



STATEMENT OF THE DIOCESE OF BRIDGEPORT

Tuesday, May 26, 2009

Today's presentation at the Catholic Center overlooks the significant, thorough, and historical response of the Diocese of Bridgeport and its leader, Bishop William Lori, to the scourge of clergy sexual abuse.

- In fact, no other institution in the State of Connecticut has trained more people – 90,000 to date – in the warning signs of abuse and how to report suspected abuse.
- No other institution has reached out to victims with more compassion and dignity.
- No other institution has put in place safeguards and educational programs to ensure that such a tragedy will not happen again.
- No other institution has spoken so openly about this topic, particularly to parents.

We appreciate that emotions run high on this topic. We hope the attached document, which contains the latest statistics on our Safe Environment efforts, is helpful.

The decision of the Connecticut Supreme Court is not about new cases – it concerns litigation claims from the 1960s and 1970s. The victims' and their attorneys had access to the records in question under seal. In 2001, those claims were settled, and the court records, including documents under seal, were set to follow the standard procedure for all claims settled before trial and be destroyed.

- **Rather, our primary objection to the decision concerns judicial fairness, and the fundamental right of any individual or organization to fair adjudication in any legal proceeding.**
- From the anti-church rhetoric of the first trial judge who proceeded to "invent" an entirely new procedure to accommodate the press, to the lack of an impartial trial judge to reconsider the case on remand from the Connecticut Supreme Court, the history of this case raises issues that should be of concern to all people – and all churches.
- **In a state where the Catholic Church has had to vigorously fight for its constitutional rights (Bill 1098), we are going to continue to examine any and all legal options.**

Our statement from last Friday, which documents our grave concerns, is posted now on www.bridgeportdiocese.com.

The Diocese of Bridgeport is currently reviewing its options in response to the Connecticut Supreme Court decision.

Safe Environment programs were established in U.S. Dioceses by the Catholic Bishops in 2002 in a landmark document *The Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*, “the Charter”. The Safe Environment program is well established in the Diocese of Bridgeport with a full time director Ms. Erin Neil. Safe Environment programs oversee 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. Safe Environment programs are well established in all three Catholic Dioceses in CT.

All three Archdioceses and dioceses in CT received an external compliance audit each year since 2003. The Diocese of Bridgeport has always been found to be in full compliance and even exceeded these standards.

VICTIM ASSISTANCE

The Diocese of Bridgeport has had a Victim Assistance Program in place since 2003 and we currently have two victim assistance coordinators employed full time who are both licensed clinical social workers in the State of CT, Bill Hoey, L.C.S.W., and Erin Neil, L.C.S.W. In fact all three dioceses in CT 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 not from the Church. We provide help to victims and their families including counseling, financial 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. Safe Environments has proven a resource for people beyond the Catholic Church.

AWARENESS TRAINING

The Catholic Church has trained close to 8 million adults and children in the past 6 years. In the State of CT, the Catholic Church reached close to 200,000 people through child abuse prevention & awareness training.

In the Diocese of Bridgeport alone, we reached over 90,000 adults and children with live training and educational materials. 60,000 adults and children attended a live training program called *VIRTUS* (for Adults) & *The Child Lures Prevention, Think First & Stay Safe program* (for Children and parents). An additional 40,000+ brochures and materials on child safety and abuse prevention were distributed. Training for children includes lessons on how to spot early warning signs and grooming behaviors in sex offenders (i.e. being aware of adults who give gifts without parent’s permission, go overboard wrestling or tickling or asking to meet alone in a secluded area). Children learn to identify and report the most common lures and tricks employed by child molesters.

We also provide lessons on abduction prevention, bullying prevention, and internet safety. Child sexual abuse prevention training is provided for every student enrolled in Catholic Schools grades K-12 each year and parents are always offered the chance to preview the programs and every parent receives training materials so that they can continue teaching these safety lessons at home. VIRTUS for adults teaches participants to spot early warning signs and grooming behaviors in offenders of child sexual abuse and information on how to make a report of suspected abuse to both the State of CT child abuse hotline and to the Diocese.

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. We have a zero tolerance policy for any person with a sex crime or crime against children. Over 20,000 checks have been completed in the Diocese of Bridgeport and over 50,000 background checks were conducted by all three CT Catholic Dioceses combined.

CODE OF CONDUCT & SEXUAL MISCONDUCT POLICY

These policies provide a set of standards and guidelines for appropriate conduct when working with children, youth and vulnerable adults. These policies can be found at www.bridgeportdiocese.com under “Safe Environments.”