

Chapter 3 Human Resources

Sub-Chapter 3.11 Conduct and Disciplinary Measures

3.11.7 Preventing Sexual Exploitation and Abuse**Purpose and scope**

10. Objective of Policy: As an international public health agency, the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO or the Organization) is committed to improving the health of the people of the Americas. In carrying out the Organization's work, personnel have frequent interactions with people in the local communities, including during immunization campaigns, efforts to help contain disease outbreaks, and when providing emergency humanitarian assistance during natural disasters. Civilians in these situations are often vulnerable, and PAHO personnel and those working with and/or on behalf of PAHO must always adhere to the highest professional standards and never take advantage of anyone for personal gain or satisfaction, including exchanging goods or services for sexual purposes.
20. PAHO has zero tolerance for sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA), will robustly investigate any allegation that someone working in or associated with PAHO has engaged in SEA, and will hold perpetrators accountable to the fullest extent possible under the Organization's rules and policies.
30. The objective of this policy is to make it clear that PAHO personnel must behave at all times in an ethical and respectful manner when interacting with people in the local communities, to prevent SEA by PAHO personnel, to uphold the integrity of PAHO's programs, services, and reputation, and to provide a victim-centered approach when SEA occurs.
40. Policy Statement: Under this policy, PAHO:
 - 40.1. Prohibits its personnel from engaging, or attempting to engage, in any type of sexual exploitation or abuse with people who directly or indirectly receive services or assistance from PAHO and considers such acts to be misconduct, which constitutes grounds for disciplinary sanctions and possible criminal prosecution.
 - 40.2. Forbids the exchange of money, employment, goods, assistance, or services for sex, including sexual favors or other forms of humiliating, degrading, offensive, or exploitative behavior towards the people in the local communities that PAHO serves.
 - 40.3. Strictly forbids sexual activity with children (persons under the age of 18), regardless of the local age of consent or majority. Mistaken belief regarding the age of a child is not a defense.

- 40.4. Requires any suspicion of SEA to be reported immediately (see paragraph 80.1.2, below). Failure to do so will result in the imposition of disciplinary or other appropriate measures.
50. Application: This policy applies to all PAHO personnel who work in a PAHO/WHO workplace, regardless of the type of contract held or the duration of appointment. In this context, “workplace” means anywhere PAHO/WHO’s work takes place or where people meet at the direction or invitation of the Organization.
60. The principles of this policy also apply to individuals and entities collaborating with PAHO outside the workplace and third parties such as vendors, contractors, or partners that have a contractual relationship with PAHO.
70. Sexual Exploitation and Abuse: Sexual exploitation and abuse relate to the behavior of personnel and individuals or entities collaborating with PAHO towards people who directly or indirectly receive services or assistance from the Organization, sometimes referred to as “beneficiary populations”. Among these individuals, women and children are particularly at risk of SEA. Examples of beneficiary populations include people who receive humanitarian or emergency assistance during natural disasters, obtain medical treatment or other services during disease outbreaks, or receive vaccinations during immunization campaigns.
- 70.1. **Sexual exploitation** occurs when a person takes, or attempts to take, advantage of their position, power differential, or level of authority or trust to engage in sexual conduct with someone who is in a vulnerable situation, such as a person receiving food rations, shelter, or other goods and services. It also includes a person who is seeking employment, particularly in emergency or humanitarian situations, as well as any attempt to profit monetarily, socially, or politically from the sexual exploitation of another person.
- 70.2. **Sexual abuse** is a type of sexual assault, or attempt at sexual assault, involving unwanted or forced sexual acts committed without consent or by threats of physical aggression. Sexual abuse can occur against a person’s will, by force or coercion, or when a person is incapable of giving consent due to age, disability, duress, the influence of drugs or alcohol, or other factors.
- 70.3. Examples of acts of sexual exploitation and abuse include, but are not limited to:
- Demanding sex in exchange for a good or service, such as a job, medicine, vaccine, food ration, shelter, or any other benefit, irrespective if that benefit is conferred or not;
 - Forcing someone to engage in prostitution or pornography;

- Videotaping or photographing sexual acts and/or posting videos or pictures of a sexual nature;
- Using social media to post sexually explicit comments or make advances of a sexual nature;
- Sexual voyeurism, such as watching a person undressing, using the bathroom, or engaging in sexual acts;
- Administering alcohol or drugs (such as “date rape” drugs) to another person to engage, or attempt to engage, in sexual activity;
- Exposing one’s genitals;
- Touching or kissing; and/or
- Making gestures, comments, or suggestions of a sexual nature or innuendo.

70.4. SEA includes all types of sexual relations or sexual behavior with a child under the age of 18 years.

80. Obligations:

80.1. Obligations of PAHO personnel:

80.1.1. Duty to behave ethically: PAHO personnel must work and behave in a manner that serves the ideals of health for all, economic and social progress, international cooperation, and respect for human rights. They are expected to demonstrate the highest standard of conduct, both in their professional and personal relationships, and act with integrity and compassion at all times. PAHO personnel are strictly prohibited from engaging in any act(s) that amount to or could be perceived as SEA and are also expected to create and maintain an environment that prevents SEA. Managers and supervisors have an even higher level of responsibility to set the tone and behave in an exemplary manner.

80.1.2. Duty to report SEA: PAHO personnel who witness or reasonably suspect that SEA may have occurred have a duty to report it immediately to:

- (1) the Investigations Office (INV), including anonymously, at Report Wrongdoing to INV - PAHO/WHO | Pan American Health Organization;
- (2) anonymously through the Integrity Helpline at www.pahohelpline.org;
- (3) the Ethics Office at ethics@paho.org or to any PRSEAH Focal Point, who will submit the report to INV.

- 80.1.3. Protection against retaliation: Reporting possible SEA is always the right thing to do, and PAHO personnel must be able to freely report their concerns without fear of reprisals. To this end, PAHO assures that anyone who reports suspected SEA in good faith will be fully protected against retaliation in accordance with the *Protection Against Retaliation Policy*.
- 80.1.4. Training: PAHO personnel are required to undertake and successfully complete the United Nations online course on the *Prevention of Harassment, Sexual Harassment, and Abuse of Authority in the Workplace* and to participate in ongoing SEA training activities carried out by the Ethics Office.
90. PAHO's commitments: Any sexual exploitation and abuse of people who receive services and assistance from PAHO, especially in vulnerable situations, is abhorrent. PAHO commits to treat all claims of SEA seriously, with a victim-centered approach and in a timely and robust manner.
100. PAHO also commits to preventing SEA from occurring in the first place by raising awareness among the people in the local communities served by PAHO, providing the mechanisms to report suspected SEA, and demonstrating that PAHO is an ethical organization that has no tolerance for any type of misconduct by its personnel or anyone associated with the Organization.
110. People outside of PAHO: Anyone outside the Organization who is the victim of SEA, or who witnesses or becomes aware of a possible incident of SEA, should immediately report it to the Investigations Office at investigations@paho.org or through the INV portal, including anonymously, at: Report Wrongdoing to INV - PAHO/WHO | Pan American Health Organization through the Integrity Helpline at www.pahohelpline.org. Concerns may also be submitted to PAHO's Ethics Office at ethics@paho.org or to the PRSEAH Focal Point in the country where the alleged SEA took place.
120. People in the communities served by PAHO who report concerns of SEA will be protected by the Organization to the extent possible, and remedial action will be taken to redress any harm that has been experienced. This action will focus on a victim's specific needs, interests, and priorities, and will include medical, psychological, legal, and socioeconomic support and services.

130. Confidentiality: The Organization will take all necessary steps to the extent possible to protect the identity of individuals who report allegations of SEA. Nevertheless, it may become necessary in certain situations to disclose the identity of the person reporting SEA for due process purposes during an investigation or subsequent disciplinary proceeding. In such cases, an individual's identity will not be revealed until they have been notified in advance and granted protective measures to the extent possible.
140. Investigating SEA: INV will conduct investigations into allegations of SEA in accordance with PAHO's *Investigation Protocol* and pursuant to the scope of INV's authority, as outlined in its Terms of Reference. PAHO may also refer the matter to the relevant national or local authorities for criminal prosecution.
150. Disciplinary measures against PAHO staff members: PAHO views any act of SEA as a serious breach of its mandate to improve and safeguard the health of the people of the Americas. As a result, any staff member who is found to have engaged in SEA will be subject to disciplinary action, which may result in summary dismissal for serious misconduct.
160. Moreover, disciplinary action will be taken against anyone who fails to report suspected SEA or has encouraged or allowed it to happen.
170. Reports of SEA made in bad faith are also considered misconduct and will result in the imposition of disciplinary action.
180. In addition to disciplinary action, administrative measures may also be taken, and PAHO reserves the right to share information with other United Nations and international organizations about the measures taken as a result of acts of SEA.
190. Measures in case of suspected SEA by non-staff personnel: If the Organization reasonably believes that a consultant, service contractor, agency employee, government employee seconded to PAHO, or other non-staff member has engaged in SEA, or encouraged or allowed it to happen, PAHO can take one or more of the following measures:
- Immediately terminate the contractual relationship;
 - Return the individual to their employer;
 - Bar the individual from entering into future contractual or other relationships with PAHO;
 - Share information with other United Nations or donor agencies about the measures taken as a result of acts of SEA; and/or
 - Refer the case of SEA to the national or local authorities.

200. Measures in case of violation by employees or other persons engaged by third parties collaborating with PAHO: PAHO's standard contracts and Request for Proposals (RFP) specify that contractors shall take all reasonable measures to prevent and respond to SEA by their employees or any other persons engaged by the contractor to perform services under a contract or agreement with PAHO. Any breach of this provision by a contractor will entitle PAHO to take one or more of the following measures:

- Immediately terminate the contractual relationship or agreement;
- Bar the contractor or third party from entering into future contractual relationships with PAHO or from participating in future tenders;
- Share information with other United Nations or donor agencies about the measures taken as a result of acts of SEA; and/or
- Refer the case of SEA to the national or local authorities.

210. Questions about this policy:

210.1. Any questions regarding how to behave in a specific situation with people in the local communities that PAHO serves or regarding this policy can be submitted to ETH for guidance and advice at: ethics@paho.org or through the Integrity Helpline, including anonymously, at www.pahohelpline.org.

210.2. Questions or concerns regarding alleged acts of SEA can be submitted to INV by e-mail at investigations@paho.org or through the INV portal, including anonymously, at: [Report Wrongdoing to INV - PAHO/WHO | Pan American Health Organization](#).

Last reviewed by policy owner on 6 October 2025.