



## DIOCESE OF WHEELING-CHARLESTON

• P.O. Box 230, Wheeling, WV 26003 •

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March 22, 2019

Dear Faithful of the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston,

In the Gospel, Christ encourages, “Let the children come to me, and do not prevent them; for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” (Matthew 19:14)

You, the faithful across our state, are living models of Christ through your commitment to spreading the Gospel, helping the least among us and supporting Catholic education. You place your faith, not only in God, but in the Diocese to do the same. This is not something we take lightly and we strive each day to fulfill the commitment we have made to you.

As many of you are aware, the Attorney General of the State of West Virginia filed a civil lawsuit in the Circuit Court of Wood County, West Virginia, alleging that the Diocese has violated the West Virginia Consumer Credit and Protection Act. The Complaint is based in part on information included in the Diocese’s November 2018 public disclosure of clergy credibly accused of child sexual abuse and on other information provided by the Diocese to the Attorney General over the past five months. The November disclosure by the Diocese contains details concerning both the dates of the alleged occurrences and the dates they were actually reported to the Diocese, which in many cases were decades later. Further, some of the allegations of misconduct contained in the Attorney General’s Complaint occurred more than 50 years ago and some are not accurately described.

The Diocese will address the litigation in the appropriate forum. However, the Diocese strongly and unconditionally rejects the Complaint’s assertion that the Diocese is not wholly committed to the protection of children, as reflected in its rigorous Safe Environment Program, the foundation of which is a zero tolerance policy for any cleric, employee or volunteer credibly accused of abuse. The Program employs mandatory screening, background checks and training for all employees and volunteers who work with children.

The Diocese also does not believe that the allegations contained in the Complaint fairly portray its overall contributions to the education of children in West Virginia nor fairly portray the efforts of its hundreds of employees and clergy who work every day to deliver quality education in West Virginia.

While the Diocese will address the litigation in the appropriate forum, we wanted to update you, our Catholic families, on our efforts to keep your children safe. All of the following information

was provided to the Attorney General over the past five months and not included in the complaint nor adequately referenced in it.

## **SAFE ENVIRONMENT PROGRAM**

**Why Is There An Office Of Safe Environment?** This actually is a frequently asked question by newcomers and a good refresher for long-standing members of the Church. Offices of Safe Environment all across the country are making a difference in the Catholic Church nationwide, and the results are very public.

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) requires that all Dioceses/Eparchies have in place a Safe Environment Program for the protection of children and young people. The *“Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People”* was adopted by the USCCB in June 2002 as a response to sexual abuse of minors by Catholic priests and deacons. This Charter is the basis for the Safe Environment program in every Diocese in the United States. The USCCB established an **Office of Child and Youth Protection** to oversee the application of the Charter’s principles and to create the means for accountability for ensuring implementation of standards.

Each year, Dioceses in the United States are audited by the USCCB through an independent agency for compliance with the Safe Environment mandate. The results of these audits are published in an annual report that is made public. At any given time, the most recent report, as well as other reports related to this subject, may be found on the USCCB’s website: [www.usccb.org](http://www.usccb.org) › at the bottom of the page, click on “Child and Youth Protection” › then down the left side of the page, click on “Reports and Research.”

The Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston designates a Process Administrator for the Office of Safe Environment and a full-time Office of Safe Environment Coordinator (both at the Chancery level) to help ensure the Diocese’s commitment to its children and young people and compliance with the Diocese’s Safe Environment Policy. In addition, at the local level, each parish, school, or organization appoints a local-level coordinator to help carry out the Safe Environment process. The Diocese also engages a Victims Assistance Coordinator, who is a licensed psychologist and professional counselor with extensive experience in crisis intervention for victims of all ages of sexual assault. The Victims Assistance Coordinator for the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston is separate and independent from the Diocese.

The Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston also regularly convenes an independent Sexual Abuse Review Board comprised of lay members to ensure that the Diocese is reporting to the appropriate authorities and engaging in appropriate preventive measures.

Although the actual Safe Environment mandate was part of the 2002 Charter, the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston had been implementing some policies and procedures prior to that time. As far back as the mid-1990s, the Diocese implemented its own Sex Abuse Policy. Awareness training and background checks began for some by 2000 and the mandate followed in 2002. By 2005, the Diocese’s Safe Environment Office and Program were fully operational, and by Spring of 2006, the

Diocese was recognized as having passed the yearly audit. The Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston has passed every audit (on-site and electronic) for every year thereafter.

## **THE THREE COMPONENTS OF SAFE ENVIRONMENT FOR ADULTS**

The Safe Environment Program by the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston consists of the following components:

- ✓ Background Checks
- ✓ Policy Relating to Sexual Abuse of Children (last updated: June 2018)
- ✓ Awareness training for adults (VIRTUS online or live training)

All three components (Background Checks, Policy Relating to Sexual Abuse of Children, and Awareness Training for Adults – VIRTUS) are mandated by the Diocese for persons seeking employment or seeking to volunteer, directly or indirectly with children, within the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston and any entity that falls under the Diocese. Every year, the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston— as well as nearly all other Dioceses in the United States—is audited by the USCCB’s independent agency for compliance with its Safe Environment mandate.

An **employee** is defined as a person who performs regular work or service and is paid by the Diocese or a Diocesan-entity (parish, school, pastoral center, etc.)

A **volunteer** is a person who performs a regular service at no charge to the Diocese or Diocesan-entity.

The Safe Environment process applies to any employee or volunteer who works directly or indirectly with children/minors (anyone younger than age 18).

A person is considered in compliance with the Safe Environment Policy upon successful completion of all three components.

The background check includes a nationwide sex offender search. Every employee and volunteer is issued the ***Policy Relating to Sexual Abuse of Children*** so that he or she clearly knows the Diocese’s stance on this issue—which is zero tolerance. And lastly, the training, which can be taken online or in-person, is intended to raise awareness regarding sex abuse, teaching employees and volunteers how to recognize signs of abuse and how important it is to report.

In addition to regular employees and volunteers, the Safe Environment process is applied to all priests, deacons and seminarians. Priests, deacons and seminarians also are required to undergo additional awareness training above and beyond the initial VIRTUS module as well as more frequent background checks compared to other employees and volunteers.

The Diocese’s background check provider is ScreeningOne, a national and international provider of background checks.

The Diocese's awareness training provider is the National Catholic Risk Retention Group, also known as VIRTUS.

## **SAFE ENVIRONMENT FOR CHILDREN**

A Student Awareness Program has been implemented since the fall of 2005 in the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston to give children information (appropriate for their age levels) and skills to help recognize acceptable and unacceptable behaviors and how to effectively deal with those behaviors. This VIRTUS Program was initially called “**Touching Safety**” but is now known as “**Teaching Safety – Empowering God’s Children.**”

The program is taught in Catholic schools and as part of Parish Schools of Religion. Teachers download lesson materials from the VIRTUS website. Two lessons are taught each year, along with the showing of an age-appropriate introductory DVD.

Recognizing the sensitivity of this subject matter and that some parents prefer to address the topic of sex abuse directly with their children as opposed to having someone else address it, before a class for children is taught, parents must be sent an Opt-Out Letter at least two weeks in advance of the lesson(s).

The Department of Catholic Schools also conducts a yearly lesson for students in grades 6-12 called “**Digital Do’s and Don’ts,**” which outlines West Virginia laws regarding the possession and distribution of child pornography/inappropriate images, bullying and stalking as well as best practices for tweens and teens for staying safe on computers, cell phones and tablets. This information is made available to Catholic school children in electronic and booklet form. It is made available to Parish School of Religion students who do not attend Catholic school in booklet form. Reporting instructions are included.

## **ACCOUNTABILITY: AUDITS AND SEX ABUSE REVIEW BOARD**

There are two primary means by which the Diocese is held accountable for compliance with the Safe Environment protocol:

### **One: Safe Environment Audits**

The Diocese is electronically audited yearly by an independent agency and on-site every three years for compliance with Safe Environment procedures and protocols, including analysis to determine that allegations of abuse are appropriately responded to and reported. The Diocese also is audited on communications, dissemination of information, documentation, record-keeping, and best safety practices as they pertain to Safe Environment. The USCCB, in turn, releases publically the independent audit agency’s summarized results in an annual report. The present auditing agency is Stonebridge Partners.

## **Two: Sexual Abuse Review Board**

The Diocese's Safe Environment efforts also are overseen by a Review Board comprised of lay members that meets regularly to ensure that proper reporting and preventive procedures are followed. The board is presently comprised of professionals in the fields of general practice medicine, pediatric medicine, child abuse/psychology and human resources. All members are mandatory reporters. The Review Board meets quarterly to review all Safe Environment cases, inquiries and efforts. The Review Board meets on an as-needed basis in the event of emergent situations.

## **SAFE ENVIRONMENT STATISTICS AND INVESTMENT**

The Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston and its people have made significant investments in Safe Environment over the years.

The following are yearly statistics as reported to the USCCB through the audit process. This information includes the number of children, clergy, employees and volunteers to whom the Safe Environment process applied. For children, the process involved completion of age-appropriate awareness training. For clergy, employees and volunteers, the process involved awareness training for adults, background check and receipt of the Diocese's Sex Abuse Policy.

<b>Year</b>	<b>Children</b>	<b>Clergy</b>	<b>Employees and Volunteers (to Include Catholic School Staff)</b>
2005-06	0*	204	4,728
2006-07	13,605	231	6,258
2007-08	13,733	238	7,011
2008-09	11,811	230	6,366
2009-10	10,430	206	6,240
2010-11	10,067	158	6,031
2011-12	10,126	183	6,051
2012-13	9,269	174	6,155
2013-14	9,000	180	6,358
2014-15	8,921	149	5,963

2015-16	8,881	158	5,998
2016-17	8,050	158	5,793
2017-18	7,404	148	6,874
2018-19	Pending	Pending	Pending

**\*2005 was the first year for the Children's Program so no children had participated in the program yet.**

The Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston has spent approximately \$355,060 on thousands of background checks since December of 2004 and \$153,861 on VIRTUS training since March of 2004.

In addition to the Safe Environment Process Administrator and Coordinator at the Chancery level, there are approximately 150 local level Safe Environment Coordinators working in our parishes, schools and other Catholic organizations throughout the Diocese to help keep our youth and vulnerable adults safe by administering the Safe Environment process to employees and volunteers. The overwhelming majority of these local level Coordinators are lay members of the Diocese.

As of 2016, the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston implemented a new diocesan-wide software platform called the ParishSoft Safe Environment Program Manager to track and document compliance for employees and volunteers. Implementation of the software was designed to improve accuracy and efficiency and promote uniformity and expediency in verifying a person's status relative to Safe Environment compliance.

## **REPORTING:**

The Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston encourages reporting to civil authorities first and foremost.

To report suspected cases of sexual abuse please contact **your local law enforcement agency** or call the **West Virginia Adult / Child Abuse Hotline: 1.800.352.6513**

To report suspected cases of sexual abuse of children by personnel of the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston to the Diocese, please contact one of the designees at: **304.233.0880 or 1.888.434.6237:**

- Sr. Ellen F. Dunn, O.P., ext. 264
- Mr. Bryan Minor, ext. 263
- Rev. Msgr. Anthony Cincinnati, STD, V.E., ext. 270

The Diocese promotes reporting by displaying posters on how to report in common areas in parishes and schools; by including reporting information in weekly parish bulletins; by including reporting information in *The Catholic Spirit*, which is delivered free of charge to every registered Catholic household in the Diocese twice monthly; and by displaying reporting instructions on the Diocesan website.

## **WHAT HAPPENS WHEN ABUSE IS ALLEGED:**

- Report to the appropriate civil authorities
- Cooperation and investigation
- Initiate communications
- Engage Victim's Assistance Coordinator
- Review by Sex Abuse Review Board comprised of lay members

For more information and resources on Safe Environment in the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston, please visit [www.dwc.org](http://www.dwc.org), hover the cursor over the word "Diocese," then under "Offices," click "Safe Environment."

We hope the information provided above is helpful to you as we continue every effort to provide a quality, Christ-centered education for your children in a safe environment. Please be assured of our prayers, both for you and the future of our Diocese as we anticipate the naming of a new shepherd for our Church in West Virginia. If you would like more information or have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact Tim Bishop at 304-233-0880 ext 353 or via email at [tbishop@dwc.org](mailto:tbishop@dwc.org).