

Charter, training still aim to protect children

Recent attention on sexual misconduct in Hollywood and politics has highlighted concerns and pain that the Catholic Church has been addressing for decades.

The church was at a similar critical juncture 15 years ago, when the problem of clergy sexual abuse reached crisis level due to the national scope of the problem.

Some dioceses, including the Archdiocese of Baltimore, had policies in place well before 2002 regarding sexual misconduct by clergy.

Jerri Burkhardt, director of the archdiocese's Office of Child and Youth Protection, said the U.S. bishops in 2002 "realized that the church was in crisis, that people were really hurting because not only had there been children and young people who were victims of sexual abuse by some priests and deacons but that also the church's response was harmful to people."

The bishops wanted to restore trust.

"They knew, I think, that acknowledging wrongs of the past and apologizing for them was not enough. They actually had to take action," she said.

The charter was established to set up guidelines the bishops believed would ensure protection of young people.

"The guidelines include really promoting healing and reconciliation with victims and survivors of sexual abuse and guaranteeing an effective response to the abuse. Accountability, of course, is a very important part of that," Burkhardt said.

Burkhardt was hired in 2008 as associate director of the archdiocesan Office of Children and Youth Protection, taking up the position as director of that office earlier this year. She came to the archdiocese after years of experience working with children who were abused and neglected and adult survivors of abuse.

Her office provides a variety of services for victims or survivors of abuse when the

perpetrator is an employee or volunteer of the church.

“First and foremost, we listen to what they have to say and try to learn from their experience and offer an apology to them – in person and in writing,” she said.

They are also offered an opportunity to meet with Archbishop William E. Lori so they can share with him their experience, and the archbishop then can “share with them on behalf of the church a sincere apology in person.”

The archdiocese also offers pastoral support and counseling, and pays for the services of the therapist or counselor of the victim’s choice.

A key part of the charter’s provisions for ensuring protection of children is the screening and training of all archdiocesan employees, including clergy and religious, at Catholic Center agencies, and all parishes and schools. Any volunteer who will work with children also must be screened and trained.

To date, nearly 300,000 people in the archdiocese have undergone such training, Burkhardt said. All employees and volunteers must undergo the training every five years.

The archdiocese had been using a program called Shield the Vulnerable until it was abruptly discontinued by the vendor in October. As of Nov. 1, the archdiocese joined more than 90 other dioceses using the Virtus training program.

As of this year, Virtus provides all the features of Shield the Vulnerable, and more, including online training and certification. All the features are available in English and Spanish.

Potential employees can register through the Virtus system for background screening. New employees, after completing training about such issues as how to report cases of suspected misconduct, can read the archdiocese code of conduct and statement of policy, and acknowledge in the online portal that they have read and understand these materials.

Burkhardt said she was incredibly pleased with the support of screening

coordinators, especially in recent weeks. “We asked a lot of them in the transition (to Virtus),” she said. “They have been awesome.”

Reporting Abuse

The Archdiocese of Baltimore complies with Maryland laws requiring reporting suspected child abuse to civil authorities. Under Maryland Law, any person who has reason to believe a child has been subjected to abuse must report the suspected abuse to civil authorities, even if the potential victim is now over 18 years old and even in cases where the alleged perpetrator is deceased.

If someone associated with the church, including clergy, employees or volunteers of the archdiocese, is suspected of abuse, then the suspected abuse must also be reported to the Archdiocesan Office of Child and Youth Protection at 410-547-5438 or the Victim Assistance Line at 1-866-417-7469.

Also see:

Catholic Baltimore Radio interview with Jerri Burkhardt



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