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Religious Leaders from Bucks County join together for a presentation about a child sexual abuse education and prevention program

BUCKS COUNTY, PA. Network of Victim Assistance (NOVA) invited Bucks County's faith-based leaders to a special presentation of the Darkness to Light: Stewards of Children® training program on August 7 at Bucks County Community College's Newtown Campus.

The aim of this exclusive event was to educate religious leaders about Darkness to Light: Stewards of Children, a county-wide training initiative directed towards adults in the Bucks County community on how to: prevent children from being sexually abused; recognize signs of ongoing sexual abuse; and how to respond appropriately to a child who discloses abuse. This educational opportunity is available to all Bucks County congregations at no cost. The program is made possible through a grant-funded initiative and NOVA's goal is to train 25,000 adult community members in Bucks County or 5 percent of the county's population.

The Darkness to Light: Stewards of Children® training is evidence-based and teaches participants the steps to protecting children from child sexual abuse including:

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- Learning the facts – 1 in 10 children experience sexual abuse before their 18th birthday.
- How to minimize opportunity through eliminating or reducing isolated one-on-one situations.
- How to have age-appropriate conversations with children about personal safety and body boundaries.
- How to recognize the signs and symptoms of child sexual abuse.
- How to react responsibly to disclosures or suspicion of sexual abuse.

Darkness to Light: Stewards of Children® statistics show that when 5 percent of the adult population in a given community receives the training, the rate of child sexual abuse decreases over time.

Special guest speakers were Matthew Weintraub, Bucks County District Attorney; Diane Ellis-Marseglia, Bucks County Commissioner; and The Rev. Kris Schondelmeyer, Pastor/Head of Staff, Presbyterian Church of Deep Run and member, Presbyterian Church (USA) National Sexual Misconduct Task Force.

“Child sexual abuse is a silent public health epidemic,” stated Penelope Ettinger, Executive Director, Network of Victim Assistance, after the event. “Faith communities, like no other group, bring together communities where public health issues can be framed with a moral compass to discuss uncomfortable topics that impact on our lives and those we want to protect and profoundly love - our children. Faith leaders are essential partners in ensuring that we educate every adult in our community providing them with the information and tools on preventing child sexual abuse in families and communities.”

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ABOUT NOVA

Network of Victim Assistance (NOVA) supports, counsels and empowers victims of sexual assault and other serious crimes in Bucks County and works to prevent and eliminate violence in society through advocacy, training, community education and prevention programs. Founded in 1974, NOVA is a non-profit 501(c)(3), community-based organization operating out of three offices in Fairless Hills, Jamison and Perkasio. Services are made possible through the financial support of federal, state and local government grants and contracts, corporations, foundations and private donations. All contributions are tax deductible to the extent provided by law. For more information, visit www.NOVABucks.org.

About Darkness to Light: Stewards of Children®:

the *Safe and Healthy Communities Initiative (SHCI)* is one of four pilot projects being implemented in Pennsylvania. Through the cooperation of the Penn State Child Maltreatment Solutions Network and the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency, the *SHCI* launched in January, 2018. Darkness to Light: Stewards of Children® is part of the larger *SHCI*. Funding for this project comes from the monetary penalties levied on Pennsylvania State University (PSU) by the National Collegiate Athletic Association as a result of the Jerry Sandusky case. The Bucks County Department of Housing and Human Services and NOVA were selected through a competitive application process. The long-term goal of the *SHCI* research project is to expand this effort to all counties in the state.

Bucks County is a leader in the Commonwealth on addressing the epidemic of child sexual abuse. The Office of the District Attorney, the Children and Youth Agency, NOVA, local law enforcement, schools, and many community partners have worked hand-in-hand to keep children safe. However, in order to truly prevent sexual abuse, the community at large must come together and *Darkness to Light: Stewards of Children®* is the first step.

For more information visit <https://www.novabucks.org/D2L>. To schedule a training for your community, congregation or place of business contact Grace Wheeler at 215-343-6543 or email grace@novabucks.org.

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Editor's Note: Photo Caption (Photo courtesy of NOVA)

Photo: group shot.jpg—Clergy members from Bucks County gathered to learn about the Darkness to Light: Stewards of Children® child abuse education and training program held on August 7, 2019 at Bucks County Community College in Newtown, Pa.

