

Wednesday, 12 July 2023

To all Congregation Chairpersons and Secretaries & all Church Council Chairpersons and Secretaries,

Overview of Work Health and Safety (WHS) for Presbyteries and Congregations

Recent changes to WHS legislation affect us all. This document is designed to help congregations understand WHS requirements and processes.

Work Health and Safety (WHS) ensures that all people have a safe and healthy workplace. WHS includes anything in the workplace/environment that may cause physical or psychological harm for volunteers, paid staff, and ministers.

Early reporting of WHS hazards allows potential risks to be resolved before someone gets hurt. It is our responsibility to report work related hazards and incidents as soon as possible.

Understanding who is included in what category is important:

- i. Work Health and Safety considers ministers, paid staff, and volunteers as workers.
- ii. Return to Work and Workers Compensation only applies to paid individuals.
- iii. Church property is considered a work place.

There are 3 main WHS elements to be aware of:

- 1) Identification, reduction and/or elimination of hazards.
- 2) Reporting of hazards and incidents.
- 3) Return to work/recover at work plan.

Note: These 3 elements are a summary of more detailed processes. Please refer to the following flow chart for more detailed information: [Develop a WHS Framework](#)

1) Identification, reduction and /or elimination of hazards

The priority is to identify a possible hazard and minimize/remove it before it can cause harm. This is most effective when the whole congregation are pro-active. Having someone in your congregation authorised to look after WHS can help the congregation understand who they should report a potential risk too. Recent changes in the WHS legislation identify that harm to a person can be both physical and psychological (mental health, extreme stress).

Some examples to be aware of include (but not limited to):

- Inspect property both internally and externally for possible hazards. For example, walk around the property with an eye for how a small child or an elderly person might navigate their way.
- Review operations of church programs run both onsite and offsite. Consider the following for guidance: [Complete WHS Risk Assessment when planning for events and activities](#)
- Review workloads. Unrealistic expectations can cause both psychological and physical harm. This applies to both paid individuals and volunteers. Volunteers and paid employees/ministers need to know what is expected of them and be able to do their work safely. Ministers, volunteers or paid staff who are expected to do too much, and /or work in a difficult or uncertain work environment face a very real WHS risk.
- Review work expectations and practices to ensure safe practices are assured.
- Promote an environment where everyone feels safe, both physically and mentally.

These need to be reviewed at least annually. Providing a safe space for people is the first missional activity of every congregation. If people do not feel safe at church, the church will not have the trust of the wider community to engage in missional service.

The **Annual Property Maintenance Checklist** will help identify possible hazards:

<https://www.nswact.uca.org.au/shared-services/property-services/property-forms-and-resources/>

2) Reporting of hazards and incidents

Once a hazard has been identified, or an injury has occurred, it needs to be reported to the Synod Office within 48 hours, or sooner via email: wss@nswact.uca.org.au. The WHS Manager will then guide you on next steps, including workers compensation matters, if necessary.

Refer to this form to report a matter: <https://www.nswact.uca.org.au/media/yxuhlypc/hazard-injury-report-form.pdf>

If the work-related incident is a dangerous incident, or results in the serious injury, illness or death of a person, these matters also need to be notified to the state WHS regulator immediately (in addition to any notification to the workers compensation provider).

NSW: SafeWork NSW 13 10 50 <http://www.safework.nsw.gov.au/>

ACT: WorkSafe ACT 02 6207 3000 <https://www.worksafe.act.gov.au/>

For more information on what a reportable incident is, refer to this document:

<https://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/sites/default/files/2022-09/Incident-notification-fact-sheet-2015%20UD.PDF>

3) Return to work/recover at work plan

Following any work related injury of a worker (including volunteers, staff and ministers), it is important to ensure they are supported through their recovery.

For paid individuals, work related injuries need to be reported to the relevant workers compensation provider. You can seek assistance with Workers Compensation Claims Lodgement and Return to Work matters by completing the hazard-injury report form:

<https://www.nswact.uca.org.au/media/yxuhlypc/hazard-injury-report-form.pdf>

Once completed, email it to wss@nswact.uca.org.au. The WHS team will then put you in contact with the Return to Work and Workers Compensation Provider who will triage the situation, assist with gathering required information and notify the workers compensation insurer on your behalf.

Another important part of supporting recovery is to implement a Recover at Work Plan to enable the person to return to work in a manner that considers the overall wellbeing of the person and assists them towards a full recovery.

It is important that this plan is in line with any medical restrictions issued by a doctor and discussed and agreed with the person so that it does not impose work duties on the person that are unrealistic or impede their recovery. A form is to be completed and updated throughout the recovery process, so all people are clear on expectations. It is important that this plan be implemented and constantly monitored/updated to ensure it remains appropriate. The form is located here:

<https://www.nswact.uca.org.au/media/rmxp3bf5/recover-at-work-form.pdf>

Further information and contact

The NSW ACT Synod has a website that has further information and links:

<https://www.nswact.uca.org.au/shared-services/people-culture/work-health-and-safety-whs/>

Should you need to discuss specific issues or gain a better understanding of WHS matters, please contact the WHS Manager: wss@nswact.uca.org.au

Matters relating to WHS incidents are time critical. Please ensure your Church Council, and anyone else who may need to know, are familiar with these processes so responses to incidents can be attended to as soon as possible.

Yours sincerely,



Rev. Bronwyn Murphy
Associate Secretary, Synod of NSW and ACT