

Safe Environment Office takes steps to protect

The year 2002 was a watershed year for the church in the United States. The public exposure of sexual abuse of children by clergy in the Archdiocese of Boston — and the subsequent failures to recognize and care for victims as well as a failure to effectively address those clergy who had sexually abused children and prevent them from harming additional children — forced every diocese to take an honest look at its own history and actions.



Deacon Dan Wagnitz

That year the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) drafted the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People, a blueprint that outlines the elements of an effective overall Safe Environment Program. In addition, the Secretariat of Child and Youth Protection and the National Review Board were established

to assist each diocese to implement the requirements of the Charter. The Secretariat set up an annual audit process to ensure that all dioceses are adhering to the Charter.

2002 marked the moment when:

- The church moved from handling cases of child sexual abuse internally and confidentially to being as transparent as possible — now requiring that the civil authorities be alerted and cooperate in all cases of alleged child sexual abuse.

- The church no longer looked at those clergy who abused children as having failed in one or more isolated instances and now required that any cleric found to have sexually abused a child must be permanently removed from public ministry.

- It recognized that child sexual abuse is not a random individual failing, but a social issue and requires that all clergy, church employees and volunteers who work with children must complete an application, provide references and submit to a criminal background check.

- It required that all volunteers who work with children must complete Safe Environment Awareness education to learn the behavioral warning signals of a potential abuser and of a potential abuse victim and what action steps to take should they ob-

serve such behavior. It also requires that all children in Catholic schools and faith formation programs be given age-appropriate abuse awareness education to better protect themselves.

- The church stopped viewing child sexual abuse as a problem for just the upper levels of the church hierarchy to address and shifted to a realization that everyone's help is needed to end child sexual abuse.

- The focus shifted from protecting the institution of the church and the reputation of the priest to where it should have been all along — on helping victims heal and helping to ensure that no more children are harmed.

All of these newly implemented safety measures marked a needed shift from reacting after a child had been sexually abused to taking proactive measures to prevent child sexual abuse from happening in the first place.

In the Diocese of Green Bay, we have taken the following preventative steps to protect our children and individuals at risk:

- Over 39,656 background checks including searches of sex offender registries have been completed on clergy, employees and those volunteers who work with children or individuals at risk. The criminal background check is refreshed every four years.

- Over 39,310 clergy, employees and those volunteers who work with children have received training on how to protect children through the VIRTUS — Protecting God's Children program

- 27,254 children (on average) in our Catholic schools and faith formation programs have annually received age-appropriate, morally sound training on how to be safe, includ-

ing recognizing signs of abuse and how to report.

The Diocesan Safe Environment Program has been audited by an outside audit company contracted by the USCCB each year since 2003 to ensure compliance with the Charter.

Allegations of child sexual abuse may be made by calling the Office of Safe Environment at 920-272-8174 or toll-free 1-877-270-8174 or even via email to officesafeenv@gbdioec.org. All contacts are responded to by me. It is my responsibility based on the nature of the allegation to involve the correct resources to conduct a thorough and timely investigation.

Deacon Wagnitz is Diocesan Safe Environment coordinator for the Diocese of Green Bay.

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