



## YMCA OF GREATER HOUSTON

### Child Abuse Prevention

Over a YMCA career spanning more than three decades, and with special emphasis for the past ten years, I have championed efforts within the YMCA and in local communities to protect children from sexual abuse. Children who have their childhoods stolen from them in this way often carry their trauma into adulthood with lasting, often invisible, wounds. When caring adults break their sacred trust with children, the victims too often experience a lifetime of isolation, shame, fear, and self-destructive impulses.

Thanks to the efforts of researchers, we now know that those who wish to do harm to children behave in largely predictable ways. By opening ourselves up to training, communication, and dialogue about this predatory behavior, we can disrupt attempts to manipulate innocent children. For that reason, we must all work together to create communities where no child has to endure the trauma of sexual abuse.

We know that in order to gain the trust of a child, as well as that of their parents or caretakers, offenders behave in visible ways. We are calling out those behaviors and calling upon all adults to be on the lookout and to never tolerate it. In addition to best practices at the Y like background checks, codes of conduct for staff and volunteers, and ongoing training, we are taking our internal protection efforts beyond our walls. To would-be offenders throughout our communities, our message is clear: "We are on the lookout for your grooming behaviors and we will see you."

Throughout the year, our Houston-area YMCAs are holding "awareness building initiatives," providing adult training for community members, and building partnerships with subject matter experts, other youth serving organizations, and advocacy groups. These undertakings are core to our local efforts.

In addition, a national effort is underway. I currently serve as the chair of the National Alliance of Youth Serving Organizations for Child Protection, and I was previously a chair of the Guardians Against Sexual Abuse, a coalition of YMCA leaders pushing for more public dialogue and continuous quality improvement of YMCA protection practices. With these efforts, we hold ourselves to a higher standard of protection of the children, families and communities we are called to serve, while also honoring the pain and suffering of those who are survivors.

Recent legislative action in many states, including Texas, is lengthening the statute of limitations for victims of sexual abuse. At the Y, we salute that effort in full knowledge that childhood traumas are too often buried. In particular, sexual abuse victims often keep their stories in the dark out of fear that their experience will be viewed as a personal blemish.

Shining more light on this issue and engaging more adults in the cause of protecting youth from sexual abuse is worthy of our collective investment of time, funding, and other resources.

I am grateful to our Board of Directors for engaging with me in this conversation and becoming champions of children. I am also grateful to our more than 175,000 members for joining us in this dialogue. And lastly, I am grateful to our local partners who continue to look out for all children everywhere.

A recent study published by [Darkness to Light](#), established that 1 in 10 children experience sexual abuse before turning 18, so we know there are many survivors in our midst. To all survivors, please know that we believe you, we know that you are not at fault or to blame, and we are here to help.

Please follow the [attached link](#) to learn more about how you can become a guardian for all children in your community.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Stephen Ives".

Stephen Ives  
President and CEO – YMCA of Greater Houston