

Tough Lessons for Organizations Serving Vulnerable Clientele



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Last week's verdict in the criminal case against Jerry Sandusky offers a sobering reminder about the risk of sexual misconduct or abuse facing every nonprofit that provides services to vulnerable clientele, including children, individuals with disabilities and the elderly. While it remains true that vulnerable service recipients are *statistically safer* while participating in programs sponsored by nonprofits than they are in their own homes, the compassionate leaders of today's nonprofits must be aware of the potential for harm and avoid the naïve thinking that puts our clients at undue risk.

My takeaway reminders from the recent verdict include:

- **Any adult in your nonprofit who is “above suspicion” shouldn’t be.** During the 20-year history of the Center we have been retained on numerous occasions to conduct post-incident reviews for client organizations that have faced allegations of abuse. During several of these engagements we were told that the alleged—and eventually convicted perpetrator—was “an ideal citizen,” “beloved volunteer,” or “walked on water as far as we were concerned.”
- **Never ignore or discount reports of misconduct involving vulnerable clients.** During the Sandusky trial the jury and public learned that reports of misconduct made by a graduate student in 1998 were not investigated. As difficult as it may be to imagine that a trusted insider has perpetrated a crime or violated your policies regarding the care of clients, allegations of wrongdoing must be investigated promptly and thoroughly. When inappropriate conduct or injury is alleged, it is imperative to determine what happened, how it happened and identify immediate steps to prevent further harm.
- **Criminal history background checks do no inoculate your agency from the risk of misconduct.** Despite the volume of information now available on predators, including the fact that most have committed multiple offenses before their first arrest, too many nonprofit leaders continue to rely on background checking as a principal or sole youth protection measure. Background checks are simply one tool in what should be an evolving toolkit of practical strategies.
- **Never assume that your staff and volunteers have a shared understanding of what constitutes permitted and impermissible behavior.** Many onlookers in the Sandusky case were dismayed, if not shocked, to read about the inappropriate “games” the now convicted coach played with young participants. Guidelines that clearly specify permitted and strictly prohibited conduct are a “must” for nonprofits serving vulnerable clients.
- **Changes in program scope, size or delivery warrant a close-up look at the effectiveness of**

youth protection measures. The publicity surrounding the Sandusky case recently led the leaders of two leading nonprofits to engage the Center for an independent review of youth protection measures. The leaders of these client organizations recognized that as their organizations evolve, strategies to provide a safe environment must also evolve.

- **No risk management strategy can prevent all harm. Don't wait until harm is alleged before deciding how you will respond to allegations.** Nonprofit leaders are well-served to consider today how they will respond in the wake of allegations of misconduct involving a vulnerable client. Not even the nation's largest and most respected agencies can guarantee a safe environment. Every organization should take the time to consider how it will respond with compassion even in the glare of a media spotlight.

If you are looking for an authoritative guide to risk management for your youth serving nonprofit, check out [The Season of Hope: A Risk Management Guide for Youth-Serving Nonprofits](#), which offers practical guidance.

Melanie Lockwood Herman is Executive Director of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. She welcomes your ideas about any risk management topic, feedback on this article and questions about the Center's resources at Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org or 703.777.3504. The Center provides risk management tools and resources at www.nonprofitrisk.org/ and offers [consulting assistance](#) to organizations unwilling to leave their missions to chance.