

THE CHRONICLE OF
PHILANTHROPY

NEWS AND ANALYSIS

FEBRUARY 01, 2018

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Foundations Push Grantees to Get Tough on Child Abuse

By Alex Daniels

As his victims took the stand in court one by one to confront convicted sexual abuser Larry Nassar, Suzann Stewart thought of the children who spent a week swimming and canoeing last summer at Camp Hope.

Stewart is executive director of the Family Safety Center, which, together with the YMCA of Greater Tulsa, supports a weeklong sleep-away camp for kids who have been exposed to domestic violence. Many of them have cycled through other organizations and agencies intended to help them. And like the dozens of gymnasts who were preyed upon by Nassar, the former USA Gymnastics team doctor, some have suffered at the hands of authority figures — the very people who should be taking care of them.

"People placed in a position of trust many times are the abusers," she says. "Some of these kids have been victimized by volunteers at other agencies. We know that sort of stuff happens."

To protect children from abuse, a group of foundations including the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Foundation, which gave nearly \$30,000 to the Family Safety Center in 2015, has pledged to support only nonprofits that have enacted comprehensive policies to prevent and address child abuse.

The message is simple: If you want our money, make sure you are protecting children.

Other grant makers that have signed the pledge include the Leichtag and Samuel Bronfman foundations and the Ruderman Family Foundation.

Work on the pledge originated three years ago when philanthropist Rochel Leah Bernstein-Deitcher asked Jumpstart about protections against child abuse at Jewish schools and camps, according to Joshua Avedon, co-founder of Jumpstart, a philanthropy research group that has worked extensively with Jewish organizations

Avedon hopes that other grant makers that are either secular or that support religious camps and schools outside of the Jewish tradition also step up and sign the pledge.

"You can work one organization at a time, but one of the best ways to get many organizations to do something is to make it a requirement of their funding," he says. "It's a lever for change."

'Best Intentions'

A survey Jumpstart conducted of 200 Jewish overnight camps and 140 Jewish day schools found gaps in how organizations prevented, detected, and responded to risks associated with child abuse.

Ninety percent of the schools said they felt they were prepared to deal with child sexual abuse. But when asked specifically about staff screening measures, training, guidelines for how staff interact with children, and reporting of possible abuse, nearly one-third of schools got low marks. The camps had higher expectations. They thought 95 percent had proper policies in place. But their adherence to recognized standards was lower, at 87 percent. Thirteen percent of camps scored poorly, more than double their expectations.

"Despite the best intentions of these organizations, many of them were confused about what the best practices were, or they weren't implementing them across the board," Avedon says.

The pledge is relatively simple. First it states that no community is immune from child abuse and expresses a desire for organizations that work with children to craft written policies on child abuse, including personnel screening, training programs, and legally compliant measures to respond to suspected wrongdoing.

Then the foundations pledge to give significant support only to groups that have "institutionwide measures that increase the safety of children in their care."

Few Specifics

The pledge is intentionally lacking in specifics, says Sandy Cardin, president of the Schusterman Foundation, because the grant makers didn't want to impose burdensome requirements on small organizations that couldn't possibly comply.

What it can do without prescribing specific mandates, he says, is press grantees to pay more attention to the issue.

He added that the movement wasn't in response to any specific incidents involving his foundation's grantees.

"We want to be sure they're thinking about it in a systematic way, that their boards have discussed it and they're constantly reviewing what's happening at their organization to make sure children are protected at all times," he says.

Grant makers have sought to pressure grantees on other personnel policies. There's the Ban the Box Philanthropy Challenge, which seeks to do away with the requirement that job applicants must say whether they have a criminal record. Dozens of grant makers have done away with the requirement themselves and are encouraging their grantees — and society at large — to follow suit.

"Changing policies and practices is important," said Damon Hewitt, executive director of the Executives' Alliance for Boys and Men of Color, a network of philanthropy leaders who developed the effort. "But what we're really trying to do is shift culture to prevent these kinds of harms."

However, unlike Ban the Box, the child-welfare pledge is built on more than just encouragement and moral leadership: There is the threat of losing funding if they don't comply.

Tougher Standards

The child-welfare pledge so far is vague in its requirements and enforcement. Participating foundations can seek compliance by requiring documentation that practices are being put in place and by making site visits. In the long run, however, the idea is that an independent organization would audit participating nonprofits.

Jay Ruderman, president of his family's foundation, says the time is right to jump-start the movement.

"It seems like the floodgates have opened," he says.

For Ruderman, signing the pledge was common sense. His family foundation supports disability rights. Often, he says, children with disabilities are the most vulnerable victims. When the media attention to sexual abuse dies down, he says, the pledge will be a way to keep the issue in the spotlight.

With grant money on the line, it's a good bet people will listen, he says:

"We're trying to use our pocketbooks to influence policy."



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