

CONGREGATION OF THE SISTERS OF MERCY

Congregational International Child Safeguarding Policy & Standards

Review date: **November 20, 2024**

Effective Date **March 2022**

Policy Title: **CONGREGATIONAL INTERNATIONAL CHILD SAFEGUARDING
POLICY & STANDARDS**

Inspired by the life of Jesus and challenged by Catherine McAuley's faithfulness to His example, we Sisters of Mercy commit ourselves to the wholesome development of children in a respectful and life-giving environment. We uphold the safety of the child as paramount and are committed to do all in our power to safeguard the welfare of children to whom we minister or with whom we have significant contact.

Each child is a gift of God. As Sisters of Mercy, our ethos commits us to ensure that the fundamental rights of children are respected. In all circumstances we pledge to create a supportive and caring environment where children are listened to, treated fairly, taken seriously and feel safe.

The Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy is committed to a culture of safeguarding and ensuring compliance with best practice. Each Province, Region and community in the Congregation, in keeping with the civil and legal requirements of its respective jurisdiction, and with canonical and congregational requirements, will adhere to the child safeguarding policy and standards as articulated in this document.

STRUCTURE OF THE CONGREGATION

The Congregational Leader, together with her Team, constitutes the primary focus of unity and leadership within the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy (Constitution 108). The Congregation is structured according to different Provinces, Regions and communities in the following countries: Ireland, England, Brazil, Kenya, South Africa, Peru, and United States of America.

Each Province, Region and community adheres to this Congregational Child Safeguarding Policy and Procedures in keeping with civil legislation and church regulations. Each Province, Region and community has its own Designated Liaison Person.

If you have a concern with regard to the welfare and safety of a child in any of these Mercy Congregation locations please contact the relevant Province, Region or community.

CONGREGATIONAL INTERNATIONAL CHILD SAFEGUARDING STATEMENT

As a Congregation, we are committed to safeguarding and respecting the sacredness of all Life. Our commitment is exercised in accordance with Gospel-based values, our Charism, Constitutions, Statutes, Chapter Statements and the U.N. Convention Guidelines on the Rights of the Child.

We are particularly committed to safeguarding the dignity and fundamental rights of all people in our care especially children and to ensuring their safety and well-being and we will work in partnership with parents/guardians to do this. We recognise each child as a gift from God, and we value and encourage the participation of children in all activities that enhance their spiritual, physical, emotional, intellectual and social development.

All our members and all those who work with us under our authority (clergy, religious, staff and volunteers) have a responsibility to safeguard children through promoting their welfare, health and development in a safe and caring environment that supports their best interests and prevents abuse.

Safeguarding Children: Policy and Standards for the Catholic Church in Ireland 2016 is endorsed by the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy as the foundational document underpinning this Congregational International Child Safeguarding Policy.

Safeguarding Children: Policy and Standards for the Catholic Church in Ireland 2016 underpins all practice of safeguarding of children in the 4 Provinces in Ireland namely the Southern Province, the South Central Province, the Western Province and the Northern Province. The standards of this same document, in tandem with local ecclesial and civil requirements, also inform the practice and delivery of child safeguarding in the US Region, the South African Province, the Kenyan Province as well as communities in Brazil and Peru. This policy is to be found on www.safeguarding.ie and on the Congregational website at www.sistersofmercy.ie.

Details of the person to contact if you are concerned about the welfare and safety of a child:

Please contact the Designated Person in the country and Province/Region concerned.

If the contact details are not available to you, please contact the **Congregational Administration in Ireland** for the relevant contact details:

Phone: 00353 1 4673737

Email: mercy@csm.ie

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

In developing and implementing the Congregational International Child Safeguarding Policy, we are reliant on *Safeguarding Children Policy and Standards for the Catholic Church in Ireland 2016* and the following foundations:

1. Gospel

Children have a key place in the heart of Jesus who said: *'Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it'. (Luke 18: 17)*. This places a sacred obligation on the Church to ensure that children are welcomed, cherished and protected in a manner consistent with their central place in the life of the Church.

2. Children's Rights, National Law and Canon Law

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) outlines the forty- two fundamental rights to be implemented in national law by signatories to the Convention (this includes the Holy See). Full realisation of these rights will ensure that children will be *'brought up in a spirit of peace, dignity, tolerance, freedom, equality and solidarity'*.

The Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy, as part of our charism, commits to upholding our obligations under the civil legislation of the countries in which we minister and the requirements of Church law.

SCOPE OF THE POLICY

This policy applies to all members, and all those who work with Sisters of Mercy (lay staff and volunteers). All are required to comply with it. Full understanding of and adherence to this policy should lead to a deepening in the understanding of, and respect for, the rights of children and young people to participate as people of faith in the life of the Church.

The care and protection of children involved in the activities of the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy is the responsibility of all Mercy personnel and is a requirement that applies regardless of the nature of the activity in which the children are involved. Everyone has a role to play in creating an environment in which children can develop and be safe.

CONGREGATIONAL STANDARDS FOR ALL PROVINCES, REGIONS AND COMMUNITIES OF THE CONGREGATION

All Provinces, Regions and Communities of the Congregation take their standard for child safeguarding from this Congregational International Child Safeguarding Policy (itself based on *Safeguarding Children, Policy and Standards for the Catholic Church in Ireland 2016*) and comply with the Church and State regulations in their own country.

Where the civil legislation and guidelines are inadequate and not in line with best international practice, we adhere to the best practice set out in this policy, and in conjunction with other concerned groups, actively lobby to change the system. In these circumstances, each Province, Region, and community clearly explains to the Congregational Leadership Team why a particular action is not possible and what actions have been put in place to mitigate risk of abuse of children.

CONGREGATIONAL STANDARDS

1. Creating and Maintaining Safe Environments

We,

- ◇ adhere in each Province, Region and community to this Congregational policy for the safeguarding of children
- ◇ create safe environments for children, in safe, secure premises by carrying out hazard/risk assessments of children's activities
- ◇ use a child-centered approach, where the full participation of all children is encouraged and facilitated, practicing positive engagement with children – we do not allow physical harm or smacking of children
- ◇ receive parental and child consent for all activities
- ◇ ensure that all adults, Sisters, employees and volunteers, who work with children are appropriately vetted, recruited and trained
- ◇ maintain appropriate staff to child ratios
- ◇ ensure that there is appropriate supervision for all activities and that suitable codes of conduct/behaviour for children and adults are drawn up
- ◇ have a safe use of digital media policy
- ◇ have a proper reporting and recording system in place
- ◇ clear procedures around visiting personnel including clerics and including having a sign in and sign out procedure.

2. Procedures for Responding to Child Protection Suspicions, Concerns, Knowledge or Allegations

We,

- ◇ create in each Province, Region or community procedures and systems for recording, reporting and responding to child protection suspicions, concerns, knowledge or allegations
- ◇ encourage responsible whistle blowing by creating a whistleblowing procedure
- ◇ adhere to the safeguarding children civil legislation/guidelines in each country where we minister and reporting allegations, concerns, suspicions to the appropriate authorities
 - *Where the civil legislation, guidelines and practice are inadequate and not in line with best international practice and it is unsafe to report, we adhere to the best practice set out in this policy and in conjunction with other concerned groups, actively lobby to change the system. Reporting in such cases will be through the relevant Mercy designated child safeguarding person.*

3. Care and Support for the Complainant

We,

- ◇ set in place structures for the care and support of the complainant and care and support for others who may be affected by the allegation.

4. Care and Management of the Respondent

We,

- ◇ take just and appropriate action in relation to Mercy personnel who are accused or who have abused, remembering that the safety of children at all times is paramount.

5. Training and Support for Keeping Children Safe

We,

- ◇ provide, support and ensure that Child Safeguarding training takes place wherever Mercy Sisters/personnel minister. Where relevant, we provide appropriate training in internet safety for all those involved with children, including parents.

6. Communicating the Safeguarding Message

We,

- ◇ communicate, appropriately, the Mercy Congregational policy and procedures to all personnel, to children and their families and to the wider public.

7. Assuring Compliance with the Standards

We,

- ◇ develop a plan of action at Congregational, Provincial, Regional and community level to assure compliance with the child safeguarding standards and we review the plan annually
- ◇ carry out a self-audit of safeguarding procedures annually and address issues arising
- ◇ regularly review implementation of this policy.

COMMITMENTS

Together with the Standards and Principles outlined above, the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy, as part of the Catholic Church commit to:

a) Reporting

Each one of us, Sisters, employees and volunteers, has a duty to notify the statutory authorities of suspicions, concerns, knowledge or allegations that a child is being or has been abused:

- physically
- emotionally
- sexually
- through neglect.

Suspicions, concerns, knowledge or allegations may relate to possible abuse by Mercy personnel, but they can also relate to incidents in the child's family, or elsewhere in the community.

b) Caring for the welfare of all children and the adults who work with them

We commit to implementing measures to create and maintain environments that are safe for children, that prevent abuse and that create nurturing, caring conditions for children and the adults who work with them. We will continue to strengthen and review practice so that all the environments for children are safe. This will be done through training, support, communications and quality assurance.

c) Responding appropriately to child protection suspicions, concerns, knowledge or allegations

Anyone who brings a suspicion, concern, knowledge or allegation of current or past abuse of a child to the notice of Mercy Sisters will be responded to sensitively, respectfully, actively and in a timely manner, in line with the Congregational policy, statutory child protection procedures and Church requirements.

All suspicions, concerns, knowledge or allegations that reach the threshold for reporting to the civil authorities will be reported through the appointed Mercy representative if it is safe to do so (see note under 2 above). This will be done irrespective of the status of the person (lay, cleric or religious) who is suspected of having been abusive to a child. If the allegation relates to a lay member of staff or a volunteer, in addition to notifying the statutory authorities, the allegation must be reported to the lead person of the Mercy Sisters.

If the allegation relates to a cleric or religious from another country, in addition to notifying the statutory authorities, the allegation must also be reported to the Mercy Sisters and the Church authority in the country of origin.

All Mercy personnel will co-operate with the statutory authorities.

d) Caring pastorally for complainants and other affected persons

Those who have suffered child abuse by Mercy personnel will receive a compassionate and just response, and will be offered appropriate pastoral care, counselling and support as they seek to rebuild their lives.

An appropriate pastoral response to the family, congregation, community and to the wider community will be provided, with due regard to the right of privacy of those directly involved, and to the administration of justice.

e) Caring pastorally for respondents and other affected persons

The Sisters of Mercy in their response to suspicions, concerns, knowledge or allegations of child sexual abuse will respect the rights under civil law and canon law of accused religious or other personnel. A legal presumption of innocence will be maintained during the statutory and Mercy enquiry processes. As the processes develop, additional assessment, therapy and support services may be offered to the respondent.

The Mercy Sisters will take responsibility for ensuring that any member of the congregation who is considered to constitute a danger to children is managed according to a risk management plan.

All requisite steps will be taken to restore the good name and reputation of anyone who has been wrongly accused of abusing a child.

Respondents can belong to families and religious communities. The Mercy Sisters will be mindful of the need to provide support to members of families and communities affected by the respondent's changed situation.

COMMITMENT OF ALL MERCY PERSONNEL

All Mercy personnel in ministry with children will be required to read this Safeguarding policy and to commit in writing to follow its procedures and these Standards.
(See Appendix for sample form)

COMMITMENT OF CONGREGATIONAL LEADERSHIP TEAM

The Congregational Leadership Team commits to:

- a) ensuring that each Province, Region and community is aware of and embraces all aspects of the principles and standards outlined in this Congregational International Child Safeguarding Policy
- b) monitoring, annually, the actions and plans of each Province, Region and community of the Congregation in relation to its compliance with these principles and standards
- c) evaluating practices and procedures during Congregational Leadership Team visits to each area and
- d) providing training at international level periodically as needed.

REVIEW

These standards and policy will be reviewed every three years, or sooner, if necessary.

Signed: Sr. Marie Louise White RSM
Congregational Leader

Dated: November 20, 2019

Review date: November 20, 2024

RELATED CONGREGATIONAL POLICIES

- ◇ Dignity and Respect
- ◇ Health and Wellbeing
- ◇ Anti-Bullying
- ◇ Mediation
- ◇ Pastoral Ministry
- ◇ Volunteers
- ◇ Mercy Ministries and Projects- Leadership, Management and Succession Planning
- ◇ Data Protection
- ◇ Whistleblowing
- ◇ Sisters in Mission Outside Province of Origin
- ◇ Team-to-Team Handover
- ◇ Safeguarding Vulnerable Persons
- ◇ Anti-Fraud/Anti-Corruption
- ◇ Congregational Formation Guidelines
- ◇ Communications Policy

APPENDIX

[Sample)

[Title of Congregation/Province/Region: _____]

Declaration of Adherence to the Policy

[Name of Policy: _____]

I have read the above-named Policy dated: _____ and have understood my responsibilities in relation to its contents and will abide by the directions of the policy. I will attend all information and training sessions provided in relation to this policy.

Signed: _____

Position held: _____

Date: _____