

SPECIAL REPORT:

ADDRESSING ALLEGATIONS OF SEXUAL ABUSE IN THE DIOCESE OF ST. AUGUSTINE

THE DIOCESE OF ST. AUGUSTINE established a process for responding to allegations of sexual abuse of minors and vulnerable adults in 1989 -13 years before the 2002 adoption of the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People* by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. And each year since 2002, the diocese has been found compliant with the provisions of the charter by independent auditors contracted by the National Review Board.

In response to the recent crisis, Bishop Felipe Estévez pledged in August to provide an independent and transparent review of the diocesan safe environment program and to make improvements where needed. His letter is available on the diocesan website or by using this link: <https://tinyurl.com/y9cd95ut>.

The following are answers to commonly asked questions:

Q: What happens when an allegation of sexual abuse of a minor or vulnerable adult is made against a priest, deacon, religious or seminarian?

A: When a victim calls to report the sexual abuse of a minor or vulnerable adult, they will be referred to the diocesan Victim Assistance Coordinator (VAC). The VAC is trained to write a report and answer the victim's questions about the reporting process.

The VAC promptly calls law enforcement to report the allegations and contacts the chair of the Diocesan Review Board and the bishop.

The accused is placed on administrative leave pending the outcome of the police investigation.

The VAC also calls the Victim Advocate – a state licensed mental health counselor – contracted by the diocese to reach out to victims and their families to offer emotional and spiritual care.

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Q: What will happen if the abuse of a minor or vulnerable adult occurred many years ago and the victim is now an adult? How does the diocese respond?

A: The same procedure applies. The VAC will talk to the victim, write a report, answer the victim's questions, and call law enforcement. The VAC will contact the chair of the Review Board and the bishop. The accused is placed on administrative leave pending the outcome of the police investigation.

Unlike secular law that has a statute of limitations on these crimes, the diocese places no deadlines or time limits on reporting sexual abuse by priests, deacons, religious, seminarians and other church personnel. Whether it is five, 15, or 50 years old, our diocese accepts and responds to all reports.

Q: Can anyone report the sexual abuse of a minor or vulnerable adult to law enforcement or do they have to report the abuse to the diocese?

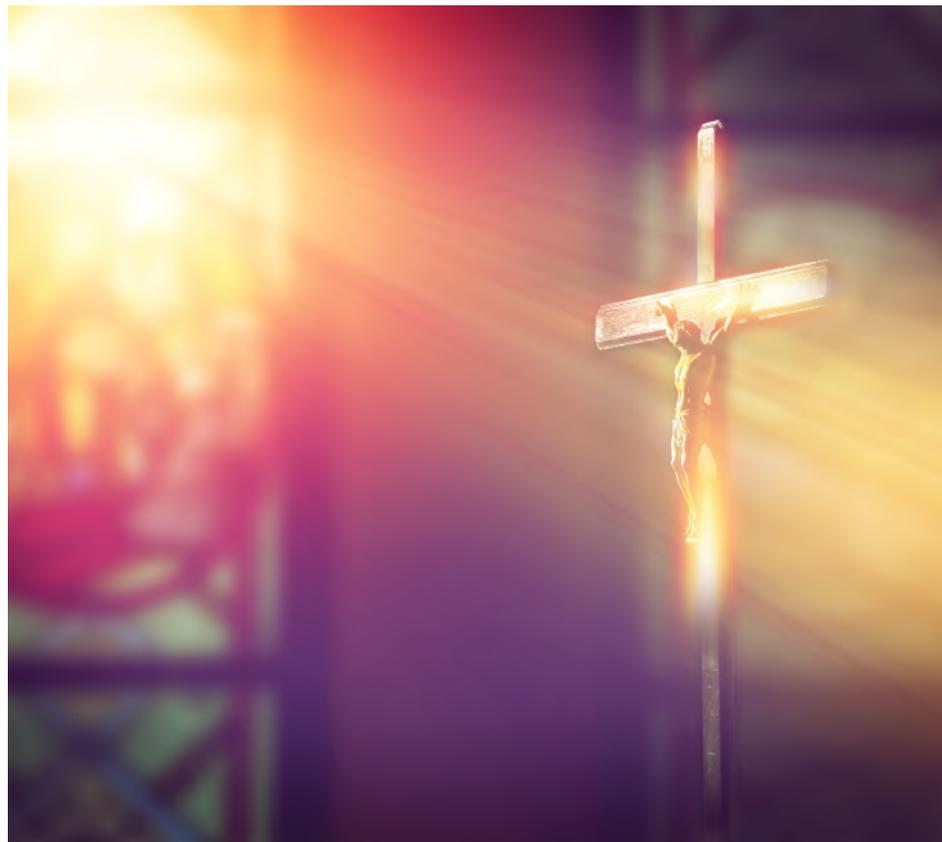
A: Anyone can report abuse directly to their local police department or call the Department of Children and Families at 1-800-96Abuse (2873). You do not have to call the diocese unless you want to.

Q: Who is on the Review Board and do they function independently of the bishop and other church leadership?

A: The Review Board comprises lay men and women, not employed by the diocese, with expertise in civil and canon law, criminal investigation, psychology, medicine, and victim advocacy. They are an independent board that evaluates cases of sexual abuse of a minor or vulnerable adult by a priest, deacon, religious or seminarian and makes recommendations on appropriate action to the bishop. They do not investigate cases.

Q: Why won't the diocese publish the names of the Review Board?

A: For the Review Board to operate independently, the names of its members



must be kept confidential and free from undue pressure and outside influences.

Q: What happens to a priest or deacon when allegations of sexual abuse of a minor or vulnerable adult are credible?

A: If the allegations are credible, the faculties of the priest or deacon are removed, and he can no longer minister in the church. He is also subject to criminal prosecution. There is a zero tolerance policy for sexual abusers. The bishop never transfers predator priests or deacons from parish to parish or diocese to diocese.

Q: How does the diocese prevent priests and deacons from other dioceses and religious orders who have not been criminally charged but have had allegations made against them from serving here?

A: Every priest and deacon who wants to minister in the diocese must be fingerprinted and undergo a national or international criminal background check. They must also provide the diocese a letter of suitability from his bishop or general superior before he can celebrate Mass, speak at a special event, hear confession

or assist in ministry. He must have a clean record before he can receive faculties to work in the diocese.

Q: Does the diocese alert parishioners when credible allegations of sexual abuse of a minor or vulnerable adult are made by priests, deacons, religious, seminarians and other Church personnel?

A: Yes, the diocese will place notices in church bulletins where the accused priest, deacon, religious and seminarian served, and notify secular media. Anyone harmed by church personnel is encouraged to come forward.

Q: What is Bishop Estévez doing to ensure that transparency and accountability are built into the safe environment program of the diocese?

A: In addition to what is already in place, Bishop Estévez has called for an independent review by a former law enforcement officer of the diocesan safe environment program. A report, providing full disclosure will be made available to parishioners once the investigation is completed.

While the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People* mandates that Review Boards address only allegations of sexual abuse of minors and vulnerable adults, the bishop wants to expand the scope of the Review Board in the near future to include other cases of a sexual nature by priests, deacons, religious and seminarians. These cases include sexual harassment and sexual misconduct with adults.

The diocese invests \$220,000 annually (paid by the diocesan insurance fund) for a safe environment program which includes fingerprinting and conducting national criminal background checks on all priests, deacons, religious, seminarians, employees and volunteers who work with children. Also, they are required to complete a Protecting God's Children training course. Age-appropriate education is provided to children in Catholic schools, parish religious education classes, and youth programs.

Q: What is happening on the national level to hold bishops accountable for their failure to protect children and vulnerable individuals?

A: The USCCB Executive Committee has met and established an outline of necessary changes. They include 1) an investigation into the questions surrounding Archbishop McCarrick; 2) an opening of new and confidential channels for reporting complaints against bishops, and 3) advocacy for a more effective resolution of future complaints. These goals will be pursued with proper independence, sufficient authority from the Vatican, and substantial leadership by the laity.

The overarching goal in all of this is stronger protections against predators in the Church and anyone who would conceal them, and protections that will hold bishops to the highest standards of transparency and accountability.

For more information about the diocesan safe environment program, call Donna Wilhelm at (904) 262-3200, ext. 104 or email dwilhelm@dosaf1.com. To call the Victim Assistance Coordinator, call Judy Pinson at (904) 208-6979. 

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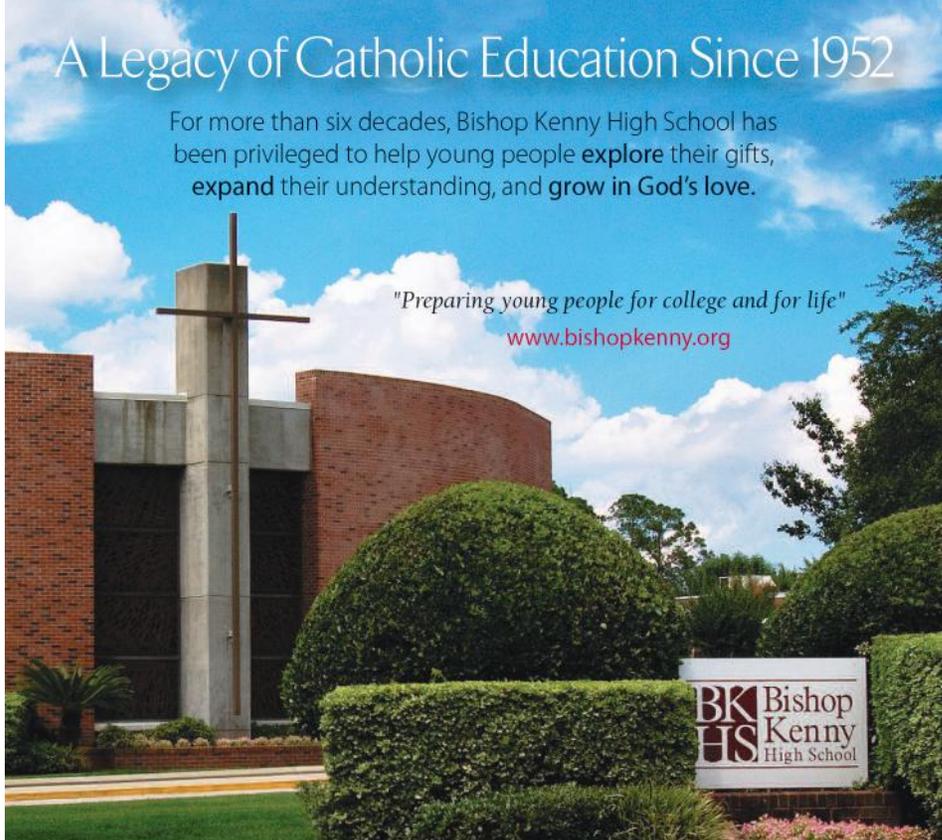
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