

170th SESSION OF THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

Washington, D.C., USA (hybrid session), 20-24 June 2022

Provisional Agenda Item 6.4

CE170/29
11 June 2022
Original: English

PREVENTING AND RESPONDING TO SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE IN PAHO

Background

1. At the outset, the Pan American Sanitary Bureau (PASB) wishes to note that it is not aware of any allegation of sexual exploitation and abuse involving its personnel or anyone collaborating with the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO). While this may appear to be a positive statistic and may reflect the integrity of PAHO personnel, sexual exploitation and abuse is often not reported due to social stigma, fear of retaliation, and lack of knowledge of reporting mechanisms.
2. Several international organizations and aid agencies, including the World Health Organization (WHO), have recently been compelled to address serious incidents of sexual exploitation and abuse involving their personnel. The detrimental impact of this abhorrent behavior on victims and communities and the significant reputational damage to the organizations involved dictate that the prevention and response to sexual exploitation and abuse must always be taken seriously, with no room for complacency. The message must be clear and categorical, PAHO will not tolerate such unpardonable behavior.
3. This report provides a brief overview of the actions and initiatives that PASB has taken to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse. It also details other measures and steps that are being taken to further strengthen PAHO policies and practices to minimize the risk of sexual exploitation and abuse, facilitate reporting, protect victims, and hold perpetrators accountable.

Analysis of Progress Achieved

PAHO Policy

4. The PAHO Policy on Preventing Sexual Exploitation and Abuse was issued in April 2021. The policy prohibits PAHO personnel (regardless of type of contract) from engaging, or attempting to engage, in any type of sexual conduct with individuals who depend on services or assistance provided by the Organization. In addition, it strictly
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forbids PAHO personnel from engaging, or attempting to engage, in any type of sexual activity with children (persons under the age of 18), regardless of the local age of consent or majority.

5. Given the lessons learned from the experience of WHO during the 10th Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of Congo, as well as the latest best practices, this relatively new policy is already being updated to:

- a) Clarify that it applies to everyone who depends on the services and assistance provided by PAHO and not merely to individuals who are “beneficiaries,” within the strict meaning of that term.
- b) Focus on a victim-centered approach by clarifying the level of medical, psychological, legal, and socioeconomic support—as well as material assistance and specialized services—required by victims, particularly children, as a result of sexual exploitation and abuse.
- c) Facilitate the reporting of allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse.
- d) Assure individuals who come forward that any allegation will be treated seriously and will be fully investigated.

6. PAHO is also developing a completely redesigned code of ethics, which addresses all forms of sexual misconduct in a stand-alone section. This section states that promoting health is central to the mission of PAHO and that everyone who works in the Organization, or receives assistance or services, should feel safe, supported, and empowered in every interaction.

Strengthening Capacity

7. Sufficient human resources are essential to effectively prevent and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse. The mandate for this area of work has been assigned to the PAHO Ethics Office, which consists of two professional staff members. To strengthen capacity in this area, a Senior Regional Coordinator position at the P5 grade level, specifically for the prevention and response to sexual exploitation and abuse, has been created and will be located in the Ethics Office. Similarly, a dedicated country focal point position at the P4 grade level has been created in the PAHO/WHO Representative Office in Venezuela to focus on prevention and awareness activities in that country. WHO is funding both positions, which are presently under recruitment.

8. In addition, serving PAHO personnel are being appointed as focal points in all PAHO/WHO Representative Offices. The responsibilities of the focal points include supporting the PAHO/WHO Representative in activities relating to the prevention and response to sexual exploitation and abuse, and collaborating with other United Nations agencies at the duty station on joint initiatives, victim services, and learning and development. The PASB has already appointed many of its country focal points and is in the process of identifying and appointing the remaining ones.

9. A multi-disciplinary working group, consisting of personnel at all levels and across the entire Organization, has also been established to provide insights, hands-on knowledge and guidance on how to effectively prevent and address sexual exploitation and abuse.

Training

10. The principal training program currently being used in PAHO for the prevention and response to sexual exploitation and abuse was developed by the United Nations. This mandatory course aims to raise awareness among personnel about how acts of sexual exploitation and abuse impact individuals and communities, and to instruct personnel on what to do about it. The course was launched in PAHO in February 2022 and, to date, 1,503 individuals working in PAHO have completed it. This represents a response rate of 61%. Action is being taken to ensure compliance by all personnel throughout the Organization.

11. The United Nations training program will be supplemented by more specialized training courses and materials developed by the Ethics Office as soon as the Regional Coordinator post is filled, and the incumbent joins the Organization. Sustained training will be particularly useful to individuals working as first responders in health emergencies. It will also be important to sensitize local communities on the standards of behavior expected of PAHO personnel and anyone affiliated with the Organization.

12. Training on the prevention and response to sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment is also provided as part of the regular training activities carried out by the Ethics Office.

Collaboration with the World Health Organization

13. PASB has been collaborating closely with the WHO Secretariat since the release of the final report of the Independent Commission on the allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse during the response to the 10th Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. PAHO staff assisted WHO in preparing its management response letter to the findings and recommendations contained in the report and reviewed various communications to WHO personnel. A PAHO staff member is also part of the WHO Sexual Exploitation and Abuse and Sexual Harassment Prevention and Response (PRSEAH) Task Team and actively participates in the PRSEAH Task Team's regular meetings.

Raising Awareness

14. Raising awareness, both internally and externally, is key to a successful program on the prevention and response to sexual exploitation and abuse. Since the release of the Report of the Independent Commission, several communications were issued to PAHO personnel to keep them informed of developments regarding the situation in WHO, to make it clear that PAHO has zero tolerance for sexual exploitation and abuse, and to remind

personnel that they have a responsibility to immediately report suspected sexual misconduct involving PAHO personnel or individuals collaborating with the Organization.

15. PASB has partnered with a company to help develop awareness materials (including posters) to promote ethical conduct and encourage individuals within and outside the Organization to speak up and report any concerns they may have. This awareness campaign will be centered around the theme of the redesigned code of ethics, “Health First, Integrity Always,” and will include an outreach component for local populations who interact with PAHO personnel or individuals working on behalf of the Organization. The awareness campaign, which will be launched during the second half of 2022, will also instruct people on how to access the PAHO Helpline to report a concern.

Reporting Allegations of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse

16. Historically, victims of sexual exploitation and abuse often have not come forward because they did not know how to report such misconduct or because they believed that such abhorrent behavior was part of an organization’s culture. Reporting misconduct involving PAHO personnel or individuals collaborating with the Organization must be simple and straightforward. Individuals must know that PAHO is an ethical organization that does not tolerate misconduct, will treat every allegation seriously, and will fully protect everyone involved from retaliation.

17. PASB has taken several steps to facilitate reporting. Firstly, allegations no longer need to be made in writing. Verbal allegations can be made either directly or indirectly and will be treated with the same level of importance as written complaints. Secondly, PASB has opened more pathways to file complaints. The telephone component of the Helpline is being reinstated, and people will have the option of speaking to a live operator in any of the four official languages of the Organization. This feature was discontinued several years ago due to minimal usage but is being reactivated to make it easier for individuals inside and outside of PAHO to access the Helpline and report a concern, even anonymously. Individuals inside and outside of PAHO can also continue to go online to report concerns in writing. Thirdly, PAHO is collaborating with other United Nations agencies at the country level to institute helplines that will be administered and accessible locally. The availability of two different helplines, one at the global level and one at the local level, will provide additional options for reporting misconduct.

18. To reflect the seriousness of all allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse, PASB will conduct a full investigation for all allegations. Every allegation will be robustly investigated, and a report will be sent to management so that it can take decisive and timely action, as appropriate.

19. When reporting possible misconduct, individuals inside and outside of PAHO must be comfortable knowing that they will be fully protected from retaliation and will not suffer any adverse consequences for reporting a concern in good faith. In 2021, PASB strengthened its Protection Against Retaliation Policy. Among other changes, the policy

now expressly states that individuals who submit an allegation of sexual harassment or sexual exploitation and abuse will be protected. The revised policy also clearly states that the Ethics Office plays a key role in protecting personnel from retaliation and ensuring their well-being.

20. PAHO recognizes the importance of promoting a speak-up culture and fostering an environment where people can speak freely and without concerns. Strong leadership at all levels of the Organization is required to reinforce this message at every opportunity.

Risk Management

21. Sexual exploitation and abuse can happen in any setting and there is always a risk that unscrupulous individuals working in PAHO will engage in this type of behavior. To safeguard the people served by the Organization, PASB will carry out a comprehensive risk assessment and mapping exercise to identify the areas and circumstances where there is a greater risk of sexual exploitation and abuse. This assessment will cover all areas of the Organization, with special emphasis on community-facing programs and health emergencies, where the risks are higher.

Due Diligence and Background Checks

22. Integrity is the cornerstone of the mandate and work of PAHO as an international public health organization. Consequently, the individuals working in the Organization must have the highest level of competence and integrity. To achieve this, carrying out background checks should be a key component of the hiring process. Background checks allow organizations to filter out applicants who may not meet the required standards of ethical behavior and protect organizations from various potential risks, helping to keep the workplace safe.

23. As a first step in conducting more comprehensive background checks, PASB started using the Clear Check screening database in December 2021.¹ This centralized database permits the sharing of information among United Nations entities about former United Nations personnel who have been terminated for engaging in sexual exploitation and abuse or sexual harassment, with the aim of preventing their reemployment elsewhere within the United Nations system. PASB has direct access to the Clear Check database and uses it to check candidates who are under consideration for all fixed-term, short-term, and non-staff assignments in the Organization. Additionally, PASB used the database to check the names of all serving personnel and was pleased to ascertain that no one currently working in PAHO appeared on the list.

24. While certainly useful, the Clear Check database has two inherent limitations. First, it only includes individuals who have previously worked in the United Nations system. Second, it relates exclusively to sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment and

¹ More information is available from: <https://unsceb.org/briefing-note-clear-check>.

does not include former United Nations personnel who have been terminated for other types of misconduct, including fraud and corruption. As a result, the database is not helpful in identifying applicants outside of the United Nations system who have committed misconduct, including of a sexual nature, or those who have engaged in other types of misconduct within the system.

25. To address this vulnerability, PASB is involved in discussions with companies that have the capability to conduct worldwide background checks, including criminal background checks and sex offender registry list verifications. A partner company will be identified soon, and a more stringent approach will be taken along with the use of the Clear Check database to prevent unscrupulous applicants and disgraced former United Nations personnel from being employed or contracted in PAHO.

Action by the Executive Committee

26. The Executive Committee is invited to take note of this report and provide any comments and recommendations it deems pertinent.

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