

# Digital Protection of Children

Lessons Learned from Community Efforts to create a universal data model for child protection.

**NetHope's Center for the Digital Non-profit**

Jean Louis Echochard and Nicholas M Kerastas

## Contents

Acknowledgements.....	3
Coalition Members .....	3
Coalition Partners .....	3
Aims.....	4
Methodology.....	4
Outcomes .....	5
Feasibility .....	6
Readiness .....	6
Data and Technology .....	7
People and Process .....	7
Collaborative Approach .....	8
Timing.....	8
Competition, Confidentiality, and Sensitivity .....	8
Barriers.....	9
Adoption and Uptake.....	9
Budget.....	9
Centralization at Global Level .....	9
Data Fragmentation .....	9
Data - Policy Gap.....	10
Data Retention .....	10
Data Utilization .....	10
Customizations for Country Programs.....	10
Incentives for Uptake.....	11
Internal and External Reporting Priorities .....	11
Standard Socialization.....	11
System Outsourcing.....	11
Conclusion.....	12

## Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank this initiative's primary supporters, Danielle Lilly, John Zoltner, Nick Hurlburt, as well as Alexandros Mouratchanidis and Cesar Montalvo for sharing their expertise and contributing on behalf of their respective organizations.

Appreciation is extended to supporters of the NetHope Collective Impact Fund as well as Box.com for making this work possible.

## Coalition Members



## Coalition Partners



## Aims

In the lead up to the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of NetHope and the 2021 Annual Summit, a group of humanitarian stakeholders with expertise in child safety, protection, and advocacy united to identify how our community leverages data to ensure safety of children and other vulnerable client communities from harm. In partnership with Save the Children International, ChildFund International, numerous other NetHope Members, and support from corporate partners, the community of child safety advocates came together under the banner of the Digital Protection of Children (DPC) Coalition. Using a distinct and explorative methodology predicated upon previous successes with the Frontline Humanitarian Logistics (FHL) Initiative, this initiative followed these steps:

1. Conducted a learning exercise (this document) to identify how the NetHope community uses data to protect children from digital risk and physical harm.
2. Collected existing community standards and crosswalk into a minimal viable product.
3. Facilitated the development and implementation of solutions based on a universal data standard.
4. Integrated the universal data standard into existing solutions for protecting children.

The primary objective of the DPC Coalition is the creation of a universal data standard which protects children from contact and conduct risks created by harmful actors within social sector organizations and communities of action. Such a standard would allow for the greater uptake of incident reporting mechanisms (i.e., hotlines, helpline, or equivalent reporting systems) which contribute to the safeguarding of children as well as other vulnerable client communities. This standard would enable information interoperability amongst child safety practitioners (both internal to organizations and across the community) ensuring the proactive safety of the most vulnerable client communities. This report represents the main output of the first stage, the lessons learned exercise.

## Methodology

Since its 2021 Global Summit, NetHope has been hosting monthly Coalition meetings seeking to understand how the Member community leverages data to ensure the safeguarding and protection of children, as well as other vulnerable client communities. Each meeting served as an opportunity for Members to share information and speak to pre-selected topics related to data utilization in this space. These collaborations focused on the following topics:

- Stakeholders and sector peers who should be included in the DPC Coalition (i.e., Tech Matters and THORN, among others).
- Organizational priorities and perspectives of risk facing children or other vulnerable communities (e.g., the 4 C's Classification schema).
- Existing processes, policies, terminologies, and standards around the protection of children in both digital and physical contexts.
- Data standards and digital solutions which protect children and other vulnerable communities from harm (e.g., reporting hotlines, case management systems, or similar safeguarding mechanisms).

- Barriers on the unification of organizational priorities, data standards, and digital solutions that our community leverages to safeguard children and young people from harm amplified by digital environments.

Supplemental data was also acquired through one-on-one conversations with Members and outside stakeholders of the child safety and protection ecosystem. Additionally, NetHope collected the safeguarding strategies, sector terminologies, as well as best practices around the protection of children. Upon gathering this input, existing standards, and hosting meetings, the entirety of this information has been kept by NetHope and now supports the findings summarized in this document.

## Outcomes

This document represents the primary deliverable from the first stage of the DPC Coalition (i.e., lessons learned) and highlights the journey of the Coalition as the group identified the most viable approach for development of a universal data standard that positively contributes to the digital and physical safety of children or other vulnerable communities.

Presently, the NetHope Membership does not have a heavy programming presence in risks associated with content review or analysis (i.e., child sexual abuse material or CSAM). Two participating Members had programs in the content space. Rather, the DPC Coalition identified emerging synergy amongst the Members around the information ecosystem that supports incident reporting mechanisms (i.e., hotlines, helplines, or equivalent system) for safeguarding against contact and conduct risks. Within this priority area there is a significant gap of data architecture that would enable incident reporting mechanisms and relevant digital tools to achieve greater effectiveness to safeguard children and other vulnerable communities from both physical and digitally derived contact and conduct risks.

As a result, innovations which could help protect children, maintain the integrity of programs, and increase transparency are stifled through a fractured information supply chain. Thereby denoting the need for the development of a universal data standard for incident reporting mechanisms (i.e., hotlines, helplines, or equivalent system) for safeguarding children against contact and conduct risks.

The integration of existing standards and approaches into a shared process for safeguarding or incident management needs support beyond the convening of this Coalition. Specifically, the Coalition needs to establish funding, incentives for standard uptake, and change-management to support future integration. Accounting for people, process, and technology would offer the greatest contribution for the safety of children and other vulnerable affected communities. To maximize effectiveness, the development of a comprehensive toolkit for the implementation of incident reporting mechanisms and processes should be considered, and it should include a universal data standard.

## Feasibility

Below are factors which influenced the viability and sustainability of this initiative, as the Coalition pursued a universal data standard and leveraged solutions that support incident reporting mechanisms (i.e., hotlines, helplines, or equivalent) for safeguarding children.

### Readiness

The DPC Coalition recognizes the need for the development of a universal data standard for incident reporting mechanisms (i.e., hotlines, helplines, or equivalent) which support the safeguarding of children. Efforts toward data standard development are not as useful as holistic system development for incident management. To be effective for nonprofits, the creation of standards should be incorporated into a toolkit for implementing incident management systems for safeguarding. Harmonizing existing incident management systems for the development of toolkit will require a wider mandate from the DPC Coalition going forward.

Incident management systems for the safeguarding of children are built upon critical organization policies on standards of conduct, community feedback mechanisms, and confidential reporting. Additional best practices are derived from sector terminologies, development guidelines, as well as mandatory compliance requirements from partner and donor institutions. Some organizations are just developing incident management systems for safeguarding while other participating Members have had such mechanisms in place for over a decade. Data standards were not available for most participating organizations. It is critical that the development of a universal data standard for incident reporting be integrated into the existing foundational elements of Member approaches on safeguarding.

Multiple efforts exist across the social sector and child safety ecosystem to harmonize terminologies, policies, and data standards safeguarding children from harm. Several participating Members of the Coalition are already a part of such efforts across perspectives of risk (content, contact, contact, and contract). There is an opportunity for NetHope to join forces with other organizations ready to address the gap of universal data standards for safeguarding and incident management.

Several Member organizations that prioritize child safeguarding were hesitant or unable to participate in the Coalition. The emphasis on data collection and reporting did not fit existing safeguarding standards (that are mostly physical); others had just begun developing safeguarding frameworks and incident management systems; and there was as a hesitancy to participate in initiatives around information interoperability in such a sensitive space. Still others were limited by the time commitment and lack of funding to support collaborative efforts such as this Coalition.

The digital maturity of the sector currently is insufficient to support the specific development of a universal data standard for safeguarding and incident management (i.e., hotlines, helplines, or equivalent). However, the potential return from the future development of such a standard is present, growing, and recognized, which can be leveraged for future initiatives.

## Data and Technology

Within the current information environment, the existence of data frameworks and taxonomies which support incident reporting mechanisms (i.e., hotlines, helplines, or equivalent) for safeguarding are not commonplace amongst Members. Such data frameworks and taxonomies were either non-existent or not readily accessible at the time of this document. This trend can be explained by organizational dependence upon outsourced systems (i.e., Navex Ethics Point, Syntro Lighthouse, or equivalent reporting mechanism) or an ad-hoc developed case management systems (i.e., whistleblowing or confidential incident reporting as well as manual confidential reporting) implemented at the country and local level. Developed reporting mechanisms are strategically placed within wider safeguarding strategies and are developed on an ad-hoc basis with internal IT functions or with external product vendors. Global headquarters organizations actively sought to empower and build community capacity to strengthen local and national systems that safeguard children. Participating Members were not in full control of underlying data frameworks of incident reporting solutions. Organizations are offered opportunities for customization, but this comes with added cost and wide-ranging program implications, some arising after grants have been approved. Slow uptake and adoption of these systems therefore guides organizations into data silos which become the standard operating procedures for incident reporting.

Available technologies and tools (i.e., Navex Ethics Point, Syntro Lighthouse, or equivalent reporting mechanism) are not always fit for purpose when it comes to incident reporting and management for safeguarding. The Coalition identified a sector need for a universal data standard as the adoption and facilitation of such a standard would lead to reduced costs, greater ease of system uptake, and increased effectiveness of reporting mechanisms as organizations across the community begin coordination with solution providers and implement digital reporting mechanisms. Such collaboration also opens the possibility of future collaborations with existing solution providers to improve offered applications and promote information interoperability between organizations seeking to protect children from conduct and contacts risks.

## People and Process

Most participating organizations have safeguarding operating procedures well established in terms of people and process. Built on a foundation of policy and strategy, responsibility for safeguarding is designated to a wide array of internal stakeholders including program or country focal points, directors for safeguarding, as well as everyday staff and contractors. Multiple participating organizations were advancing safeguarding strategy out of the pilot stage, while most participants had such standards in place for several years. Training, staffing, and procedures of staff in the case of an incident against children are currently considered more important than the underlying data standard which support reporting mechanisms. Incident reporting is highly dependent on in-country staff and processes rather than global stakeholders from headquarters or supporting data frameworks. This provides a strong set of enablers should a universal data standard be developed for safeguarding and incident reporting mechanisms in the future.

Subject matter expertise (SME) can be siloed within job functions, and globally dispersed in large organizations, thus making progress through a coalition difficult. Future collaborations need to include program and field personnel, information, and technology (IT) professionals, as well as safeguarding and child safety experts from the country level. The job functions such as focal points and safeguarding officers should also be included. Agile methodologies (i.e., IDEA Journey™) may be more suitable for such collaborations.

There is a willingness to collaborate on people and processes as they relate to safeguarding and incident reporting and management. Doing so provides greater transparency on best practices, solution options, and safeguarding children or other vulnerable client communities from all perspectives of risks, but especially contact and conduct risks.

While donors support safeguarding broadly, there remains a need to fund underlying data standards that would enable efficient and integrated responses through incident reporting mechanisms.

### Collaborative Approach

NetHope was unable to achieve a critical mass of Members to consistently participate in the Coalition. This was largely due to competing interests, lack of funding to offset participation costs and support collaboration, and lack of support from Senior Executives who are committed to their organization's own bespoke approach on incident management and data collection. Future initiatives should be considerate of alternative methodologies, such as human-centered design workshops (i.e., IDEA Journey) which would more rapidly advance the development of a universal data standard for incident reporting and management.

### Timing

While the topic of incident reporting and management for child safeguarding is an element of the sector's principles of "Do No Harm," it is possible that the DPC Coalition, and its emphasis on developing a universal data standard which support safeguarding and incident management systems, has missed the critical time of action (i.e., the sector's 2018 safeguarding crisis). The enabling environment which would have seen support from across the entire social sector, executive leaders, and internal job functions was missing in this project. Had this effort taken place between 2018 and 2019 when multiple organizations were facing safeguarding concerns the imperative and buy-in from across the community may have been theoretically greater.

### Competition, Confidentiality, and Sensitivity

The protection and safeguarding of children as well as other vulnerable communities is a highly sensitive space which is guarded by organizational priorities and willingness to collaborate on normally confidential information. Several organizations did not want to participate due to terminologies used, such as information interoperability, which denotes the sharing of case information and which could be perceived as a data privacy violation. While no such efforts were within the scope of this Coalition, confusion between sharing data frameworks and actual case information was a deterrence, as this information is highly confidential.

## Barriers

Below are factors which impact the development of a universal data standard and solutions that support incident reporting mechanisms for the safeguarding of children and other vulnerable client communities.

### Adoption and Uptake

There is not sufficient collective Member demand for enhanced incident reporting mechanisms (i.e., hotlines, helplines, or equivalent) which support collaboration behind the development of a universal data standard. Data frameworks and digital tools which leverage taxonomies on the application layer are only as applicable as the organizations and programs willing to adopt such standards. Changing the wider organizational policies on safeguarding such that they include a shared data framework as a component is not within the scope of the Coalition. Existing processes and approaches on data collection take precedence.

### Budget

Collaborative efforts for the development of universal data standards for incident reporting mechanisms (i.e., hotlines, helplines, or equivalent) to support safeguarding systems were limited due to the unfunded nature of the Coalition's work. Participating Members were not compensated for time and therefore competing priorities or daily responsibilities took on greater importance than the development of data standards which support unification of incident reporting mechanisms. Adoption of universal standards and applications into wider frameworks and policies takes significant time and resources that are outside the scope of this Coalition's mandate.

### Centralization at Global Level

In cases where safeguarding and incident reporting was controlled by a centralized entity (i.e., a Member Headquarters) the demand for a universal data standard behind incident management systems cannot be artificially generated. Forcing the development of a standard without central authority support makes the data standard of little value for participating organizations. There were numerous organizations that did not join the Coalition due to a lack of headquarter appetite for integration of a universal data standard for incident management mechanisms (i.e., hotlines, helplines, or equivalent) behind safeguarding systems. Data frameworks should be considered for external release as safeguarding strategies are updated for each organization.

### Data Fragmentation

Across the ecosystem of incident report mechanisms (i.e., hotlines, helplines, or equivalent) organizations have noted a purposeful fragmentation of systems. The management of multiple reporting channels is the norm for safeguarding approaches. Current reporting channels vary from in-person or manual paper-based incident reports, email or messaging platforms, as well as off-the-shelf incident reporting hotlines and helplines. Moving to a single application may contradict current best practices for safeguarding children and other vulnerable communities from harm. The ability of existing systems to communicate and share case information presents

significant challenges, leaving the problem largely unsolved and addressed in ad-hoc approaches.

### Data - Policy Gap

Participating Member organizations do not have a comprehensive data framework readily available for implemented incident reporting solutions (i.e., hotlines, helplines, or equivalent). The low digital maturity of this component of safeguarding strategies makes the development of underlying data frameworks a non-priority for many organizations. Generating data frameworks is strenuous work that often involves the digitization of existing systems and community feedback mechanisms. Doing so for each organization participating in the group is currently outside the scope of this Coalition's mandate.

### Data Retention

Due to the fragmented nature of incident report mechanisms, it becomes difficult to aggregate and retain case information. Difficulty is also found in sharing this information across functions, departments, and federated organization even when aggregated. Databases range in sophistication from Excel to case management solutions hosted on Dynamics CRM.

### Data Utilization

The current information ecosystem does not support information interoperability between organizations on incident reporting. Few organizations have noted information interoperability as a priority. Participating organizations are most concerned with collecting and reporting to meet donor requirements (i.e., such as USAID's requirements for safeguarding protocols) and to ensure internal controls for safety and quality (i.e., community feedback). Organizations with a wider interest in utilizing data for community wellbeing have joined other efforts (i.e., INHOPE, Child Helplines International, or ECPAT). The safety of children and other vulnerable communities should not develop into a competitive safety race, the likes of which occurred amongst the corporate social media ecosystem. Understanding how nonprofits could utilize such data is currently unknown.

### Customizations for Country Programs

Depending on country context, client community, and partners involved in program implementations the development of incident reporting systems (i.e., hotlines, helplines, or equivalent) is highly variable. Even in organizations with global case management systems, data collection is hyper-local, allowing for customizations and considerations through decentralized processes and systems. Standards are instituted at the global level (i.e., Members' headquarters) and then implemented at the local level (i.e., Members' national offices) all the while being adapted for purposes of client accessibility, user experience, and program, legal, or donor requirements. Reporting mechanisms must be considerate of contextualized needs and socialized in a strategic manner to account for local needs. Standardization across the community in the context of this information environment is difficult and represents a significant barrier to the development of universal data standards, as localization and customization are necessities to effective application development.

### Incentives for Uptake

Coalition Members identified a lack of organizational incentive to move toward and adopt a universal data standard for child safety and protection. Participating organizations have differing uses of data for child safety that are highly intertwined with child protection policies and program approaches. Without a monetary or operational incentive to adopt a universal standard, participating organizations will be hesitant to make the necessary investments to make the data standard effective internally and across the sector.

### Internal and External Reporting Priorities

Participating organizations did not always have a developed or established mechanism (i.e., hotlines, helplines, or equivalent) for client communities to report. In cases where such applications were not developed, a combination of community feedback mechanisms and in-county program focal points took on the primary role of safeguarding children and other vulnerable communities from harm. Internal reporting mechanisms were reported to be more common and often built upon existing protocols (i.e., whistleblowing) into more substantial reporting mechanisms or leveraged off-the-shelf applications (i.e., Ethics Point or Lighthouse).

### Standard Socialization

Participating organizations noted the need for increased socialization of the importance of safeguarding into wider program frameworks and donor proposals. Without support from donor organizations which support impact from program areas, and the practitioners who achieve impact, the development of a universal data standard and commonly leveraged applications for incident reporting for safeguarding will continue to be implemented on ad-hoc basis guided by individual organization needs.

### System Outsourcing

Available solutions which are commonly leveraged for safeguarding and incident reports on contact and conduct risks (i.e., Navex's Ethics Point and Syntro's Lighthouse) are designed and more effectively used in the context of corporate whistleblowing. Such tools are not designed to collect incident reporting from client communities and must be adapted to fit such contexts. Many organizations are thus using tools that are not designed for current implementations. Participating organizations can make customizations to such tools but this comes with added cost implications. There are noted language and accessibility barriers when using current applications on the local level.

## Conclusion

It is the conclusion of the DPC Coalition that a universal data standard which supports incident reporting and management for safeguarding against contact and conduct risks (i.e., hotlines, helplines, or equivalent) is needed. For purposes of effectiveness and pursuit of greatest value for nonprofits the development of a universal data standard for safeguarding should be incorporated into the development of a broader toolkit which provides standard operating procedures for organizations interested in implementing incident management systems for safeguarding children and other vulnerable client communities.

The development of such a standard would allow for increased collaboration with solution providers and ensure that the sector is equipped with data frameworks and fit for purpose digital tools that more effectively protect children and other vulnerable communities from harm. However, given the explanations laid out in the feasibility and barriers section, it is also the conclusion of the DPC Coalition that the development of such a standard will require support and perhaps a mandate (i.e., regulations, corporate resolutions.) much larger than this Coalition has been granted. The low digital maturity of safeguarding approaches as well as fragmented incident reporting ecosystems makes further progress through this Coalition a difficult task. Agile methodologies may be the best option moving forward.

Safeguarding is still viewed by leaders as a physical concern despite ample data indicating a strong shift to digital. The regulatory need to report to law enforcement offices with varied digital capabilities, may also get in the way to streamlining sector wide information for efficient and effective digital protection of children.