

New report highlights archdiocese's response to child sexual abuse

The Independent Review Board that assists the Archdiocese of Baltimore with child protection efforts issued the first of what will be annual reports regarding the archdiocese's response to child sexual abuse within the church.

The report, which covers July 2016 through June 2017, was begun several months ago at the request of Archbishop William E. Lori so that Catholics and the general public could have more information about the archdiocese's efforts to prevent and respond to instances of child sexual abuse by clergy, personnel and volunteers.

"Although begun some months ago, this report now seems particularly timely in light of the grand jury report issued by the Attorney General of Pennsylvania in August, and the announcement in September that the Maryland Attorney General has initiated an investigation of records from the archdiocese on incidents involving child sexual abuse," the report says.

The report noted that in the reporting year, the archdiocese paid \$319,086 to provide counseling, therapy and other necessary medical costs for 64 survivors of child sexual abuse or their family members.

In the same period, the archdiocese paid \$619,500 in voluntary settlements with 14 survivors of child sexual abuse through its mediation process, although all 14 claims were time-barred under applicable law. The child sexual abuse in all of those claims occurred more than 40 years ago.

The report said, "The archdiocese recognizes the importance of not only offering support to those who are abuse survivors, but to their family members as well. The Office of Child and Youth Protection offers survivors counseling and pastoral services with the therapist of their choice, and coordinates a financial mediation program for survivors upon their request for monetary compensation in lieu of counseling."

"Counseling assistance and mediated settlements are provided without regard to

legal liability and regardless of how long ago the events occurred,” according to the report. “Counseling assistance, mediated settlements and related legal costs are paid through the archdiocese’s insurance programs.”

The Independent Review Board’s report provided details on allegations received in 2016-17:

- No clergy or religious serving at the time in the Archdiocese of Baltimore were accused of child sexual abuse.
- Nine members of the clergy who were either deceased or already permanently removed from priestly ministry due to prior allegations, were accused of child sexual abuse, based on events that occurred many years earlier. In all cases, reports were made to civil authorities in accordance with Maryland child abuse reporting laws, and the archdiocese cooperated with civil authorities.
- Two volunteers and one employee serving at the time in the archdiocese were accused of child sexual abuse. In each case, the allegation was reported to civil authorities, the archdiocese cooperated with civil authorities and the volunteer or employee was terminated. Two of the matters resulted in criminal convictions.

The report noted, “Allegations of child abuse are reported to civil authorities by the archdiocese regardless of credibility. Allegations of child sexual abuse against church personnel are also reported to the Independent Review Board by the archdiocese regardless of credibility. Anyone credibly accused of child abuse, as determined by the archdiocese and the Independent Review Board, regardless of whether the person has been convicted of a crime, is permanently excluded from ministry, employment and volunteer service in the Archdiocese of Baltimore.”

The report also detailed training and screening efforts in 2016-17:

- 38,609 adults – clergy (including bishops), lay employees and all volunteers with substantial contact with children – received required training on preventing, recognizing, and reporting child abuse and neglect.
- 39,932 children and youths received safe environment training.
- 7,919 clergy, religious and employees working with children were cleared

after submitting to a criminal history screening.

- 30,590 volunteers working with children were cleared after submitting to a criminal history screening.

The 10-person review board – five women and five men – is comprised mostly of lay people.

Ellen M. Heller, a retired judge who has served on the review board since 2004, said the fact that there were new incidents in the reporting year does not mean that the archdiocese does not have appropriate safeguards in place.

“Safeguards are printed words and the people who do these deeds are people, and they are surrounded by other people,” she said. “There are so many ways to circumvent the law generally and so many ways that people – if they are intent on doing something, even if it’s something bad and evil, like child sexual abuse – can get around those (other) people.”

Children especially are vulnerable, so it is the church’s responsibility to ensure that its policies and practices endeavor to protect them. “Having said that, it would be unreal to say that all incidents could disappear, whether it’s in the archdiocese or the city of Baltimore or Timbuktu,” the judge said.

“There are people who continue to do harm. And it’s hard to say that we can have a perfect policy, but what we can do is to continue to try to review it, to expand it, to learn from past mistakes, and to try to detect harm and to try to detect the perpetrator ahead of time – before the harm,” she said.

Heller said in the effort to rebuild faith and trust among Catholics and the greater community, the archdiocese has to “take all reasonable measures to prevent the injury from occurring in the first place.”

“That means not just to help the victim and the victim’s family heal, but it means also to ensure that there is full disclosure and that there are no cover ups. And having said that, I think the archdiocese is trying to do just that,” she said.

Heller said this is not new for the archdiocese. “I know with great confidence that the archdiocese is taking and reviewing and considering all measures to have full

disclosure, to have greater transparency and to promote the healing of victims of child sexual abuse.”

The retired judge said the board’s independence from the archdiocese is assured through the makeup of the members (see below for current membership).

“First of all, we’re not employees of the archdiocese. We are diverse, and independent, in that sense, means just that,” she told the Catholic Review. The board includes Catholics, including one priest and one religious sister, as well as non-Catholics, such as Heller, who is Jewish.

“It’s a pretty mixed group which brings a varied experience. I think we’re all united, however, in understanding how important it is that we do everything in regard to protecting children and following-up (on allegations).” Since the members are not archdiocesan employees, “there’s really nothing the archdiocese could do, such as not to promote us or not raise our salary or fire us.”

She said all complaints received by the review board are first and foremost reported to civil authorities. Most of the cases already have a prosecutor or state’s attorney assigned to them when the review board hears them. “We hear it; nothing is kept from us,” Heller said.

The report for 2016-17 noted, “The inability to protect children from predatory adults has been a tragic failure of the church. As we continue the long, laborious and painful process of rebuilding faith, credibility and trust, we acknowledge again that oversight efforts and systems require constant vigilance, strict accountability and swift action as necessary.

“The work of the Independent Review Board is one way to provide more lay oversight and transparency to the church’s reform efforts. We hope this report is one step forward in efforts to educate all about the ways to best protect the children entrusted to our care,” the report said.

This first report provides some history of child protection efforts here, such as the fact the archdiocese first created child protection policies in the 1980s, and publicized written policies and established the Independent Review Board in 1993.

Those efforts were later required in 2002 when the U.S. bishops passed the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People and the accompanying Essential Norms.

“The archdiocese has updated its child protection policies periodically, more recently in revisions effective Nov. 1, 2018, after input from the Independent Review Board and others,” the report noted. Those changes included requiring training every year for employees, instead of every five years, and now expressly include the archdiocese’s bishops among those covered by the policies.

Jerri Burkhardt, director of the Office of Child and Youth Protection for the archdiocese, said the review board has a history of independence in the archdiocese. In light of recent events, she said, “I have seen the review board members kind of step up and take their role as independent overseers more seriously. Not that they weren’t before, but I think that they have a heightened sense of purpose and responsibility.”

She added, “I think this report helps them do their job, which in turn makes my job, not necessarily easier, but it makes me more effective and it makes my office more effective. (The review board) also communicates to people in parishes and schools so that people in parishes and schools realize the work the archdiocese has done but also that there’s this independent body that is holding us accountable.”