



Adapting Approaches: Creating a SHEA Prevention and Response Program During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Chemonics' [SHEA Prevention and Response Program \(PRP\) handbook](#) equips staff to prevent and respond to instances of SHEA in the workplace. The COVID-19 pandemic — and its resulting “[shadow pandemic](#)” of intensified violence against women, girls, and vulnerable people — requires that we rethink how to run our businesses, conduct day-to-day operations, and meaningfully support our staff. This addendum builds on the handbook designed for traditional workplace settings by providing recommendations that respond to new realities brought on by the pandemic.

Prevention

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated and even mutated familiar sexual and gender-based threats. Gender-based violence and domestic violence have increased dramatically since the outset of COVID-19,¹ and perpetrators of abuse have found new ways to harass, harm, and exploit.² Organizations committed to staff safety and security should seek innovative responses for staff affected by SHEA.

- **Train staff to recognize signs of domestic violence.** Due to the pandemic, staff may be sheltering in place with a perpetrator of gender-based or domestic violence. The [Women's Funding Network](#) has recently launched the #SignalForHelp campaign, mainstreaming a [one-handed gesture](#) that men, women, and children can use on video calls or in person to communicate that they feel threatened. Staff can learn to recognize this sign and activate their organization's reporting process.
- **Create entry points to access resources.** Despite the necessities of quarantine and a phased approach to office return, it is critical to recognize that for some, the workplace is safer than the home.³ When possible, leadership should consider ad hoc requests for office access in cases where staff require a safe space to access services and consultation away from home.
- **Convene your SHEA leads.** Engage leads to ensure application of regular safeguarding practices and assess whether procedures fit extended work-from-home arrangements. In particular, the SHEA lead should amend their list of local resources related to sexual harassment, exploitation, and abuse⁴ to include new initiatives or processes instituted during the pandemic.

¹ UN Women. (2020). “[COVID-19 and Ending Violence Against Women and Girls.](#)”

² Cruickshank, S. (May 13, 2020). “[Pandemic Poses Key Challenges for Preventing Child Sexual Abuse.](#)” *Johns Hopkins University Hub.*

³ Workplaces Respond to Domestic and Sexual Violence. (2020). “[When Work is Safer than Home: Supporting Workers Experiencing Violence During the Pandemic.](#)”

⁴ Goldstein, A., and Caria, S. (2019). [Sexual Harassment, Exploitation, and Abuse: A Handbook for Building a Prevention and Response Program.](#) Chemonics International Inc. (p. 16).

- **Encourage all staff to take advantage of mental-health services benefits.** Staff are likely experiencing increased generalized anxiety from changes and uncertainty brought about by this protracted emergency. This can compound for staff who experience insecurity in their own homes. The stress, fear, and helplessness felt in emergencies increase risks of violence against vulnerable people.⁵ Supervisors should encourage staff to use coping and resilience resources and allow staff the time to seek regular mental-health consultation when necessary.
- **Transition SHEA prevention training to interactive virtual platforms.** Migrate training on topics such as active bystander intervention and staff-care resources to virtual platforms. Offer training via live webinars instead of pre-recorded sessions to allow for interactivity and consider bandwidth requirements and mobile accessibility.

Response

- **Advocate for sexual and gender-based violence response programs as essential and life-saving services.** Programs, partners, and networks [should advocate](#) that public services such as government-run helplines, public-service announcements, and shelters be considered essential during the pandemic. Programs providing technical support to local and national governments should provide policy advice to integrate SHEA-responsive measures in tailored COVID-19 plans and budgets.
- **Provide accurate, actionable information on COVID-19 risks and pathways for care.** Survivors of sexual harassment, abuse, and exploitation may be less willing to seek help, particularly for legal support or health care, because of perceived risks of contracting COVID-19 and transmitting it to their families.⁶ Where feasible, information on referral pathways could be added to existing COVID-19 communications.
- **Ensure reporting mechanisms are available to staff and beneficiaries.** Extreme power inequalities between aid workers and beneficiaries make women and girls vulnerable to sexual exploitation and abuse. Survival needs may increase exploitation and protection risks, particularly for adolescent girls, including as a result of transactional sex as a negative coping mechanism.⁷ Promoting a multilayered reporting system⁸ diversifies choices available to survivors and responds to the needs of the most vulnerable. To maximize reach, organizations should consider all factors that could restrict access (e.g., literacy, mobility, eyesight, language, and mental health) and [tailor systems](#) to staff needs.

Host or participate in virtual training events with partners. Partners may need training and tools to prevent and respond to SHEA during and after the pandemic. Using the [SHEA PRP handbook](#), projects can build partner capacity to create effective SHEA prevention and response programs through virtual training. Some programs may have the capacity to host or facilitate partner training; others can share recommendations and best practices during local virtual training events and seminars.

⁵ Walker, T. (May 1, 2020). "[A Second, Silent Pandemic: Sexual Violence in the time of COVID-19](#)." *Harvard Medical School Center for Primary Care*.

⁶ Peterman, A., et al. (2020). "[Pandemics and Violence Against Women and Children](#)." *Center for Global Development*, Working Paper 528.

⁷ UN Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict. (2020). "[Implications of COVID-19 for the Prevention of and Response to Conflict-Related Sexual Violence](#)."

⁸ DFID Safeguarding Unit. (2018). "[Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Harassment \(SEAH\) in the international aid sector: Victim and survivor voices: main findings from a DFID-led listening exercise](#)."