteer or staff should not be allowed to continue to work with children until local law enforcement officials have concluded their investigation.