

Archdiocese maintains strong abuse policies

Protecting the safety of children and providing support to victims have been top priorities of the Archdiocese of Baltimore, according to archdiocesan officials.

Following the adoption of new protocols in 2003, the archdiocese has conducted criminal background checks on thousands of parish, school and archdiocesan employees.

More than 50,000 volunteers who come in contact with young people have also undergone required screenings, and employees and volunteers alike have undergone yearly training in ethics in ministry that includes discussion of protecting children from abuse.

The archdiocese produced an award-winning 54-minute training video on the protection of children and youth that has been incorporated or adapted in training videos of other dioceses around the country.

The archdiocesan catechesis for human sexuality was recently updated to incorporate the latest sexual abuse research. Also, more than 150 priests last week attended workshops conducted by the archdiocese to review hiring practices and recognize signs of abuse, and a similar meeting was held this week.

All the principals of the archdiocesan schools attended similar sessions on hiring practices last year, according to Alison D'Alessandro, director of the archdiocesan office of child protection.

"I think we have been one of the leading dioceses," said Ms. D'Alessandro.

"We have been open and transparent, and we've worked hard with survivors to assist with the healing process." The archdiocese maintains a policy of providing unlimited counseling support for abuse victims and their families, Ms. D'Alessandro said.

“If anyone comes forward who has been abused by a representative of the church, whether a member of the clergy, a teacher, an employee or a volunteer, we immediately offer counseling with the counselor of their choice,” she said, noting that victims also receive an apology.

“The archdiocese really believes strongly in providing assistance,” she said.

Church leaders have also entered the political arena to support bills that would help protect children, according to Richard J. Dowling, executive director of the Maryland Catholic Conference.

This legislative session, the Catholic bishops of Maryland supported two such measures.

The first would prohibit registered sex offenders from residing within 2,000 feet of a public or nonpublic school, child care facility or a location where children congregate.

The second would require nonpublic school administrators to be informed when one of their students has been arrested for a violent or sexual crime and when such a student from another school transfers to their school.

In 2003, the Maryland Catholic Conference supported an effort to expand the statute of limitations in childhood sexual abuse cases by four years. The change has since become law and a claimant seeking civil damages for childhood sexual abuse has been able to seek damages any time between the alleged abuse and his or her 25th birthday.

According to information provided by the archdiocese, more than \$1 million has been spent on counseling for survivors and their families.

Cardinal William H. Keeler publicly apologized for the suffering endured by abuse victims. And, he published in *The Catholic Review* a list of names of clergy members “credibly accused” of abuse with the intention of encouraging other abuse victims to come forward.