

# Media & Messages: Practical skills for addressing child sexual abuse in rural areas

## Tips for writing a *Letter to the Editor* for a local newspaper

**Research:** Check in with the editorial section of your local paper or their online site for specific instructions related to length, content, etc. Most papers ask that the length be no more than 250 words, which is approximately three paragraphs, or about a half page typed. Shorter is fine, but if it's longer they may edit it down, and you may not agree with which parts they choose to cut. It's best if you can adhere to their guidelines.

**Concept:** Decide on one clear point you want to make.

**Style:** Write in short, clear sentences and avoid using jargon or complicated words or ideas. Remember that this is an opinion piece – but people should know that your opinion on this subject is credible, because of your work and/or personal experience.

### Suggested structure:

First paragraph - Begin by stating your main idea – let readers know what the subject is and why it is important to you.

Second paragraph - In the middle, you can expand upon that idea or provide additional supporting facts, examples, or observations to support your point.

Third paragraph - Summarize your point. For example (pick one):

- A. An action that you would like someone to take; an invitation to get involved
- B. What you would like to see different
- C. A thank you to someone who handled a situation well
- D. Challenge people to consider a different perspective

Closing - Provide your name and contact information. Most papers will contact you before printing a letter to confirm that you are the one who submitted it.

**Timing:** Sometimes letters are printed fairly quickly. Other times, there can be a delay up to a few weeks, or they may not be printed at all. If you are responding to another letter, be sure to mention the author, date and briefly refresh people's memories about the topic.

**Positive:** It's usually best to not restate something you disagree with (as that reinforces it), but rather just to state your own opinion. For instance, don't say "I was offended by Ms. Barber's letter of June 13 when she said that opening a group home in our neighborhood will devalue our property value." Instead consider something like "Ms. Barber's letter on June 13 about group homes inspired me to tell you about my wonderful experience in living across the street from one for the past 12 years."

## Additional resources

In 2012, the National Coalition to Prevent Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation released the *National Plan to Prevent Child Sexual Abuse & Exploitation*. To download it, please visit: [www.nsvrc.org/news/11692](http://www.nsvrc.org/news/11692)

NSVRC's *Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Information Packet* contains an overview, technical assistance bulletin, technical assistance guide on programs for adults, technical assistance guide on programs for children, resource list, annotated bibliography, research brief, and literature review. To download it, please visit: <http://tinyurl.com/3ekwzzh>

In July 2013, The Poynter Institute hosted *Covering Child Sexual Abuse: A McCormick Specialized Reporting Institute*. Here are the resources from the two-day workshop with experts, advocates and journalists: <http://tinyurl.com/cluxtha>

In February 2013, NSVRC and The Poynter Institute's NewsU launched a free, online course for journalists, teachers, students (and the general public) entitled, *Reporting on Sexual Violence*. To enroll or learn more, please visit <http://tinyurl.com/c33yn2b>

NSVRC has a media packet titled, *Understanding & Reporting: Info & Stats for Journalists covering Sexual Violence & Prevention*. The packet contains topic info sheets along with statistics (and citations). To download it, please visit: <http://tinyurl.com/9c74ex3>

In March 2013, NSVRC and the Ohio Alliance to End Sexual Violence covered the Steubenville rape case. Check out the resources and responses at [www.oaesv.org/response](http://www.oaesv.org/response)

In June and October 2012, NSVRC and the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape (PCAR) covered the Jerry Sandusky case. To view those resources, visit <http://tinyurl.com/ck3yb53> and [www.pcar.org/sandusky-case](http://www.pcar.org/sandusky-case)

NSVRC's *False reporting overview* clears up misconceptions by providing facts about sexual violence cases and reporting rates. To download it, please visit: <http://tinyurl.com/c3eec4s>