

Archdiocese tightens screening requirements to enhance child protection

The Archdiocese of Baltimore is enhancing its requirements for training and background checks for employees, clergy and most volunteers to continue to ensure safe environments for children.

The new policies, which will take effect Nov. 1, include:

- A new requirement for screening application within three days of starting employment;
- Training for current employees will be conducted annually, instead of every five years;
- Archdiocesan policies now expressly include bishops;
- Each parish and school must post local contact numbers for Child Protective Services (CPS) and civil authorities.

The policies also require a CPS clearance for all new employees, in addition to fingerprinting and a criminal background check. A bill proposed but not passed in the 2018 Maryland General Assembly, backed by the Maryland Catholic Conference, would have required that all school personnel have such certification.

In a letter to priests announcing the changes, Archbishop William E. Lori said they are a result of a regular review of the archdiocese's safe environment policies and procedures.

"The goal of the review is to see where we might strengthen existing practices or implement new ones to improve upon our overall child protection efforts," he said.

Jerri Burkhardt, director of the archdiocesan Office of Child and Youth Protection, said that in 2002, when the archdiocese implemented its policies after the passage of the U.S. bishops' Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People and the accompanying Essential Norms, "we saw ourselves as setting the standard."

CPS clearance has been required in child-care facilities and licensed pre-schools, which included some Catholic schools. Some Maryland counties and school districts required it for all public school employees and educators.

The archdiocese will take that policy further, requiring CPS clearance for all new parish, school and archdiocesan employees, including clergy, religious and bishops.

“We want to make sure we are doing the best,” Burkhardt said. “We try to be on the cutting edge.”

Since 2002, the archdiocese has required new employees to be fingerprinted and undergo a background check through the FBI’s Criminal Justice Information Services. The new clearance requirement will also check Child Protective Services records.

The archdiocese had required employees to undergo safe environment training upon employment and every five years thereafter. A new Maryland law requires annual training for school employees, so the archdiocese will add that to its policies, with all employees receiving annual refresher training.

Training is conducted through Virtus, a company that assists dioceses around the country. The archdiocese asked Virtus to customize the training to reflect archdiocesan policies and Maryland laws. The training also helps employees and volunteers with substantial contact with minors learn about the signs of any maltreatment of children – physical, sexual or emotional abuse.

“We’re focused on prevention, identification and reporting child abuse,” Burkhardt said.

At schools especially, she often leads in-person training for faculty and staff, and last year made a special effort with sports coaches.

Joseph Smith, executive director of human resources for the archdiocese, said consistent training “sharpens the awareness” for staff and volunteers.

Employees and volunteers have undergone more than 150,000 training sessions in the archdiocese since 2002, Burkhardt said.

The idea of safe environment training is not only to keep children safe at school and parish programs, but that “everywhere they go is safer because they are around adults who prevent, identify and report abuse,” she said.

Burkhardt and Smith noted that although the 2002 Charter did not specifically mention bishops, it was always presumed to cover them.

When Archbishop Lori was appointed archbishop of Baltimore in 2012, he was fingerprinted and underwent the CJIS background check, the same as other employees. Bishop Mark Brennan went through the same process when he was ordained auxiliary bishop in 2017.

Burkhardt noted that Maryland law has long required all Marylanders to report any child abuse to law enforcement and CPS in the local jurisdiction where the abuse occurred, and it has been part of the archdiocese’s policy.

The new policy being implemented requires every parish and school to publicize in a prominent place the local phone numbers for civil authorities and CPS. Additionally, if the allegation involves church personnel, the allegation “must be reported to the Office of Child and Youth Protection so we can take personnel action,” she said. Any church employee or volunteer who is credibly accused of abuse is removed from ministry.

Also see:

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