

# Youth Protection Program

## Diocese of Harrisburg

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## Summary

The tragedy of sexual abuse of minors affects every segment of modern society. The Catholic Diocese of Harrisburg is committed to meeting its responsibility to its people and to the larger society regarding this problem, and has adopted the *Youth Protection Program* as a tool of pastoral life and legal discipline. The Diocese pledges to uphold all provisions of the *Youth Protection Program*. Furthermore, the Diocese pledges adherence to Canon Law and full, open cooperation with the law-enforcement agencies of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and other civil jurisdictions.

The Diocese of Harrisburg pledges to respond promptly and decisively to all accusations of suspected sexual abuse of a minor by any person connected with the Church. To provide on-going means for the prevention of abuse, the Church pays particular attention to the fitness of those whose employment or ministry includes interaction with children and youth, and it focuses special care on those to be ordained. To ensure that the Program is evaluated and updated regularly, the *Diocesan Review Board for Youth Protection*, an independent standing board of 8 to 12 members appointed by the Diocesan Bishop, will review cases in the manner described herein and recommend revisions of this Program annually to the Diocesan Bishop. This advisory board was first constituted in 1994 and its members are predominantly laypersons not in the employ of the Church.

This summary document is a synopsis of a much longer text, the complete *Youth Protection Program*, which consists of three parts: the *Pastoral Charter*, which states our concerns and promises for the protection of youth; *Norms and Practices*, which outlines specific policies and mandates for fulfilling our promises; and *Implementation Policies*, which lists the practical details and procedures by which this Program will be implemented.

## **Guiding Principles: A Pledge**

### **The Diocese of Harrisburg pledges...**

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1. To recognize forthrightly the tragedy of sexual abuse of minors in society and in the Church. We are committed to recognizing and addressing the problem, and we pledge the resources of the Diocese to this end.
2. To maintain as our primary concern the healing, reconciliation, and spiritual well being of the victims of sexual abuse and their families. We pledge that in each case we will reach out to victims of abuse and their families to offer whatever pastoral and professional care we can, and to address their spiritual and emotional needs. We pledge also to assist victims of sexual abuse and their families in locating resources and providers to address their emotional and mental-health needs that arise from the tragic experience of abuse.
3. To observe without exception the demands of the two laws under which the Church operates: the canon law of the Roman Catholic Church and the secular or civil law of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and the United States of America. We pledge also to assist accuser and accused in knowing and fulfilling their rights under both laws.
4. To forward to appropriate civil authorities, even when not required by civil law, every report of suspected sexual abuse of a minor, unless the accuser has made a complete retraction.
5. To receive every accusation of suspected sexual abuse of a minor with compassion and to treat it with seriousness and diligent attention. Response to accusations will be the priority of all who are involved.
6. To make our policies and procedures regarding the sexual abuse of minors known and available in openness and transparency. We pledge to follow these policies and procedures consistently in each case.
7. To educate the Church community — youth and adults — in matters related to the sexual abuse of minors, especially its prevention, identification, and reporting.
8. To make known to all clergy, seminarians, candidates for Holy Orders, employees, and volunteers the provisions of this program along with Standards of Conduct to guide interactions with minors.
9. To undertake a comprehensive practice of screening seminarians, clergy, candidates for Holy Orders, employees, and volunteers who have more than sporadic and infrequent contact with minors. This screening shall include criminal-history checks.

### **Youth Protection Council**

To facilitate implementation of this Program, a Youth Protection Council has been created, consisting of several diocesan employees charged with oversight of the various aspects of this program: education and screening, outreach and assistance to victims, communication, and compliance-checking. It is chaired by a Program Director, who provides overall direction, and who personally receives all accusations of suspected abuse. Members of the Youth Protection Council are designated as Coordinators of their specific areas of oversight, as described below.

## **Reporting suspected abuse**

To simplify the means of making a report, the diocese has established a toll-free number for making reports or accusations: 1-800-626-1608, and an e-mail address, [safeyouth@hbgdiocese.org](mailto:safeyouth@hbgdiocese.org). Reports received by other means or by clergy, employees or volunteers are to be forwarded without delay to that number. Failure to forward suspected sexual abuse of a minor is a serious offense and may be punishable by suspension or loss of employment.

So that the diocese can respond fairly, and in order to report claims of the sexual abuse of a minor to civil authorities, when a report is made to the diocese, such a report is to contain the name of the accused, the name(s) of suspected victims, the locations and nature of the alleged abuse, and the approximate dates when the abuse is said to have occurred. Anonymous reports are discouraged, and may not be acted upon if insufficient information exists to conduct an initial inquiry.

It is especially important for clergy to understand the urgency and necessity of reporting any knowledge of suspected sexual abuse gained in the external forum. Under no circumstances should any person — whether a cleric, an employee or supervisor, or a volunteer — attempt to undertake an inquiry into the matter. Reporting suspected sexual abuse of a minor is an important obligation, not only for clergy, but for any lay person in ministry with the Church. Failure to forward a report of suspected sexual abuse of a minor is a serious offense under canon law, and may be considered obstruction of justice under civil law. It is subject to punishment by suspension or loss of employment.

## **Assistance to Victims and their families**

An Assistance Coordinator is assigned to provide outreach and oversight of assistance to victims of abuse and their families. Several experienced counselors and therapists have been designated as Support Counselors to assist in individual cases by identifying needs and locating services for assisting victims and families. Through these persons, the Church can ensure that our primary concern can be fulfilled – allowing God’s grace to bring about healing and reconciliation by helping victims and their families to find and receive competent assistance.

The fundamental mission of the Church remains the salvation of souls, and where the actions of its ministers or employees have injured the spiritual or emotional well-being of others, especially of children, the diocese pledges its efforts to assist victims of abuse in healing and reconciliation. Even if the diocese bears no legal liability for an offense, victims of child abuse and their families will be offered assistance. Although no victim will be left without assistance, the abuser bears responsibility and is expected to pay therapy costs. The Assistance Coordinator will oversee efforts to locate qualified, mutually-acceptable therapists and counselors to address the needs of victims in specific cases. The Assistance Coordinator will also help in assessing the progress and efficacy of the therapy.

## **Education in Preventing, Recognizing, and Reporting Abuse**

To assist in implementing education and screening activities, the diocesan bishop has named an Education Coordinator. All clergy, all employees, and those volunteers with more than sporadic and infrequent contact with youth must undergo mandatory criminal record checks. The same persons must receive training on the prevention, recognition, and reporting of sexual abuse of

minors. A Compliance Coordinator will annually audit compliance in offices, parishes, and schools, and make a report to the Review Board and the bishop.

## **Inquiry into Reports**

When an accusation is received by the Diocese, a two-person Inquiry Team will promptly conduct an initial fact-finding inquiry, with every effort made to conduct this within 48 hours of receiving the report. Every accusation of the suspected sexual abuse of a minor will be forwarded to the appropriate civil authorities, even when the diocese is not mandated by state law to do so.

A person accused of the sexual abuse of a minor may be placed on suspension or leave from their assignment, office or employment with no interruption of salary and benefits, at any stage of the inquiry process. This action is not to be understood as a penalty and is not penal in nature, but is a tool in the free and unhindered investigation of a serious crime. If during the initial inquiry either the accuser or the accused requests canonical or civil counsel, this request will be honored, but the diocese generally considers such costs to be the responsibility of the individual requesting counsel. The diocese, if requested, will assist either party in locating competent canonical counsel.

## **Communication**

A Communications Coordinator serves as the diocesan spokesperson on all matters related to the sexual abuse of minors. Except for the bishop and Program Director, all other persons represent merely personal opinions. The normal means of communicating to the people of the Diocese of Harrisburg regarding our policies, statistics regarding accusations, or any specific accusation, is through our diocesan newspaper, *The Catholic Witness*.

In order to safeguard the rights and reputations of all persons involved in an accusation or inquiry, a governing principle in receiving and responding to accusations is the preservation of appropriate confidentiality. The rights and reputations of all persons concerned with these delicate matters demand that this be respected. Disclosure of an accusation, inquiry, or finding of fact will be made only when necessary to protect against ongoing abuse, to reach out to other potential victims, to provide factual information to repair scandal, or to correct damage done by a false accusation. Confidentiality cannot be construed to mean secrecy, however, and the diocese pledges to maintain its long-standing and strict zero-tolerance policy: no person found to be an abuser of children or youth will ever be permitted to return to any form of ministry or employment.