

A WORD FROM...

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Supporting a Welcoming Environment at the AMS

With February's Black History Month and March's Women's History Month, now seems like an opportune time to describe efforts to ensure that everyone participating in AMS committee meetings and AMS mathematics conferences experiences a welcoming environment. The AMS is committed to advancing mathematics research and creating connections. Our Mission Statement says that our publications, meetings, advocacy, and other programs encourage and facilitate the full participation of *all* individuals. And yet, stories have been shared with the AMS of instances where members of our mathematics community did not feel welcome. This is a concern we take seriously and are working to address.

The AMS Policy on a Welcoming Environment¹ was adopted by the January 2015 AMS Council and revised in January 2019. It applies to all AMS activities, including committee meetings and conferences.

The Policy reads as follows:

The AMS strives to ensure that participants in its activities enjoy a welcoming environment. In all its activities, the AMS seeks to foster an atmosphere that encourages the free expression and exchange of ideas. The AMS supports equality of opportunity and treatment for all participants, regardless of gender, gender identity or expression, race, color, national or ethnic origin, religion or religious belief, age, marital status, sexual orientation, disabilities, veteran status, or immigration status.

Harassment is a form of misconduct that undermines the integrity of AMS activities and mission.

The AMS will make every effort to maintain an environment that is free of harassment, even though it does not control the behavior of third parties. A commitment to a welcoming environment is expected of all attendees at AMS activities, including mathematicians, students, guests, staff, contractors and exhibitors, and participants in scientific sessions and social events. To this end, the AMS will include a statement concerning its expectations towards maintaining a welcoming environment in registration materials for all its meetings, and has put in place a mechanism for reporting violations. Violations may be reported confidentially and anonymously to 855-282-5703 or at www.mathsociety.ethicspoint.com. The reporting mechanism ensures the respect of privacy while alerting the AMS to the situation.

The goals contained in the AMS Mission Statement and the Welcoming Environment Policy, while laudable, unfortunately remain aspirational. Take note, for example, of interviews conducted for and described in the March 2021 report² "Towards a Fully Inclusive Mathematics Profession," written by the AMS Council's *Task Force on Understanding and Documenting the Historical Role of the AMS in Racial Discrimination*. Chapter 5 of the report discusses the report's finding that "Black mathematicians suffer from a lack of professional respect, even today." The chapter says Black mathematicians report commonly experiencing microaggressions at AMS meetings. In subsequent discussions of this report with multiple stakeholders in our community, it has been suggested that the AMS increase

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¹<https://www.ams.org/welcoming-environment-policy>

²<https://www.ams.org/understanding-ams-history>

efforts to support our Welcoming Environment Policy, particularly at conferences. First, I will describe how we currently support the Welcoming Environment Policy, and then I will describe a new addition to our efforts.

Since 2015, the AMS has subscribed to the external service called EthicsPoint to help us address reported conduct violations experienced by members of our community. This service is used by several professional societies. The EthicsPoint system allows the reporter to correspond with the AMS anonymously and confidentially. Cases involving AMS staff are handled by our director of human resources, while cases involving members of our community are overseen by the executive director. Each case is unique. Consultation with legal counsel and the AMS president can occur, but we are not conducting formal investigations. The goal is to resolve each case in a respectful and effective way. A brief report with very basic details of EthicsPoint cases from the prior year is provided to the Board of Trustees each spring by the executive director. To date the AMS has addressed a total of thirteen cases, all involving bias or harassment. These cases provide insight into the types of issues being encountered by our community. Our goal is to work with complainants to ensure their satisfaction that their concern has received adequate attention, as well as to improve the AMS's approaches to supporting a welcoming environment. For one case, for example, the AMS arranged for personal security for a conference attendee. In another case, a person with multiple complaints against them was banned from future AMS conferences.

At AMS committee meetings, the Welcoming Environment Policy is included in each agenda. Time is spent at the start of each committee meeting describing the essence of the policy, addressing any questions, and explaining how someone could proceed if they feel the policy is not being followed. In addition to speaking directly to the committee chair, AMS secretary, or AMS executive director, a concerned person could choose to submit a concern through EthicsPoint.

At AMS conferences, the Welcoming Environment Policy is included in the conference program, along with information about how to contact that conference's ombudsperson. A trained AMS staff member is designated as the on-site ombudsperson for each conference and is accessible to anyone who would like to discuss a matter of concern. Anyone at an AMS conference can help direct an inquiry to the ombudsperson. The EthicsPoint portal is also available to anyone who would like to make an anonymous report.

A new endeavor called MathSafe offers an additional way to support the mathematics profession at meetings and conferences. MathSafe will be piloted at AMS conferences and will be reviewed and adapted as needed to support our community effectively. The intent is for MathSafe to further support our AMS conferences. This program is actively being considered for adoption by other mathematics professional societies to support their code of conduct policies at their meetings and conferences.

Briefly, MathSafe introduces a mechanism for trained volunteers to support the Welcoming Environment Policy during conferences. Volunteers wear a MathSafe button to indicate their willingness to assist anyone who feels they have witnessed or experienced an unwelcoming environment. It is important to emphasize that volunteers are *not* actively enforcing codes of conduct, nor will they be settling any arguments. By wearing a MathSafe button, they are signaling their willingness to listen and help. These volunteers can easily connect those who experience harassment, bullying, or other unwelcome behavior to access existing support services and formal reporting channels. For a further description of MathSafe, including FAQs (frequently asked questions), please visit the website at <http://www.mathsafe.org>.

Where did the idea for MathSafe come from? The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine³ released a consensus report⁴ in 2018 entitled "Sexual Harassment of Women: Climate, Culture, and Consequences in Academic Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine." This report documented serious issues with harassment of women, much of it occurring at professional conferences. Subsequently, the Societies Consortium on Harassment in STEMM⁵ was formed. The mathematics discipline is represented in this consortium by the AMS, SIAM,⁶ MAA,⁷ ASA,⁸ and AWM.⁹ They join over 130 professional societies representing disciplines in science, technology, engineering, and medicine. At a Societies

³<https://www.nationalacademies.org/>

⁴<https://www.nationalacademies.org/our-work/sexual-harassment-in-academia>

⁵<https://societiesconsortium.com/>

⁶<https://siam.org/>

⁷<https://www.maa.org/>

⁸<https://www.amstat.org/>

⁹<https://awm-math.org/>

Consortium convening, members were introduced to Safe AGU,¹⁰ a program of the American Geophysical Union.¹¹ This was held up as a model for consideration by other disciplines. The executive directors of these five mathematical societies recognized the potential to improve the climate for mathematics conference attendees. This was discussed at, for example, the Joint Policy Board for Mathematics (JPBM¹²). We decided to work together to develop something similar to Safe AGU that could be shared for possible adoption at a range of mathematics conferences.

In January 2020, the presidents of the four member societies of the JPBM (AMS, SIAM, ASA, MAA) sent a letter to the Association for LGBTQ+ Mathematicians (Spectra¹³) in response to Spectra leadership's expression of concern about climate and safety regarding the 2022 International Congress of Mathematicians (ICM¹⁴) being held in Russia. A copy of this response was sent to the Local Organizing Committee (LOC¹⁵) of the ICM. The letter included the following paragraph:

We are pleased to share that the AMS has offered to help ensure a welcoming environment with a program that this society will be launching at JMM2022. The program, modeled on that of another professional society, provides trained and easily identified on-site staff and volunteers who can effectively address issues related to climate and to the welcoming environment policies. For ICM, the AMS will work in partnership with the LOC to offer such a program.

The program this letter refers to had no name at the time, but was inspired by ongoing discussions to introduce something similar to Safe AGU at mathematics conferences. Consequently, the AMS took the lead in developing what is now known as MathSafe. While we had hoped to pilot this at the Joint Mathematics Meetings, we now plan to do so at future AMS conferences. Since the pilot launch is delayed, the 2022 ICM does not plan to offer it as of now.

Over 130 people signed up for the first MathSafe volunteer training held on November 4, 2021. A second training for leaders involved in running the program on-site occurred the following week. This first round of training was delivered by the same consultant who trains volunteers for the Safe AGU program. These trainings included representatives from the ICM LOC, as well as some JMM partner societies (AWM, SIAM, COMAP,¹⁶ ASL,¹⁷ NAM¹⁸). From the AMS, all staff who attend AMS conferences are trained, although it is each employee's personal choice whether or not to volunteer. Several people from AMS governance, including some from the AMS Committee on Meetings and Conferences and the AMS Committee on Human Rights of Mathematicians, attended the trainings.

Once MathSafe is piloted, it will be reviewed by the AMS Committee on Meetings and Conferences. We will adapt this program to meet our needs going forward. We anticipate offering MathSafe at future AMS conferences and we expect that other professional societies may also adopt MathSafe. We imagine that program refinement will be ongoing, to ensure that it is supporting our Welcoming Environment Policy in the ways we expect. If you are curious and want to attend a future MathSafe training, please visit the website to sign up.



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¹⁰<https://www.agu.org/Learn-About-AGU/About-AGU/Ethics/SafeAGU>

¹¹<https://www.agu.org/>

¹²https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joint_Policy_Board_for_Mathematics

¹³<http://lgbtmath.org/>

¹⁴<https://www.mathunion.org/icm/icm-2022>

¹⁵<https://icm2022.org/organization>

¹⁶<https://www.comap.com/>

¹⁷<http://aslonline.org/>

¹⁸<https://www.nam-math.org/>