



## National Education Campaign:

### Screening Employees and Volunteers in Positions of Trust with Children and Other Vulnerable Individuals

#### Background

The day Sheldon Kennedy testified that his coach, Graham James sexually abused him hundreds of times when he was a boy, is the day that screening became a reality for many organizations. Kennedy not only settled the score with his coach but his admission also signalled the end of the unspoken agreement by many victims to stay silent about abuse.

Most child molesters are people like Graham James - ordinary citizens who look and act normal, except that they are attracted to children and have a need to exert power over them. Some pedophiles prey on girls, some prefer boys, and some abuse both sexually. Most have never been caught, or legally convicted of the crime.

This story is not limited to sport. The story of Gary Blair Walker haunts many social agencies. Walker admits to having sexually molested over 200 boys over the course of 30 years while he held a variety of positions of trust as a paid worker, and as a volunteer. He was at different times a sport coach, a police officer, a Scout master, a church camp counsellor, a school bus driver and a martial arts instructor.

Recent tragedies include the massacre of 16 children in Dunblane, Scotland and the uncovering of an international child pornography ring in which the Executive Director of a Big Brothers agency was involved. It is obvious that we must take greater care in ensuring the safety of children and other vulnerable people.

#### Federal Commitment

In the speech from the Throne on January 18, 1994, the Government of Canada declared its commitment to combating violence against women and children. Shortly thereafter, representatives of the Departments of the Solicitor General Canada, Justice Canada, and Health Canada, and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police were appointed to an Ad Hoc Interdepartmental Working Group on Information Systems on Child Sex Offenders. The Working Group's mandate was to address the following question: "How can federal and provincial information systems be strengthened to provide better information to police services and organizations conducting background checks on people seeking paid and/or volunteer work in areas where they will have direct access to children?" A series of consultations was held across Canada. Participants included representatives from provincial governments, police agencies, and public and voluntary sector organizations.

The importance of appropriate and thorough screening of applicants for positions of trust with children and with other vulnerable individuals was a consistent theme of these consultations. Furthermore, the use of police information systems was clearly identified as an important screening measure, and the strengthening of such systems was encouraged.

In November 1994, the Honourable Herb Gray, Solicitor General of Canada, announced that his Department, in cooperation with Justice and Health Canada would be taking the lead in providing public education on screening, through the National Education Campaign on Screening Volunteers and Employees in Positions of Trust with Children and Other Vulnerable Individuals, a project to be undertaken by Volunteer Canada.

### **A National Response**

Volunteer Canada is the national organization of local volunteer centres, the primary local resource centres for voluntary action across Canada. Volunteer Canada's mission is to promote voluntary action in Canada, and to support local volunteer centres. Volunteer Canada has been contracted to undertake the development of the National Education Campaign materials, and to spearhead the national training program.

The overall goal of the campaign is to assist voluntary and public sector organizations in their efforts to protect people from harm. Recent research carried out with convicted pedophiles revealed that these individuals had actively sought out paid and unpaid positions within voluntary sector organizations. They declared their amazement at how quickly and easily they were placed in work with vulnerable clients.

Clearly voluntary and public sector organizations, which provide services to vulnerable clients, must do everything they reasonably can do to provide adequate, appropriate, safe, and well-managed programs. They have moral, ethical, and legal obligations; both implicit and explicit, to exercise reasonable care to protect the individuals in their care, as well as the staff, the community-at-large, and the organization. Many organizations have taken steps to introduce screening measures, others are seeking out support to develop

and introduce such policies into their agencies.

Screening of applicants refers to the range of procedures and processes used by organizations to carefully scrutinize individuals who apply for paid or unpaid positions in order to choose the best candidates, and to weed out, as far as possible, those who are incompetent or who have the potential to cause harm.

### **Resource Development**

Development of materials began in January 1995, with the assembling of a team of researchers. These individuals spent several months researching relevant federal and provincial/territorial legislation and social policy. In addition, they interviewed representatives of various government departments and ministries, and staff members of numerous voluntary and public sector organizations.

The results of their research is integrated throughout the following resource materials developed for the National Education Campaign on Screening Individuals in Positions of Trust with Vulnerable Individuals include the following:

#### **Screening Handbook**

The Screening Handbook is designed to assist organizations in creating, developing, or refining their own screening programs. It has been formatted and printed to be placed in a binder, so that information can be updated, materials removed and extra material easily added.

### **Education Dossier**

The *Education Dossier* has been developed to provide information to organizations and the general public, including prospective volunteers. The *Education Dossier* is composed of information sheets, which can be easily reproduced as flyers or brochures, each one addressing an issue, or question related to the topic of screening.

### **Education Video**

A 15-minute video, entitled *Duty of Care* has been developed for general audiences, including prospective volunteers, clients and their families, and organizations seeking information about screening as an element of program management. *Duty of Care* introduces the idea of screening, and discusses the basic, relevant issues. The English version of the video is narrated by actor Al Waxman; the French version by actor Daniel Pilon.

### **Training Campaign**

The second major component of the National Education Campaign is training. Local volunteer centres have begun to offer training throughout the country. The training may take any one of a variety of forms, including half- or full-day, in-person workshops, a series of teleconference training sessions, and/or video conferencing. Volunteer centres are also available to work with agencies on an individual basis to integrate policies on screening and to introduce them into the organizational culture.

Individuals and organizations wishing to receive training and/or to obtain information on sponsoring training in their own communities are encouraged to contact Volunteer Canada at 1-800-670-0401.

### **Current Activities**

In October 1997, the federal government announced that it would continue to support the campaign's objectives over the next two years. Having developed some excellent resources and established a training network for screening, the next steps are:

### **Targeted Training**

Volunteer Canada has identified three major communities that face unique challenges when it comes to volunteer screening; sport and recreation, education and faith communities. These communities share a number of characteristics: they all provide programming to thousands of children. They are all very large, highly organized and rather self contained. They tend to work with "mainstream" children and use mostly parent or known volunteers.

These factors have led to a lower awareness of the need to screen and in many instances - primarily as a result of the involvement of parents as volunteers (as opposed to "strangers") - there is actual resistance to the idea of screening. A general belief that "it won't happen to us" pervades these communities and even at the organizational management level there is uneasiness about the amount of work, and the expenditure that will be involved if screening policies are introduced. Periodic scandals and tragedies have created pockets of awareness and often lead to hurried decisions to "do something".

### **Public Education Campaign**

A substantial element of the work with schools, sports groups and the faith communities will be educating their respective publics about screening. In addition to the targeted initiatives there will be a more general awareness campaign.

The goal of the campaign is to encourage the public to ask the organizations they and their

children are involved with about their screening policy.

### **Police Community Awareness**

Volunteer Canada would like to work with the police community to further their understanding of the principles and objectives of the National Education Campaign on Screening. We will seek out opportunities to meet with leaders from the police community and inform them and their constituencies of our work in this area.

### **Conclusion**

There is no easy way to protect millions of children involved with hundreds of thousands of activities operated by countless, mostly well-meaning, volunteers. There is no simple way to know if someone will harm a child. It takes skill and vigilance on the part of organizations. It takes parents and friends watching, supporting, and making sure that groups are screening properly.

Volunteer Canada is committed to providing organizations with information and resources to help them develop comprehensive screening measures to protect clients, staff, and the community from harm.