

FAITH IN THE FIELD



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Protecting our children

In the wake of the clergy sex abuse crisis, how are parishes working to keep our children safe? ■ BY **KERRY WEBER**

When the U.S. bishops' "Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People" was implemented in 2002, the diocese of Tucson was in financial distress. The charter's purpose was to help dioceses and parishes develop procedures to protect children from sexual abuse and to provide healing for those abused in the past, and the diocesan staff in Tucson understood the serious nature of this mission. But they also knew that meeting the standards of the charter would take resources that could stretch thin the diocesan staff and budget.

"We were faced with how to implement a policy and procedure to reasonably achieve those goals while recognizing that it would take years to raise ourselves to those standards

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and stay within the budget,” said Paul Duckro, director of the diocese’s Office of Child, Adolescent, and Adult Protection since 2002.

The charter, in part, required the implementation of a series of steps known as “Safe Environment” programs, which would educate children and adults on how to spot and prevent abuse; offer guidelines for the behavior of individuals working with or in the proximity of children; and create a process for screening clergy, parish staff, and volunteers.

As in Tucson, dioceses across the country have struggled to effectively implement these programs. Most employ a Safe Environment coordinator, but other full-time diocesan employees or volunteers often take on the additional responsibilities to assist with volunteer training, record keeping, or conducting audits. Despite these challenges, according to the most recent audit, conducted by the bishops’ National

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Review Board and released in April 2011, the majority of U.S. dioceses are in compliance. Still, more must be done: Of the 188 dioceses and eparchies that participated, 55 received letters that pointed out areas in need of improvement.

The audit cited high turnover and poor record keeping among the most common problems, both

of which can result in inconsistent enforcement of procedures.

Teresa Kettelkamp, who served as executive director of the Office of Child Protection for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops until August, says some priests oversee several parishes, which can compound the confusion. Adding additional material to an already full school or religious education curriculum for children can be challenging as well. But failure to resolve these issues could lead to the dioceses being labeled as noncompliant. Currently the dioceses of Baker, Oregon, and Lincoln, Nebraska, as well as five

eparchies, are noncompliant. At present, aside from being labeled noncompliant, there is no official penalty for noncompliance.

With regard to Safe Environment training in particular, the dioceses demonstrated a high level of compliance, providing training to more than 99 percent of clergy; 98 percent of em-

ployees and volunteers; and 96.8 percent of children. Dioceses have the option of developing their own programs with approval from the diocese or of choosing from dozens of existing ones and adapting them to fit parish needs.

In some parishes, records are kept at a local level; others receive help from a diocesan data support



As the American Church continues to refine its Safe Environment programs and answer to charges in dioceses throughout the United States, New York Archbishop Timothy Dolan said recently he would welcome an opportunity to share in a

national discussion that tackles child sex abuse directly.

At the annual meeting of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops in November,

just days after the arrests at Penn State University related to alleged child sex abuse, Dolan, who is president of the USCCB, responded to journalists' questions about the tragedy.

"First of all," Dolan told report-

ers, "this shows us that the scourge of sexual abuse is not limited to any one faith. ...It's in organizations, it's in universities, it's all over the place."

Dolan said he would "exuberantly welcome" an alliance between the Church and organizations that work with children to establish safety standards and share what the Church has learned. The Church, Dolan added, "might be able to come with a little wisdom, earned the hard way, to that table when we have that discussion."

He continued, "We bishops, in our own response to this, have said, in a way, with deep regret, we have not been a good example of how to deal with this in the past. We'd like to become a good example of how to do it now.

"If there's a national conversation on this tragedy, we would be grateful, and honored, to have a part of it."

Sexual abuse

WE NEED A NATIONAL CONVERSATION

office. Most dioceses require each parish and school to appoint a compliance officer whose job it is to communicate with the central office, and many diocesan coordinators have worked hard to develop a relationship of trust with local law enforcement, which conducts background checks.

But keeping track of who has been trained is not easy, and Kettelkamp says internal and external audits provide some incentive. However, she says that many employees and volunteers have deeper motivations. “I think you will find a cadre of people who have a passion for protecting children,” she says. “[The audits] help people who are doing the right thing make sure others are pulling their weight. People who care want that accountability.”

Duckro is one of the people who cares. Soon after his arrival in Tucson, he realized that the central diocesan office could not manage the implementation

of the charter alone. He also realized that giving parishes some autonomy to develop their own programs could benefit their diverse diocese. He asked each parish and school to propose a plan to meet

the charter requirements. The completed plans were reviewed by the central office and then implemented by the parishes. “The back-and-forth made us more responsive and also meant that each parish or school shared ownership for the plan,” Duckro says.

In the initial stages, not every Tucson parishioner was thrilled about the new training

requirements. Duckro estimates that as many as 10 to 20 percent of volunteers in some parishes or schools withdrew from ministry or were removed from their positions for refusal to comply. Some long-time volunteers felt the requirement was insulting. Others said the background checks were an invasion of privacy. Some said they had no contact with children. But Duckro held firm and says he “respectfully removed people from ministry” for

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failing to comply.

Eventually, volunteers realized the training was not going away. Duckro told them, “You need to be the eyes and ears, even if you yourself are not a risk. Ninety-nine percent of volunteers are good people, but if they don’t cooperate, we’ll never notice the 1 percent with bad intentions.”

Duckro also has found communication between parents and children to be key to the success of Safe Environment programs for young people. He says parents need to understand that, while lessons must be age-appropriate, they must also address issues that are relevant to today’s youth. “The biggest problems isn’t that we’re telling kids too much,” he says. “The biggest problem is not addressing the things the young people already are encountering because we [the adults] are embarrassed or afraid.”

But not every diocese can easily facilitate face-to-face training — isolated, rural dioceses, in par-

ticular. Jenny Michaelson, director of Safe Environment programs for the Archdiocese of Anchorage, in-



stituted online training for adults, to ensure consistency of training. Other dioceses use video training. When volunteers do get together, Michaelson tries to provide an environment that enables open communication and promotes a Church that is more transparent and aware. “I don’t find people making accusations or as-

sumptions, but I find that they're questioning [some behaviors]," Michaelson says. "The reality that we have perpetrators in all aspects of our lives is draining. Hopefully we're providing information that can extend beyond the Church."

Within the Church, connecting these programs to elements of the faith can be useful in helping volunteers have a meaningful training experience. In Baltimore, Alison D'Alessandro, director of the Division of Youth and Child Protection for the archdiocese, says she works closely with the division of evangelization and catechesis to achieve this goal. The archdiocese has created its own program, called Stand. "In addition to stopping abuse, I think our vigilance will help increase people's faith, and we'll create a culture of trust," she says.

Still, D'Alessandro says despite immense support from her bishop and fellow staff, she sometimes struggles to comprehend the suffering so many children have endured because of abuse. "There have been times that I feel like I question how much longer I can do this, or even question God a little bit," she says. "But then when

you see a victim who has been keeping this secret for 30 years finally come forward and find some healing, it feels worthwhile."

While safe environment programs have become a regular part of parish life, Mary Beth Hanus, the victim outreach and prevention manager for the Diocese of Omaha, Nebraska, says that dioceses must be vigilant about keeping programs relevant and transparent. This year, she helped update Omaha's adult program, called Circle of Grace, taking into account the fact that changing technologies can foster new forms of abuse. "It's important not to just accept the status quo, but to see if there is anything we can do to make the standards better or clearer," she said. "People's awareness is heightened." The job is stressful, but Hanus says, "It is more stressful not to be doing something to make [the situation] better," and she believes the Church has made great strides. "The gift in this tragedy of clergy abuse," she says, "is that we're going to be the leaders in how to keep kids safe." **CD**

Kerry Weber is an associate editor of *America* magazine, and author of *Keeping the Faith: Prayers for College Students* (Twenty-Third Publications).