



Catholic Diocese of Richmond

Office of Communications

Office of Communications
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Frequently Asked Questions

Regarding the Sexual Abuse Crisis

How the Diocese Protects Children, Assists Victims and Survivors and Reports Abuse

1. How are Bishop Knestout and the Catholic Diocese of Richmond confronting the sexual abuse crisis?

The first and primary concern regarding the sexual abuse crisis is responding to the needs of the victims and survivors. Bishop Knestout and the Catholic Diocese of Richmond remain committed to facing the sexual abuse crisis in the Church with courage, faith, hope and love; as well as action. A full accounting of the Bishop's promises was originally outlined in Bishop Knestout's pastoral letter to the faithful and distributed in September 2018. [You can view that letter here.](#) In his letter, Bishop Knestout acknowledges a failure of leadership in the Church regarding the sexual abuse crisis and urges patience from the faithful as he and others work toward greater reforms. The Bishop outlined that he and the Diocese would:

- a. Make public the names of the priests in the Diocese of Richmond accused of credible and substantiated sexual abuse.
- b. Arrange for a comprehensive audit of clergy files by an independent third-party.
- c. Set aside funds to provide therapeutic assistance for victims/survivors of abuse. The fund would be managed by the Diocesan Review Board.
- d. Strengthen and reinforce existing abuse policies, codes of conduct, procedures for evaluating, reporting and responding to accusations of abuse.
- e. Remain a consistent leader in the implementation of safe environment programs and protecting our youth from harm through VIRTUS and other similar programs.
- f. Continue to meet with the victims/survivors of abuse personally to help them overcome the trauma associated with sexual abuse, to share in their experience, and to help them in their journey of healing.

In addition, the Diocese has a Victims Assistance Coordinator who provides assistance and support to victims and survivors of sexual abuse within the Catholic Church. The diocesan website contains information on resources available for victims and survivors, which may be found under the Child Protection/Safe Environment Office.

2. How can I report abuse? What procedures and/or resources are in place to help abuse victims?

The Diocese of Richmond urges individuals who have been sexually abused by a priest, deacon, religious, lay employee or volunteer of the Diocese of Richmond to report abuse directly to law enforcement, including Child Protective Services (CPS), and by calling the Attorney General's Clergy Abuse Hotline at 1-833-454-9064. In a commitment to support and facilitate healing, individuals are then encouraged to contact the 24-hour confidential Victim's Assistance Reporting number at 1-877-887-9603 or the Director of Safe Environment by phone at 804-622-5203 or by email at vac@richmonddiocese.org.

3. What is being done to ensure a crisis of this nature does not happen again?

Bishop Knestout acknowledges the past failures in Church leadership to address this issue in a way that provides justice and healing for the victims/survivors of sexual abuse. The Bishop outlined the steps he and the Diocese continue to take to protect our youth and others from abuse in his [Pastoral Letter to the Faithful](#), published in September 2018.

In 2002, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) addressed the abuse crisis by creating the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*. That Charter established a set of procedures for addressing allegations of sexual abuse of minors by Catholic clergy. The Charter remains our guiding principle.

Bishop Knestout is taking the steps outlined above to make the protections for everyone as strong as possible. Through the safe environment program, the Diocese has trained, and continues to train, tens of thousands of clergy, religious, lay employees, volunteers, and others to recognize and identify abusive and grooming behaviors.

Additionally, seminaries employ extensive psychological testing and intensive background checks for all candidates for priesthood. In the Diocese of Richmond, we use highly-trained mental health professionals with over twenty years of experience in assessment of men applying to seminary formation. Seminary candidates also go through detailed and lengthy evaluations with vocation directors, vocation boards, lay faithful and spiritual directors before admittance.

You can learn more about the seminarian formation process and why it is so important in the context of preventing another sexual abuse crisis by [watching Bishop Knestout address this question directly](#).

In the Diocese of Richmond, diligent efforts continue regarding the protection of youth in our parishes and schools. We are constantly evolving and improving our efforts.

4. What is Bishop Knestout's role within the USCCB? What is the USCCB doing to address this crisis?

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) is an assembly of the bishops of the United States that serves to promote the good news of the Catholic Church and to act collaboratively on vital issues confronting the Church and society. The USCCB established the National Review Board in 2002 to advise the conference in preventing the sexual abuse of minors by clergy. The National Review Board conducts annual audits to ensure all dioceses are following the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*.

Bishop Knestout serves as the Region IV representative to the Committee for the Protection of Children and Young People, which provides the USCCB with comprehensive planning and recommendations related to child and youth protection. The committee also oversees the development of the plans, programs and budget of the Secretariat of Child and Youth Protection.

5. Who ensures the diocese is following best practices and procedures outlined by the USCCB when it comes to reporting abuse?

The Safe Environment Office regularly monitors and assesses compliance with the *Charter*. In addition, the Diocese of Richmond undergoes an extensive audit annually by an independent firm contracted by the National Review Board to determine the effectiveness of the protective measures that are required by the *Charter for the Protection for Children and Young People* from 2002. Every three years, the audit firm completes an on-site compliance audit. [You can read the latest audit results here.](#)

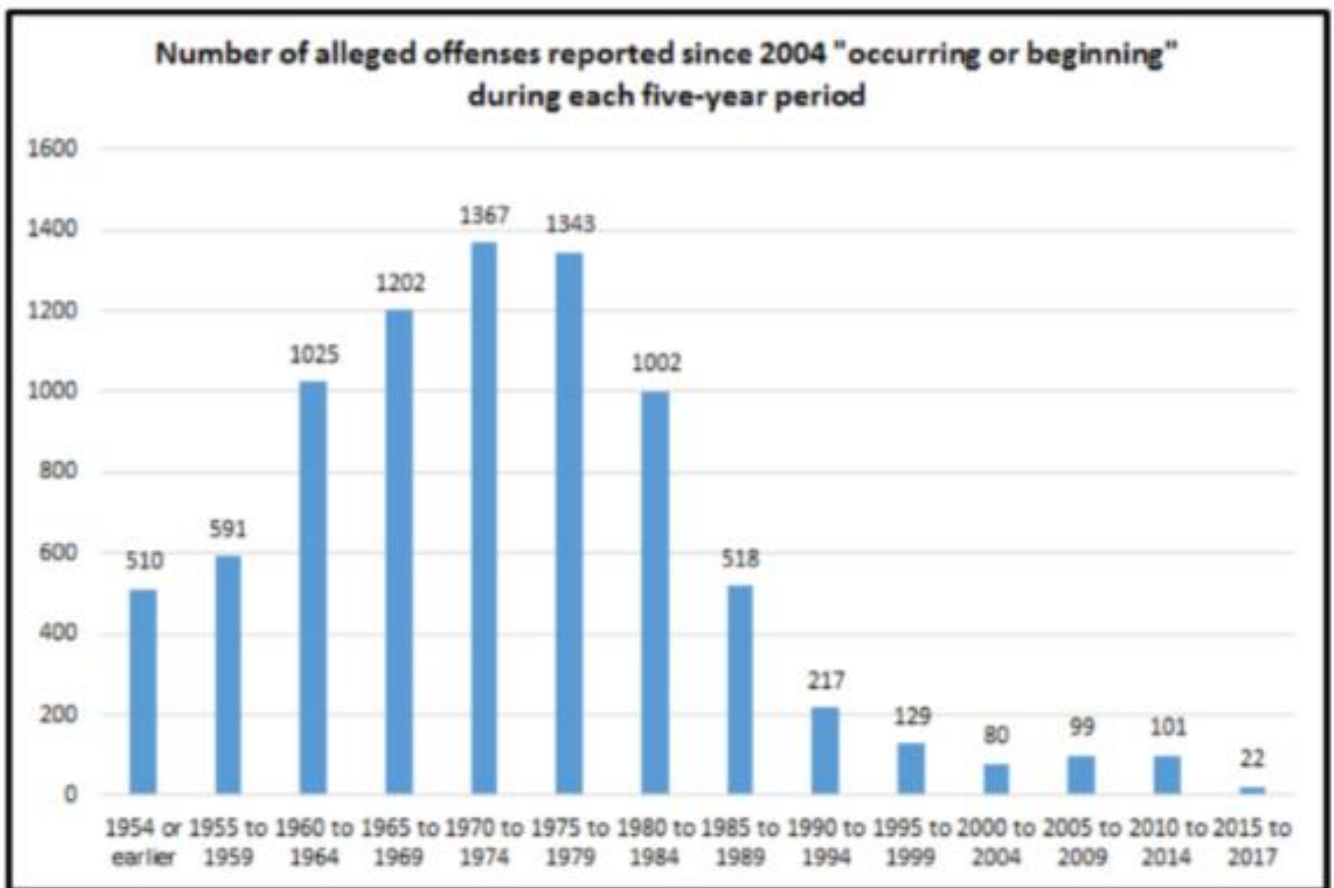
6. What are some of the reasons child sexual abuse by clergy occurs?

A report by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice of the City University of New York identified the root causes of the abuse crisis within the Church and the extent of it. The [John Jay Report](#), as it became known, posited that the abuse crisis was compounded by a number of factors, including a lack of accountability by Church leadership, a general lack of awareness by Church leadership as to the extent of the issue and a belief by Church leadership that sexual abnormalities were more readily treatable.

7. What positive impacts have resulted from improvements in the Church's response to child sexual abuse by clergy?

With the implementation of the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People* in 2002, the Diocese of Richmond, along with all dioceses in the United States, have consistently pursued mandatory background screenings and child protection training for all clergy, religious, lay employees and volunteers. Due to the vigilant efforts of thousands of clergy and lay faithful, the Catholic Church in the United States is stronger and safer today than in years past.

While there is no excuse for the terrible sins of the past, progress has been made, as this is not the Church today. Please reference the graph below from the Center for Applied Research of the Apostolate (2006) which presents national data on the number of alleged cases of clergy sex abuse of minors reported during each five-year period from 1950 to 2017. While there have been significant decreases, even one incident of child sexual abuse is too many. Bishop Knestout seeks to prevent all cases of child sexual abuse by clergy in the Diocese of Richmond.



8. What is the criteria for determining whether an allegation of child sexual abuse is credible and substantiated?

A credible and substantiated allegation of sexual abuse of a minor is supported by a preponderance of the evidence, *i.e.*, the greater weight of the evidence supported the allegation. This determination is made after carefully considering many factors and circumstances that tend to support the allegation.

This analysis is made more difficult as child sexual abuse most often occurs in the absence of witnesses. The facts and circumstances that could substantiate a credible allegation vary from case to case. Examples of facts considered included, but were not limited to admissions, convictions, arrests, settlements of civil claims, detailed, consistent, and plausible complaints, multiple victims, priest's assignment history, adverse actions against the priest by Church authority, and name published on other lists of known abusers.

We recognize the tremendous weight of such an assessment, and that is why we are grateful for the support of our Diocesan Review Board — an independent body comprising lay individuals, many of whom have legal, investigative or mental health backgrounds — in helping to reach these conclusions.

9. What happens to a priest when an allegation of child sexual abuse is found credible and substantiated?

Priests are placed on administrative leave when the allegation is made. When the allegation is substantiated, Bishop Knestout immediately removes the priest from active ministry.

10. What happens to a lay employee or volunteer when an allegation of child sexual abuse is found credible and substantiated?

Employees are placed on administrative leave while an allegation of sexual abuse is investigated including notification of proper authorities. They are immediately terminated from employment if the allegation is substantiated. In the case of volunteers, they are immediately removed from the volunteer role if an allegation is substantiated. More details on applicable codes of conduct and policies can be found in *Called to Work in Harmony*, the Diocese's employee personnel handbook, and the diocesan *Safe Environment Regulations*.

11. What does the Diocesan Review Board do? Who serves on it? What are the qualifications to serve on it?

The Diocesan Review Board assists the Bishop in examining and assessing allegations of sexual abuse of minors by clergy and other personnel and in determining the appropriateness for ministry of an alleged offender.

The Review Board is composed of seven individuals—the majority of whom are lay persons not employed by the Diocese—who are recognized for their integrity, good judgement and full communion with the Church and who have knowledge, insight or expertise in the protection of minors; this includes professionals in civil and church law as well as in the field of mental health.

Members of the Diocesan Review Board for the Richmond Diocese have requested their names not be published due to the fact of the sensitive and confidential matters they handle.

[You can find more information about the Diocesan Review Board and the duties of the Board here.](#)

12. What happens to an accused priest if an allegation is found not to be credible?

If, after an investigation by the civil authorities and the Diocesan Review Board, an allegation is found not to be credible, then the priest is restored to full ministry and steps are taken to restore his good name and reputation.

13. Does the Diocese use funds raised through the Annual Diocesan Appeal or the Living our Mission Campaign on legal fees, investigations and possible settlements?

No. We endeavor to be good stewards of the financial resources entrusted to the Diocese. Contributions to the Annual Diocesan Appeal and the Living Our Mission Campaign are restricted for specific purposes and cannot be used for legal or professionals' fees and cannot be used for settlements. Although parishes pay for background checks, no parish or school funds will be used for any of the costs associated with victims/survivors of clergy sexual abuse. Counseling, assistance, and associated legal fees are paid through the diocese's insurance program, as well as through the sale of real estate holdings and other sources of funds.

14. What does the Safe Environment Office do to help keep our children safe?

This office supports parishes and schools in safe environment compliance, as well as training and supporting over 150 VIRTUS facilitators.

Since the inception of the VIRTUS Program in November 2004, the Diocese has conducted over 3,200 Protecting God's Children for Adults training sessions with 57,000 persons in attendance. The

current 150 trained facilitators conduct 270 live sessions each year in our parishes and schools. All clergy, religious, and lay employees are required to complete VIRTUS training, undergo background checks every five years and receive monthly training bulletins. In addition, all volunteers working with minors or vulnerable adults must attend live VIRTUS training and undergo background checks every five years.

15. What does the Diocese do to protect our seminarians and ensure that they have a positive experience in their formation?

The Diocese wants to ensure seminarians (and their parents) preparing to enter into seminary that they will be in a safe environment, conducive to their health and well-being. Bishop Knestout meets and communicates with the seminarians regularly and encourages them to be honest about their experiences, challenges, joys, and goals for priestly life as they prepare and move forward in formation towards ordination.

In addition, the Vocations Director and Associate Director make frequent and regular visits to the seminarians of the Diocese to check on their well-being and progress in their formation.

There are avenues, both at the seminary and in the Diocese, to express concerns if they have been abused, treated inappropriately or improperly at any stage. The Diocese encourages them to bring forward immediately any such claims to civil and Church authorities with confidence that they will be addressed.

16. Are bishops held accountable for child sexual abuse?

Yes. All bishops are accountable to the Pope. The Pope is the single authority when it comes to appointments, oversight and discipline of bishops. Even so, Bishop Knestout supports the development of policies and practices for adjudicating complaints against bishops. He agrees with calls for greater reform and growth when it comes to addressing greater accountability and reporting allegations against bishops.

While the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People* did not address how the Church is to investigate and discipline bishops who fail in their roles as leaders, there are structures in place for bishops to be disciplined.

17. Will Bishop Knestout continue to meet with victims of sexual abuse?

Bishop Knestout welcomes the opportunity to continue meeting with victims/survivors of sexual abuse. The Victim Assistance Coordinator is available to coordinate with victims/survivors who would like to meet with the Bishop.

18. Has the Diocese ever conducted an independent audit of clergy files and when will one be released as other dioceses have done?

In his first pastoral letter “From Tragedy to Hope,” written in September 2018, Bishop Knestout announced, “our diocese is committed to making public the names of those priests from our diocese who have received credible and substantiated allegations of abuse. I believe this to be an important step in helping survivors with their healing.”

With this letter, Bishop Knestout authorized a review of all files of priests and deacons within the Diocese of Richmond. The scope of the review includes all clergy, living and deceased, active or

inactive, and religious order priests and priests from other dioceses, to the extent such files exist. ***This is the first independent review of clergy personnel files for the diocese.***

The audit of clergy files is being conducted by an independent firm with professionals with backgrounds in law enforcement and years of experience in clergy personnel file reviews related to clergy sexual abuse of minors.

19. Have there been cases of sexual abuse of minors in the Catholic Diocese of Richmond?

Yes. The Diocese of Richmond is not immune to this crisis. The Diocese will be releasing a list of clergy who have credible and substantiated allegations of child sexual abuse.

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