

Lawmakers consider bill to train schools in abuse prevention

By Maria Wiering

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ANNAPOLIS – Child protection advocates from the Archdiocese of Baltimore and the Maryland Catholic Conference testified March 8 before Maryland’s House Judiciary Committee in support of a bill that would require the State Board of Education to develop a program to train school employees in child sexual abuse prevention, identification and reporting.

“The [bill’s] purpose is consistent and effective training for all teachers,” said Del. Samuel Rosenberg, a Baltimore Democrat who is sponsoring the bill in the House of Delegates.

Alison D’Alessandro, archdiocesan director of child and youth prevention, told committee members that the archdiocese has trained more than 90,000 clergy, employees, teachers and volunteers in child abuse prevention, and Maryland’s public and non-public schools can do the same.

“It takes a community to protect children,” D’Alessandro said. “We cannot expect our children to shoulder the entire burden of abuse prevention. Their safety really depends on being surrounded by adults who know how to prevent abuse.”

The Archdiocese of Baltimore has been a leader among American dioceses in implementing child protection procedures. In 2003, the archdiocese implemented STAND training, a program that includes a web-based component designed to educate those working with children in Catholic institutions to prevent and identify child sexual abuse. STAND training helps adults and children recognize predatory behavior of a potential abuser before the abuse takes place.

Baltimore Child Abuse Center executive director Adam Rosenberg said that he’s

impressed by the archdiocese's program, but that Maryland's public schools lag behind other states in child protection.

"Our teachers already receive a great deal of training in other areas of prevention which are accepted and incorporated statewide," Rosenberg said, pointing to stop-drop-and-roll training for fires, lock-down training in case of armed intruders, and bully reporting training. Sexual-abuse prevention is important, because it's more probable that a child will be sexually abused than encounter an armed intruder, Adam Rosenberg said.

As many as one in four girls are sexually abused before age 18. For boys, it's one in six, according to the National Center for Victims of Crime.

Schools that do teach staff and students about child sexual abuse may not be using up-to-date programs. Once-popular strategies such as "stranger danger" or "good touch, bad touch" are now considered ineffective, since statistics show that more than 90 percent of sexual offenders are someone the child knows and trusts, and abuse can begin well before actual touch is involved.

A former sex crimes prosecutor for Baltimore City, Adam Rosenberg said his organization is on pace to see 1,000 children who may be sexual abuse victims. Because teachers see children almost every day, they can recognize signs that a child may be a victim, or in a situation where he or she could be victimized.

Not all suspected abuse cases are properly reported, Adam Rosenberg said, and that's a problem.

"Many [public school teachers] have been told or remember that the requirement is to report up to their supervisor, but they fail to know that the law in Maryland is to report out to the Department of Social Services or to law enforcement," Adam Rosenberg said. "This bill addresses a long, under-supported need."

Maryland Catholic Conference executive director Mary Ellen Russell provided the delegates with samples of the child abuse prevention training programs in Maryland's Catholic dioceses, the Archdiocese of Baltimore, the Archdiocese of Washington and the Diocese of Wilmington.

“After the terrible experience ... that the church had to deal with sexual abuse, one of the good outcomes for the Catholic Church has been the robust training,” she said. “This [bill] is the one of the brightest lights of hope, because this deals with preventing abuse.”

The bill, House Bill 1256, would require the State Board of Education to form a task force to examine how best to implement sexual abuse training in Maryland’s schools, with a report due to the state Legislature no later than Dec. 1, 2013. Its companion in the Senate is Bill 613.

The delegates also heard testimony supporting the bill from representatives from Advocates for Children and Youth, and the Maryland Commission to End Sexual Assault and the Maryland Children’s Alliance. No one testified to oppose the measure.