



FROM PLEDGE TO ACTION

FEBRUARY 2023

# CORE STANDARDS FOR SURVIVOR-CENTERED SUPPORT OF SEXUAL EXPLOITATION, ABUSE, AND HARASSMENT



## PURPOSE AND SCOPE

For the purpose of these Core Standards, the definition of “survivor-centered support” is:

*Consistently and continuously centering the voiced priorities of the survivor to ensure the needs, rights, and agency of the survivor are realized in all aspects of prevention, support, recovery, response, and accountability.*

A survivor<sup>1</sup> of sexual exploitation, abuse, and harassment (SEAH)<sup>2</sup> is entitled to the essential and required level of support set out below, regardless of which organization employs/employed the alleged perpetrator or where the incident occurs/occurred. These Core<sup>3</sup> Standards were created to ensure consistency in the provision of survivor support across the development and humanitarian sectors. To date, the absence of a clear global standard for support provided to survivors of SEAH has resulted in the uneven delivery of care across organizations, gaps in support services, and further harm to survivors.

When a development or humanitarian worker inflicts harm on a community member, it is the employing organization’s responsibility to respond with compassion, care, and effective support services. Access to support services should not be dependent on the substantiation of the report<sup>4</sup>, a survivor’s willingness to cooperate with an investigation, or an organization’s ability to provide support services directly. The employing organization is responsible for ensuring access to support services either directly or via referral.

These Core Standards apply to both adult and child survivors. A child is defined as anyone under the age of 18 years old. Where ‘survivor’ is mentioned, the reader should understand that for children this captures

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<sup>1</sup> Survivors of SEAH are individuals who have experienced sexual violence perpetrated:

(1) By an individual employed by a humanitarian or development organization.

(2) While that individual is actively working to carry out the objectives of the organization.

Survivors can include, but are not limited to, direct program participants, host community members, and staff.

<sup>2</sup> The full extent of these Core Standards may not be required for someone that has not experienced physical or bodily harm. Please see the FAQs for further information.

<sup>3</sup> “Core” is used to define an essential, required level of care for the survivor that each organization must meet if there is an SEAH incident.

<sup>4</sup> Please see FAQ.

the child survivor and the protective and appropriate guardian(s), whose permission must be sought alongside that of the child.<sup>5</sup>

## GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Throughout these Core Standards, the guiding principles, aligned with long-established industry standards for [gender-based violence \(GBV\) minimum service provisions](#), are:

1. Safety
2. Confidentiality
3. Respect and treat with dignity
4. Non-discrimination
5. Do no harm
6. Agency of the survivor
7. In partnership

## CORE STANDARDS

These seven guiding principles necessitate that the survivor<sup>6</sup> is the driving force behind all decisions and actions taken regarding support services, including when actions are taken, and the types of support services to be provided.

Survivors of SEAH are entitled to the essential level of care laid out below. Informed consent is a foundation of this document: none of the below provisions should be provided to survivors without their informed consent. Further, all decisions must be made in coordination with the survivor. Organizations should never move forward with a service provision that the survivor feels will cause further harm.

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<sup>5</sup> [Standard Operating Procedures for the Child Survivors of Sexual Violence](#), page 18-19: Taking consent from a child survivor.

<sup>6</sup> If that survivor is a child, a parent or guardian will be making decisions on behalf of the survivor and may be taking actions on their behalf.

## **CORE STANDARD 1: SAFETY**

To ensure the safety of the survivor and immediate family members, the survivor must provide informed consent<sup>7</sup> before any further actions can be taken with regards to any safety measures or service provision. Organizations must ensure, at a minimum, that a survivor of SEAH can move forward without the fear of retaliation and further harm.

1. A risk assessment and safety planning should be conducted *with* the survivor, not for them.
  - a. Risk assessment and safety planning should be frequently monitored. Recommended measures should be implemented from the time of report until, at a minimum, three months after the conclusion of the organization's administrative investigation.
  - b. As directed by the survivor:
    - i. Should the survivor desire to be relocated, the organization must provide transport to and shelter in an alternate location, along with all necessary living costs for the duration of the temporary location.
    - ii. If a survivor needs to change schools, assistance should be provided for transportation, school fees, uniforms, and other related expenses.
    - iii. Should the survivor need to be permanently relocated, assistance should be provided until the survivor considers themselves self-sufficient or 12 months following the conclusion of the investigation, whichever applies sooner.
    - iv. Should the survivor request assistance beyond the 12-month post investigation period, the organization must undertake an assessment and document the rationale for the decision if the request is denied.
    - v. The type and quality of the accommodation cannot be lower for the survivor at their relocation than what was previously available to them.

## **CORE STANDARD 2: MEDICAL CARE**

A medical assessment should be offered to every survivor who reports an experience of sexual exploitation, abuse, and harassment, even if the survivor did not report physical harm. In some contexts, words such as

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<sup>7</sup> For consent to be informed, the person giving consent must have been provided all information necessary to make their decision, including information on their rights, and the pro and cons of different potential actions and outcomes.

sexual assault and rape may carry too much stigma or not be the vocabulary used by the survivor. For this reason, it is essential that all survivors are provided with an immediate medical assessment.

The medical care standards below are aligned with established minimum standards for [GBV care management](#):

1. Immediate medical care<sup>8</sup> should be offered to all survivors who come forward, regardless of the experience they present when disclosing. This must include:
  - a. Care for any physical injuries that may have resulted from the reported experience and access to the standard types of medication in a [post-rape kit](#).
  - b. Funds for any associated costs to access this medical care, including transport, payment for medical services, medications, etc.
  - c. On-going medical care, where needed, as this may require long-term hospitalization or physical rehab in the event of serious bodily harm.
2. If the survivor is pregnant:
  - a. Pre-natal care must be provided throughout the pregnancy.
  - b. Free or facilitated access to a year of pediatric medical care and support should be provided.
  - c. If on the ‘balance of probabilities’<sup>9</sup> it is determined that the pregnancy was a result of the exploitation or abuse of an employee of the organization, or upon proof of a paternity test, a further two years of pediatric medical care should be provided.

### **CORE STANDARD 3: PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT**

Humanitarian and development organizations have an obligation to, with the informed consent of the survivor, facilitate access to appropriate, culturally sensitive, and accessible forms of psychosocial support (PSS). Culturally appropriate PSS looks different across contexts, and may include one-to-one counseling or therapy, support groups, talk therapy, art therapy, and more. It is the responsibility of the organization to ensure that all PSS provided is culturally sensitive.

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<sup>8</sup> These referral medical services should include a provider who has been trained in survivor-centered clinical management of sexual violence and will cause no further harm to the survivor.

<sup>9</sup> On the ‘balance of probabilities’ is a lesser standard of proof than is used in most criminal courts and can be articulated as more likely than not.

Immediate and continuous PSS should be offered in a language that is preferred by the survivor and is culturally sensitive at the location or origin of the survivor. Appropriate and desired PSS services should be the determining factor, not cost.

1. The support should be available at no cost to the survivor for a minimum of 12 months after the reporting of their experience.
2. If a survivor requires support beyond this 12-month period, a PSS specialist should evaluate this request and care should be extended based upon the recommendation.
3. If the organization has left the location, it still has a responsibility to facilitate local avenues of PSS support for the survivor.

#### **CORE STANDARD 4: ACCOUNTABILITY**

As the criminal justice system can cause further harm, it is an adult survivor's decision about whether to choose this route. If the survivor is a child, a criminal offense must be reported to the authorities in most countries. If the case does not go to the criminal justice system, there is a need to have robust internal administrative accountability measures in place within an organization.

1. Administrative investigations are a requirement because an organization has a responsibility to prevent further harm to individuals.
  - a. If an organization does not have the capacity to conduct such an investigation themselves, they must ask for support from their donors, primary grant holder, or others to provide such support.<sup>10</sup>
  - b. Administrative investigations must never seek a level of proof higher than 'on the balance of probability' unless legally required to do so.
    - i. Where local legal frameworks for administrative action prevent appropriate disciplinary actions, a 'not eligible for hire' or similar designation should be noted in the employee file. This is aligned with emerging standards and good practices for the sector, including those outlined in the [Misconduct Disclosure Scheme](#).
  - c. Where the survivor feels that it is safe and will not cause further harm, the organization is required to facilitate access to local criminal or civil courts. This should at a minimum

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<sup>10</sup> [https://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/OCHA\\_SEA\\_Fund\\_flyer%20%281%29.pdf](https://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/OCHA_SEA_Fund_flyer%20%281%29.pdf)

include, with the survivor’s informed consent and input, facilitating local legal advice in a language understood by the survivor, and appointing an individual who is appropriately trained and experienced accompany the survivor to meetings and court dates if this is desired by the survivor.<sup>11</sup> The organization must cover the transport costs to and from meetings with legal advisors and court dates.

- d. It is strongly recommended that organizations liaise with and seek advice from local legal aid or justice-oriented organizations where they operate. It is further recommended that organizations develop relationships with local embassies who often can provide limited legal advice or advice on vetted local lawyers.
- e. Where requested, organizations must comply with requests from the local judiciary to provide evidence about the current location of the accused. This includes information to facilitate paternity or child support cases brought forward by the survivor.
- f. A criminal investigation takes precedence over an administrative investigation. However, there are some circumstances where it might be appropriate to undertake a parallel investigation, such as when considering the length of time it might take for the criminal investigation to conclude.<sup>12</sup>

## LONG-TERM RECOVERY

Recovery from SEAH is not linear. It does not follow a simple path, nor is recovery linked simply to the provision of medical and PSS support. In the context of these Core Standards, SEAH is occurring at the hands of members in the humanitarian and development community. Organizations have an obligation to prevent SEAH, and when they fail to do so, they have an increased obligation to mitigate the harm caused.

1. The organization should provide a long-term contact number and email to local organizations and the local government when an organization exits a location. This is to ensure that survivors have

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<sup>11</sup> This should be an individual who the survivor is comfortable with and who is going to support and advocate for the survivor. This may be a member of staff, an individual trained in case management, a victim advocate, or any staff member of the survivor’s choosing. Depending on the survivor’s wishes, this person can either be internal or external to the organization.

<sup>12</sup> For more information, please consult the [Sexual Exploitation, Abuse, and Harassment Investigation Guide: Recommended Practice for the Humanitarian and Development Sector](#) by CHS Alliance in partnership with Humentum

access to reporting avenues and support services should they raise concerns after the organization has ceased to operate in the area.

2. For children born out of acts of SEA, financial child support until the age of 18, including payment for all educational expenses, should be facilitated by the organization, recoverable through available legal pathways in any given context. This also applies to child survivors of SEA.
3. With the goal of self-determination, organizations are obligated to facilitate and pay for survivors to access education, livelihood, or other basic assistance for a minimum of 12 months, should this be the survivor's wish. Access to these services can be essential for taking back the power that was taken through the act of exploitation, abuse, and harassment.
4. Because the impact of an SEA incident on a survivor can be cyclical, or increase rather than decrease over time, a survivor might seek additional services from an organization months or years after the conclusion of initial support. It is an organization's responsibility to meet the needs of the survivor without a statute of limitations on when the care can be initiated or restarted. Should a survivor request assistance beyond the 12-month post-investigation period, the organization must undertake an assessment and document the rationale for the decision if denied.
5. Should an organization wish to provide a settlement in lieu of meeting the standard set out for long-term recovery, the following is required to ensure that the Core Standards are not undermined:
  - a. Survivors must be presented with both the option of long-term recovery support aligned with the Core Standards in addition to the proposed settlement in lieu.
  - b. Survivors must be provided with independent external council before signing any settlement agreement and they must be given a minimum of three months to review the agreement.
  - c. A settlement agreement cannot prohibit the survivor from seeking future support for long-term medical care that results from the act of exploitation, abuse, and harassment, but that was not or could not have been known at the time of settlement.

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

### **Q: WHY DID INTERACTION DEVELOP THE CORE STANDARDS FOR SURVIVOR-CENTERED SUPPORT?**



There is currently no standard for the provision of support services to survivors of SEAH across the international development and humanitarian sector. This means that a survivor may receive a different level and standard of care depending on which organization employs or employed the perpetrator. Adequate support services are a critical component of recovery for survivors of SEAH and the standard of these support services should not be contingent upon the perpetrator’s employer.

InterAction Members reiterated a need for clearer information and guidance on what level of care organizations are obligated to provide in the instance of an SEAH incident. In response, these Core Standards were developed by a sub-group of the From Pledge to Action Working Group. This process was led by colleagues representing a range of InterAction Members.

**Q: DO ORGANIZATIONS HAVE TO CONTINUE TO PROVIDE SUPPORT SERVICES TO SURVIVORS IN CASES WHEN AN ADMINISTRATIVE INVESTIGATION FINDS THE REPORT TO BE UNSUBSTANTIATED?**

The Core Standards apply to all survivors of SEAH. As outlined above, survivors of SEAH are individuals who have experienced sexual violence perpetrated:

1. By an individual employed by a humanitarian or development organization.
2. While that individual is actively working to carry out the objectives of the organization.

Survivors can include, but are not limited to, direct program participants, host community members, and staff.

The outcome of the investigation	How this impacts the Core Standards	Notes
Before an investigation has concluded.	The survivor is entitled to the full extent of these core standards.	If the investigation is conducted in a timely manner, this will likely not yet include long-term support.
The report is substantiated.	The survivor is entitled to the full extent of these core standards.	
The report is unsubstantiated due to insufficient evidence.	The survivor is entitled to the full extent of these core standards.	If the report is unsubstantiated due to insufficient evidence, it

		should not impact the services a survivor is entitled to. It is not the burden of the survivor to provide sufficient evidence to substantiate a case.
The report is unsubstantiated and is proven to be false.	The organization may stop providing support services to the complainant.	

**Q: WHY SHOULD ORGANIZATIONS CONTINUE TO PROVIDE SUPPORT SERVICES TO SURVIVORS IN CASES WHERE SEAH IS UNSUBSTANTIATED DUE TO LACK OF EVIDENCE?**

False reports of sexual violence are extremely rare. Further, in many contexts, there is a high degree of social stigmatization for survivors of sexual violence. As such, even when a report is unsubstantiated due to insufficient evidence, it is more likely than not that SEAH occurred and the organization must continue to provide services to the survivor.

**Q: WHAT IS AN ORGANIZATION’S OBLIGATION TO A SURVIVOR OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT?**

It is important to note that in the context of these Core Standards, sexual harassment refers to “a continuum of unacceptable and unwelcome behaviours and practices of a sexual nature that may include, but are not limited to, sexual suggestions or demands, requests for sexual favours, and sexual, verbal, or physical conduct or gestures that are or might reasonably be perceived as offensive or humiliating.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, program participants, host community members, staff, and volunteers, among others, can all experience sexual harassment.

While sexual harassment may not result in physical or bodily harm, it can still have lasting emotional, psychological, and social effects on a survivor. Thus, it is critical that organizations provide support to survivors of sexual harassment. The same Core Standards of Safety, Psychosocial Support, and Accountability also apply to survivors of sexual harassment, however, the full extent of the Medical and

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<sup>13</sup> CHS Alliance

Long-Term Recovery Core Standards might not be necessary for a survivor of sexual harassment. Should a survivor of sexual harassment request assistance beyond the 12-month post investigation period, the organization must undertake an assessment and document the rationale for the decision if denied.

**Q: WHAT ARE THE OBLIGATIONS OF AN ORGANIZATION TO PROVIDE ACCESS TO SUPPORT SERVICES WHEN THEY ARE NOT READILY OR IMMEDIATELY AVAILABLE IN A LOCATION?**

While it may be logistically challenging and financially burdensome when support services are not easily accessible, this does not absolve an organization's obligation to facilitate the survivor's access to that service. Organizations need to map services and plan for how to address service gaps if an incident should occur.

**Q: RESPONDING AS OUTLINED IN THE CORE STANDARDS FOR SURVIVOR-CENTERED SUPPORT WILL CARRY A COST. WHY SHOULD THE ORGANIZATION BE OBLIGATED TO PAY FOR THESE SUPPORT SERVICES, AND CAN THEY RECOVER THE COSTS THROUGH OTHER SOURCES?**

It is a basic responsibility of all international development and humanitarian organizations to ensure that their programs do not inflict harm on the individuals and communities they are seeking to serve. When an employee of one organization perpetrates SEAH against a community member, it is a failure of this responsibility—a failure that has long-lasting, immeasurable consequences on the survivor. These standards help to ensure that organizations are accountable to survivors when incidents do occur.

Organizations of different sizes will have different models for budgeting the costs of responding to instances of SEAH. It is recommended that organizations plan a budget for these support services in advance. This can be done through unrestricted funding, allocations, grant applications, or other processes.

It is worth noting that where the survivor has insurance that can cover the cost for a service, this can be utilized. If unduly burdensome on the survivor or not sufficient, the organization has a responsibility to cover this cost.

**Q: WHY DO WE HAVE TO OFFER MEDICAL CARE AND PSS TO ALL SURVIVORS WHO REPORT SEXUAL EXPLOITATION, ABUSE, AND HARASSMENT?**

The Core Standards specify that immediate medical care should be offered to *all* survivors who report SEAH, not just those who present with clear physical injuries or that have reported an instance of sexual assault or rape. Both the experience and reporting of SEAH can be a stigmatizing experience for survivors. It is not uncommon for survivors to report a less intrusive and physical experience than what occurred. In many places around the world, the use of words like ‘sexual assault’ or ‘rape’ may not align with the vocabulary of survivors, or it may be common to use euphemisms to discuss these experiences. To ensure that all survivors of SEAH can access medical care if needed, medical care should be provided to all survivors, regardless of the experience they initially report. There are too many barriers in place for survivors and referrals to medical care should not be an added barrier.

The Core Standards also require that PSS services be offered regardless of the experience reported by a survivor in recognition that experiences will impact survivors differently. We cannot assume that a sexual harassment situation will not result in mental or emotional trauma, or that a rape survivor will need intensive therapy. Survivors are individuals with different needs and their responses will be impacted by past experiences and other factors that may not be known to the individual providing case management. Ensuring that access to PSS is provided from the moment a survivor discloses and continues to be made available is a basic level of care that should be expected from organizations.

**Q: WHAT IS AN ORGANIZATION’S OBLIGATION WHEN A SERVICE THAT THE SURVIVOR HAS REQUESTED TO ACCESS IS FREE FROM ONE PROVIDER, BUT THEY ARE INSISTING ON ACCESSING A PAID SERVICE FROM ANOTHER? FOR EXAMPLE, A SITUATION WHERE AN ORGANIZATION HAS A CONTRACTUAL AGREEMENT WITH A PSS PROVIDER, HOWEVER A SURVIVOR REQUESTS ACCESS TO A DIFFERENT PSS SERVICE THAT COMES AT A COST.**

Organizations can offer access to support services that are free or already contracted, however there are many reasons a survivor might not feel comfortable or safe with specific services. An organization should focus on supporting the survivor, not on making a determination as to whether the reason the survivor is uncomfortable is valid. The wishes of the survivor should be honored even if this means that additional costs may need to be borne by the organization. Quality care that will provide support to the survivor, in their language of choice, and where the survivor feels safe is the goal of accessing support services. Facilitating this is the obligation of the organization.