



Safe Environment

Diocese of Wheeling - Charleston

Fall 2025

Policy Updates Affect Volunteers, Employees



Revisions made over the summer to the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston’s Safe Environment policy better align with norms across the United States by focusing on volunteer roles that involve more direct or prolonged contact with minors and by shifting to a three-year requirement for continuing education, according to Bishop Mark Brennan.

The revisions are not drastic, but they are impactful, especially for volunteers in parishes throughout the Diocese. The revised policy took effect on July

1, 2025. The background check requirement and the policy acknowledgements for Safe Environment remain the same. It is the awareness training schedule and the roles to which the Safe Environment process applies that have changed.

Continuing Safe Environment education by the Diocese’s service provider, VIRTUS, is now required for all employees every three years. Compliance with the Safe Environment protocol remains a condition of employment for all employees. Volunteers who have direct or prolonged contact with children will be required to complete the continuing Safe Environment education module every three years as well. This is a change from the prior yearly training requirement.

Employees and volunteers may complete awareness training every three years online through their VIRTUS accounts; at an in-person VIRTUS training; or by reading the training module in printed material

TO FIND THE MOST CURRENT LIST OF ROLES:

Go to www.dwc.org

Hover over “Diocese”

Under “Offices” drop down and click “Safe Environment”

Down the left side, click “Download Files and Forms”

Click “Sex Abuse Policy Booklet” and the list is in the back of the booklet

format. Completion of the awareness training module every three years is required to achieve compliance with the Safe Environment protocol. There will be no change in the monthly bulletin requirement. Monthly bulletins are available to all employees and volunteers and are accessed in electronic format through VIRTUS. For volunteers who do not have internet access or computers, monthly bulletins also are made available in printed format in common areas of parishes and schools. Anyone, regardless of role, may read these printed bulletins and raise awareness.



The Safe Environment process now primarily applies to volunteer roles that involve direct or prolonged contact with minors, as opposed to all or most volunteer roles.

“Over the past 12 months, we have received and analyzed feedback relative to Safe Environment from our employees and volunteers throughout the Diocese,” Bishop Brennan said. “We also have done some research regarding what most other dioceses across the nation require as far as Safe Environment continuing education. We believe this policy revision strikes an appropriate balance and continues to safeguard our young people and vulnerable adults in a robust way, without overwhelming our local level Safe Environment coordinators or volunteers. We have

considered all of these factors as we worked with our lay-led Review Board to put in place a more manageable process for our Diocese.”

Historically, the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston required completion of one awareness training module only and nothing more. The Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston was one of only a few dioceses in the United States that did not require reoccurring awareness training for its employees or volunteers. In 2023, Bishop Brennan instituted monthly and yearly continuing education requirements for all employees and most volunteers. As time passed, local level Safe Environment coordinators and a number of volunteers expressed that monthly and yearly requirements were cumbersome to complete, track, and document. Completing the monthly and yearly requirements was especially difficult for the Diocese’s volunteers who do not have access to computers or the internet.

“Our Diocese has a sizable contingent of dedicated, older volunteers who we respect and value. They are very loyal volunteers who contribute greatly to parish life. We want to make this process manageable for them, as well as for our local level Safe Environment coordinators who often are



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- *DWC Bishop Mark Brennan*

balancing multiple tasks at the parish level,” Bishop Brennan said.

Continuing education on a three-year schedule is a workable, standard option for achieving Safe Environment compliance and is in line with protocols at many other dioceses across the U.S. The Diocese’s background check schedule is 3 years as well. Having training and background checks on the same three-year schedule is logical and practical, according to Bishop Brennan.

Safe Environment compliance requirements for Catholic schools will remain the same, with the only change being the shift to a three-year awareness training requirement. Every employee and every volunteer in every Catholic school, regardless of role, is required to comply with Safe Environment.

If parishes utilize schools for any activities, the volunteers are expected to be compliant with the Safe Environment process. “Schools are really our front lines,” Bishop Brennan said. “They have the most prolonged and direct contact with minors, and they are where our children should be able to learn, grow, and play in safety. Our parents and students should rest assured that our schools are safe places. We have always had strong Safe Environment requirements for our Catholic schools and we always will. Nothing will change there, except now awareness training will be required every three years as opposed to every month and every year.”



In parishes, volunteers whose roles involve more direct or prolonged contact with children will be required to comply with Safe Environment. Presently almost all volunteers are expected to comply.

A few years ago, parishes and schools expressed a need for a list of volunteer roles to which Safe Environment applies so they could have a point of reference to share with those looking to work or volunteer in the Diocese.

The most current list is always housed in the Diocese’s Policy Relating to Sexual Abuse which can be found online at www.dwc.org under the Safe Environment tab, then Download Files and Forms.

The list cannot account for every circumstance that may arise or every role that a volunteer may fulfill in the Diocese, but it can be used to account for most common circumstances. Effective July 1, 2025, the list focuses on the volunteer roles that involve more direct or prolonged contact with children.

The Diocese and the Review Board identified some of the more public-facing volunteer roles that do not involve direct or prolonged contact with children that will become exempt from the Safe Environment process. This policy revision also recognizes those parishes that have activities that do not always involve children versus those that do.

Bishop Brennan said the Diocese’s lay-led Review Board was integral to achieving the end result. “The Review Board asked questions and considered this issue over the course of several months,” Bishop Brennan said. “As always, they were very thoughtful and very deliberate. I appreciate their feedback and expertise and am confident we have found the best, most balanced path for everyone involved in our Diocese.”

2025-26 Children’s Program: VIRTUS Teaching Safety

The Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston provides awareness training for adults as well as children in grades Kindergarten through 12. Two lessons are taught every year for all students enrolled in Catholic schools and in parish schools of religion throughout the Diocese. **For the 2025-26 school year, Lessons 5 and 6 will be taught for all grade levels.** Parents and guardians are always welcome to view the lessons in advance. Parents and guardians also may opt out of the lessons for their children. Your parish or school will provide further information regarding the VIRTUS Teaching Safety lessons for children for this school year.

Instructions for Reporting Safe Environment Concerns



The Diocese encourages reporting to civil authorities first and foremost if a crime has been committed or is suspected. There are several mechanisms for reporting.

To Report to Civil Authorities:

Contact your local law enforcement; numbers will vary based on your location. If you believe someone is in immediate danger, call 911. To confidentially report any incidence of suspected child abuse or neglect, including sexual abuse, contact the West

Virginia Bureau for Children and Families’ Child Protective Services by calling the Child Abuse Hotline at 800-352-6513.

To Report Abuse by a Bishop of the Catholic Church: The Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston encourages reporting to civil authorities first and foremost if a crime has been committed. We also encourage utilizing www.reportbishopabuse.org to report. If you have reason to believe that a bishop has engaged in sexual misconduct or has interfered with an investigation into sexual misconduct, please contact civil authorities in the applicable jurisdiction and visit www.reportbishopabuse.org.

To the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston: The Diocese encourages reporting to the appropriate civil authorities first and foremost as well as to the appropriate church authorities. To report suspected cases of sexual abuse of children by clergy, religious or lay personnel of the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston to the Diocese, please contact one of the Bishop’s designees at 1-888-434-6237: Bryan Minor, ext. 263; Tim Bishop, ext. 353; Sr. Martha Gomez, ext. 264; Fr. Don Higgs, (304) 685-2367, or please call the Office of Safe Environment at 304.230.1504. You may also visit www.dwc.org, under “Accountability,” and utilize any of the mechanisms listed for reporting, including EthicsPoint, a third-party reporting system that accepts reports via internet or phone. You may report anonymously to EthicsPoint if you prefer.