

OVERVIEW AND FACTS

SAFE ENVIRONMENT PROGRAMS OF THE DIOCESE OF BRIDGEPORT

SAFE ENVIRONMENT PROGRAMS

- Safe Environment programs were established in U.S. Roman Catholic Dioceses by the Catholic Bishops in 2002 in a landmark document, The Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People, a.k.a. “the Charter.” Safe Environment programs are well established in all three Roman Catholic Dioceses in Connecticut.
- The Safe Environment programs in the Diocese of Bridgeport were established in 2003 with a full time director, Ms. Erin Neil, L.C.S.W. The Safe Environment Office oversees the implementation of Charter mandates including victim assistance, criminal background checks, written Codes of Conduct, and Child sexual abuse awareness and prevention training for Priests, Deacons, Lay Employees, Volunteers, Children, and Youth.
- All three Archdioceses and dioceses in Connecticut received an external compliance audit each year since 2003. The Diocese of Bridgeport has always been found to be in full compliance and in many ways we have exceeded these standards.

VICTIM ASSISTANCE

- The Diocese of Bridgeport has a Victim Assistance Program in place since 2003. We have a Victim Assistance Coordinator , Erin Neil, L.C.S.W ,who is Licensed Clinical Social Worker and is employed full time. We also have a Victims Assistance Counselor, Michael Tintrup, L.C.S.W.
- All three Archdioceses and dioceses in Connecticut have victim assistance programs in place to provide healing and outreach to survivors of child sexual abuse committed by any person from the Church and, in many cases, by persons outside the Church. We provide help to victims and their families including counseling, support and other forms of outreach specific to the person’s needs. We offer this outreach regardless of whether the abuse occurred recently or in the past and for as long as necessary for healing to take place. All victims are offered an apology and a meeting with the Bishop. The Victim Assistance office has been a proven a resource for people beyond the Catholic Church.
- To promote Healing and to ensure the safety of children, a list of Credibly Accused Clergy is listed online at www.bridgeportdiocese.com under Safe Environment.

CHILD ABUSE PREVENTION AND AWARENESS TRAINING

- The Catholic Church has trained 8.5 million adults and children since 2002. In the Diocese of Bridgeport, we reached over 100,000 adults and children with live training and educational materials. We require a live training program called VIRTUS (for adults) and The Child Lures Prevention, Think First & Stay Safe Program (for children and parents). An additional 50,000+ brochures and materials on child safety and abuse prevention were distributed over the past decade.
- There are currently 87 Certified VIRTUS facilitators in the Diocese of Bridgeport who work with the Safe Environment Office to deliver these programs. Classes and training materials are available in English, Spanish, Portuguese, Polish, Vietnamese, Italian and Korean. The Facilitators of the Diocese are dedicated volunteers who are committed to the safety and protection of children everywhere. In our Parish, the VIRTUS Facilitators are _____.
- There are 168 employees and volunteers onsite at Schools, Parishes and Diocesan Organizations across the Diocese of Bridgeport who are trained to track compliance locally with all Safe Environment programs and serve as a first line of defense when it comes to child safety. In our Parish this person(s) is: _____ Contact information: _____.

CHILDREN, YOUTH & PARENTS

- Training for children, youth and vulnerable adults includes lessons on how to recognize early warning signs in offenders by teaching them the concept of laws, personal body safety and telling children to report to a trusted adult anything that makes them feel uncomfortable.
- Training includes basic information on abduction prevention, bullying prevention, and Internet safety. The child abuse prevention education is provided for every student enrolled in Catholic Schools grades K-12 each year and in age appropriate groups.
- Parents are always offered the chance to preview these programs and the schools distribute materials to all parents in order to continue the conversation about child safety and abuse prevention in the home.

ADULTS

- VIRTUS training is a live comprehensive three hour class on Child Sexual Abuse Prevention. It is renewed every 5 Years (online or in person) by all Clergy, Employees and Volunteers who work in scheduled contact with children. Adults who volunteer in roles within parishes and programs that do not place them in scheduled contact with children must renew VIRTUS training (online or in person) every 10 years.

- VIRTUS Protecting God’s Children for Adults teaches participants the standards of conduct which are expected in the Diocese of Bridgeport when working with minors and vulnerable adults.
- Adults learn to recognize early warning signs of child abuse and grooming behaviors in the offenders of child sexual abuse.
- Mandatory Reporting: Adults receive training on Mandated Reporting Laws and Procedures. This information is included in every VIRTUS class. Adults are trained to report any reasonable cause to suspect abuse of a minor, youth or vulnerable adult to the police, to the State of CT, Department of Children and Families Child Abuse and Neglect Care-line and to the Diocesan Victim Assistance Coordinator within 12 hours of becoming aware of the information whether or not the incident occurred recently or in the past.

BACKGROUND CHECKS

- Every adult who works or volunteers in the Diocese of Bridgeport, including Priests, Deacons, Seminarians, Religious Sisters and brothers, Lay Employees, Lay Volunteers, School Parent Volunteers, Independent Contractors, and Vendors are required to complete a criminal background check. Approximately 40,000 checks have been completed in the Diocese of Bridgeport and over 5,000 vendors and contractors across Fairfield County have gone through our Safe Environment Programs.
- We have a zero tolerance policy for any person who has been convicted of a sex crime or a crime against children.
- Background checks must be renewed every 5 Years for Clergy, Employees and Volunteers who work in scheduled contact with children. Adults who volunteer in roles within parishes and programs that do not place them in scheduled contact with children must renew a criminal background check every 10 years.
- Background checks are also renewed every time there is an absence in service, a change in status from volunteer to employee, upon acceptance into a formation program and upon ordination.

POLICIES and CODE OF CONDUCT:

- The Safe Environment policies of the Diocese, including a comprehensive Code of Conduct, have been published into a single Safe Environment Handbook.
- The Policies are reviewed during each VIRTUS training program by the Facilitator and is signed by all Personnel when they register for VIRTUS training. Our Code of Conduct is a critical part of our efforts to ensure everyone is aware of the guidelines and expectations for appropriate conduct when working with children, youth and vulnerable adults and includes steps to take to avoid even the appearance of impropriety and to prevent false allegations. These policies are posted online at www.bridgeportdiocese.com under “Safe Environments.”

RESOURCES & CONTACTS:

If you or someone you know is a survivor of abuse as a minor, and it involves a person from the Church, we care deeply about your healing and you are very important to us. Please know that help is available and your report may help to keep other children safe. We encourage you to take the important step of communicating what you know to the Safe Environment Office, the Police, The State of Connecticut Department of Children and Families Child Abuse and Neglect Care-Line, D.C.F.

Mandated Reporting Laws and Procedures in the State of CT require professionals who work with children and other personnel to report to D.C.F. within 12 hours of becoming aware of the information. We encourage everyone, even those who are not mandated reporters by law, to follow these same guidelines because it is the right thing to do. We recognize that most child abuse is committed by people known and trusted by the victim and the family of the victim and in many instances may even be related to the victim. We understand that reporting abuse is a very difficult step. While we cannot guarantee anonymity in cases of suspected abuse since it must be reported to civil authorities, we will handle your information in a highly level of confidentiality at all times.

The State of Connecticut Department of Children and Families Child Abuse and Neglect Care-Line,
D.C.F. 1-800-842-2288

Erin Neil, L.C.S.W., Diocese Victim Assistance Coordinator (203) 650-3265

Michael Tintrup, L.C.S.W., Victim Assistance Counselor (203) 241-0987

For more information on the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People, please visit www.usccb.org and the Office of Child and Youth Protection.

For more information on the Safe Environment programs and Victim Assistance Ministry of the Diocese of Bridgeport, visit www.bridgeportdiocese.com under Safe Environment or call Erin Neil (203) 416-1406. Email: eneil@diobpt.org.

You may also write to The Diocese of Bridgeport
Office of Safe Environment
Erin Neil, Director
238 Jewett Avenue
Bridgeport, CT 06606

To register for a VIRTUS training session in your area, call Mike DiToro, Safe Environment Database Manager at (203) 416-1407 mditoro@diobpt.org.

Recommended Websites: www.virtusonline.org
www.childluresprevention.com
www.netsmartz.org