



Safe Environment

Diocese of Wheeling - Charleston

Summer 2024

Bishop Brennan's Letter on Continuing Education for Employees and Volunteers

In May, Bishop Mark Brennan announced a yearly continuing Safe Environment education requirement for all employees and volunteers in the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston. Below is the letter he sent Diocesan-wide. Over the course of the remainder of 2024, we will be implementing this training for employees and volunteers in phases. The quickest and easiest way to complete continuing education will be through your VIRTUS account online. However, there will be other options for those who do not have internet access or are not comfortable completing training online. Over the coming weeks and months, please watch your email for notification on how to proceed. The first phase entails all volunteers and employees being current with Version 4.0 of Protecting God's Children for Adults. Once everyone has completed Version 4.0, we will move toward yearly modules and monthly bulletins for everyone. We expect the remainder of 2024 to involve getting all employees and volunteers up to speed with Version 4.0. For those who do not have internet access, further instruction will come from your parish, school, or Diocesan entity with which you are affiliated.



OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

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May 21, 2024

Dear brothers and sisters in ministry,

One of my priorities as your Bishop has been to ensure that our parishes, schools, youth groups and camps are safe for young people. To that end I have worked in concert with our Child Protection Office, headed by Sharon Goudy, and our independent lay-led Review Board to put the sad legacy of child abuse by clergy and other Church personnel well behind us. From what I have seen, our efforts have made a great difference.

Today, I write to inform you about another measure to enhance our Child Protection program. Following the recommendation of the third-party firm that audits all the dioceses of the United States for compliance with the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young*

People and as a matter of best practice, I am implementing yearly continuing Safe Environment education, starting this year. Going forward, yearly Safe Environment continuing education will be required of all diocesan employees and volunteers. This will entail completion of a yearly module and monthly bulletins for all employees and volunteers.

Keeping this matter in the forefront of our minds is critical to maintaining a safe environment for the young and for vulnerable adults where they worship, study, recreate and camp. More information will be sent to you from the Office of Safe Environment regarding the timeline and details for completing this yearly training.

We expect to implement this continuing education in phases and will rely primarily on our existing awareness training provider, VIRTUS. With an electronic platform and a built-in tracking mechanism, VIRTUS makes it convenient and easy to complete and document training. Look for more specific information and direction from the Office of Safe Environment in the coming weeks.

I am proud to report that our Safe Environment program has gained strength in the past few years, so that we have reached levels of compliance never before achieved. This is to the good of our young people and vulnerable adults. We must continue to move forward on this path for the benefit of those whom the Lord calls us to serve.

Not long before my arrival in August, 2019, the Diocese released a list of clergy credibly accused of child abuse, an important gesture that served as a catalyst for the healing process in West Virginia. Since then, other important steps have been taken to upgrade our protection efforts. Among them are:

- mandatory fingerprinting and FBI background checks for priests, deacons, seminarians and Catholic school personnel;
- consolidating the recordkeeping of compliance data through VIRTUS to allow employees and volunteers to work smarter, not harder, leaving them more time for ministry;
- contracting with a third-party reporting system called EthicsPoint to capture concerns regarding clergy as well as employees and volunteers;
- on-site audits every year by a third-party firm utilized by the Bishops' Conference rather than every three years (the *Charter's* mandate) and other audits performed by our fingerprinting firm, Corporate Security Investigations, in our Catholic schools;
- expanding since 2023 the scope of the independent Review Board to include not only sexual abuse of minors by clergy in accordance with the *Charter* but also inappropriate behavior toward adults, including but not limited to boundary violations, harassment, sexual harassment, grooming and financial improprieties. (The Review Board consists of experts in human resources, mental health, medicine and law enforcement.)
- revising the Safe Environment section of the dwc.org website to include more information and be more transparent; and
- publishing annually the Diocese's financial audit report.

My desire, which I trust you share, is to make our parishes, schools, youth groups and

camps as safe as possible for our children, young people and vulnerable adults in order that they may flourish physically, mentally and spiritually as children of God. They deserve this effort on our part. I count on you to join me in making it happen.

Thank you for your service to God and those who benefit from your efforts. May God bless you and keep you close to Him.

Sincerely in Christ,

+Mark E. Brennan

+Mark E. Brennan
Bishop of Wheeling-Charleston

Why Monthly VIRTUS Training Bulletins?



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For many, the fact that adults are required to attend awareness sessions seems like enough to demand of people. We are all busy. Clearly we care about kids, but why do we have to participate in ongoing training through training bulletins? Is there a reason other than keeping the issue in front of us? Didn't we learn what we needed in the awareness session? We know what to look for when adults are around our children, don't we?

The response to these questions is fairly simple and straightforward, and it is based on research that first appeared in the late 1800s. The research showed that repetition of important information in small bits, over time, is the most effective way for human beings to remember and use that information effectively. Having discovered this, we learned the importance of requiring continuing education using training bulletins.

Awareness—Not Training

The Protecting God's Children® for Adults program is an "awareness" program. It raises the issue of child sexual abuse and provides information that elevates an adult's awareness about the nature

and scope of the issue. The program is designed to bring what we currently know about this issue to the consciousness of adult participants.

The program emphasizes the behavioral characteristics of potential adult offenders and establishes guidelines for putting in place the programs, policies, and procedures necessary to promote a safe environment for all God’s children. Its purpose is to lay the groundwork to create safer environments for individuals, parishes, schools, and dioceses.

Awareness does just that—raises awareness. Training goes beyond awareness and educates people to use the information presented in an effective and productive way. No matter your level of awareness, without training to integrate the information into your view of life, it will simply be bits of information that are available when something or someone brings it to your attention.

Training is a necessary part of the process of creating a safe environment. Paying attention to the behavioral characteristics of adults who interact with children in the environment as a matter of course is necessary to prevent child sexual abuse in our environments.

Training can occur in many ways. The diocese can require additional workshops or conduct multiple in-person workshops to further examine and apply the information provided. However, research tells that the most effective way to train others is through Internet-based continuing education.



Internet based “Spaced education”

A great deal of respected research explains the effectiveness of a process called “spaced education.” Spaced education refers to a process that begins by presenting the broader subject in an awareness format and then establishes follow-up information, delivered over time in smaller pieces, to reinforce the message. Researchers say that this is the most effective way for people to retain and use new information.

The theories of German psychologist Hermann Ebbinghaus, who researched the world of memory in the late 1800s laid the groundwork for the new research studies related to interval-based online education. The primary researcher in this area is B. Price Kerfoot, M.D., and professor of surgery at Harvard Medical School. He has conducted extensive research into “spaced education.” That is, coursework delivered over time and repeated at intervals through an online process. According to this research, online education that presents information in small bites and reinforces it over time is a highly effective way to educate adults.

Receiving information in repeated, small amounts over time, as with the training bulletins for the VIRTUS® programs, results in people who are able to use and apply the information and have an impact on a situation or environment in a positive way. Additionally, according to studies, 78 percent of people prefer this type of learning. Another piece of the effective learning paradigm

also used by the VIRTUS programs is the pre- and post-testing processes. By using these tools the focus is on supporting learners in applying and using what they are learning.

If the Bishops' goals and objectives to educate adults about preventing child sexual abuse are to succeed, continuing education is necessary. Simply providing initial information and expecting those who attend to assimilate that information into their everyday life and adapt it to their observation skills, will not work. More is needed. Continuing education is the key to creating and maintaining safe environments.

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; 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.