

Office of Safe Environment

A N N U A L R E P O R T

2023



CATHOLIC DIOCESE OF RICHMOND



April 1, 2024

Letter from Bishop Barry C. Knestout



Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Since the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops established the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People* in 2002, tremendous efforts have been made by dioceses throughout our country to create a safe environment for children, young people, and vulnerable adults. Here in the Diocese of Richmond, I fully support the work of the Office of Safe Environment.

Guided by the Holy Spirit, the Office staff continues to implement preventative measures that ensure the safety of our vulnerable population. Raising awareness of child abuse through training and completing extensive background screenings remain a high priority. Age-appropriate training is also provided to youth in our Catholic schools and parish communities.

The importance of establishing a culture and practice of protecting children, youth, and vulnerable adults in all our activities, and responding to those who come forward to report having suffered harm, is an important part of our mission as a diocese. I am grateful for all our employees and volunteers who serve with great dedication and commitment, and I thank you for embracing the culture of safety and for doing your part in protecting the most vulnerable.

The Diocese is audited each year by independent auditors to measure and determine our compliance with the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*. Through the joint efforts of our employees and volunteers, we have successfully completed the audit each year. I encourage you to remain vigilant and pray for the comfort and healing of those who are mentally, emotionally and/or physically struggling. Let us pray that they experience the Lord's profound love for them, and that dignity and respect is given to all God's children.

The painful tragedy of sexual abuse weighs heavily on our hearts and remains in our memories. Yet, Christ continues to call us to reconciliation and evangelization, guiding our steps to assist victim survivors on their journey toward healing.

With assurances of my gratitude and prayerful best wishes, I remain

Sincerely in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'Barry C. Knestout', with a small cross to the left of the first letter.

Most Reverend Barry C. Knestout
Bishop of Richmond

OFFICE OF SAFE ENVIRONMENT



This year, the Office of Safe Environment offered seven in-person training sessions across the diocese. These sessions were to ensure that those who minister, work and serve in our parishes and schools understand safe environment protocols and their responsibility to provide safe and healthy surroundings where the vulnerable can grow and thrive.

Maintaining personal and professional boundaries was a focal point of the training sessions. Boundaries are the legal and ethical framework that protect individuals from physical, emotional and mental harm and help to sustain a safe and nurturing environment.

Despite some staff changes, our attention remained focused on the primary work of the office. In September 2023, Karen Loper retired from her position as Victim Assistance Coordinator/Safe Environment Coordinator. Karen joined the diocese three years ago and has shown great commitment to the work of the Office, ensuring that we are in full compliance with the Charter. We are grateful for Karen's service to the diocese.



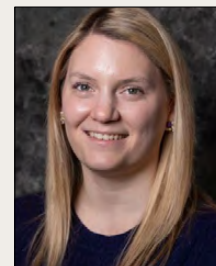
Karen Loper

Kelly Shumate, Human Resources Generalist/Recruiter in the Office of Human Resources, accepted an expanded role to include assuming the position of Victim Assistance Coordinator (VAC) in the Office of Safe Environment. Kelly joined the Diocese over four years ago. She has prior experience in the mental health field, including a Master of Science (Mental Health Counseling track) and a Bachelor in Psychology.



Kelly Shumate

Brianna Dickerson joined the office in August 2023 as the Safe Environment Coordinator. Brianna has a Bachelor of Science/Social Work from VCU. She has prior experience working in local foster care programs in Richmond.



Brianna Dickerson

Due to the high volume of work in VIRTUS training and background screening, an additional position was created this year. Anna McLemore took on that role of Safe Environment Manager in September 2023. Anna joins us from Virginia Commonwealth University, where she worked in Human Resources over the past 10 years. Anna has a Master of Public Administration and a Bachelor of Science in Psychology.

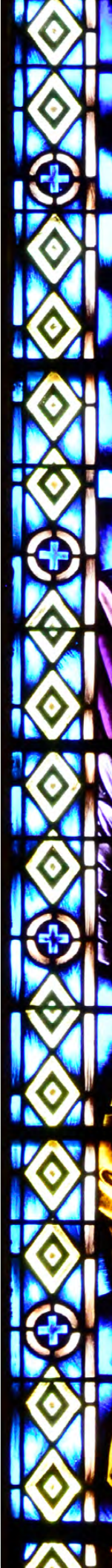


Anna McLemore

“As each one has received a gift, use it to serve one another as good stewards of God's varied grace” (1 Peter:10).

I am delighted to continue to serve you with this highly committed and enthusiastic team.

Nazia Shafi, Director
Office of Safe Environment



VICTIM ASSISTANCE OUTREACH

DIOCESAN REVIEW BOARD

During this annual report period, the Diocesan Review Board assessed two allegations of child sexual

abuse by clergy. These allegations were of past abuse, however only reported in 2023. Both were determined as being credible. Additional allegations were brought forward against a lay employee. These allegations were investigated by civil authorities.



MASS FOR HOPE & HEALING

Bishop Knestout celebrated a Mass for Hope and Healing at St. Paul Catholic Church, Richmond, on October 24, 2023. The faithful gathered to pray with the bishop for victim survivors and their families, to promote healing and to support victim survivors of child sexual abuse and their families.

In his homily, Bishop Knestout said, *“The damage from sin is great and affects everyone in the human family. The*

remedy likewise is universally available to every person. As Saint Paul says, “Where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more.” ... In our ecclesial response, we do not lose hope, nor do we simply beat ourselves up in self-hatred. We embrace the grace of redemption and are confident that all those who have been injured can receive healing and restoration, and all those who caused injury might have the opportunity to be held accountable, to experience justice, but also the possibility of forgiveness and redemption.”

SUPPORT GROUP

This year, we made the support group meetings virtual, allowing for more accessibility. Our goal was to offer this resource to a broader population of people with compassion and mercy, so that healing is made available to more victims. The support group meetings were held each month. *“Bless the Lord, my soul; and do not forget all his gifts, who pardons all your sins, and heals all your ills, who redeems your life from the pit, and crowns you with mercy and compassion”* (Psalm 103:2-4).

POPE FRANCIS DESIGNATED MARCH 2023 PRAYER INTENTION FOR VICTIMS OF ABUSE

“We pray for those who have suffered harm from members of the Church; may they find within the Church herself a concrete response to their pain and suffering.”



AT-A-GLANCE

BACKGROUND
SCREENINGS
COMPLETED

Employees
801
Volunteers
6,251

NEWLY
TRAINED
PROTECTING
GOD'S
CHILDREN
FACILITATORS

30

VIRTUS TRAINING
SESSIONS
SINCE 2004

4,542

YOUTH TRAINED
IN PARISHES,
*Teaching
Safety –
Empowering
God's Children*

1,025

VIRTUS TRAINED
EMPLOYEES
AND
VOLUNTEERS
SINCE 2004

70,916

ANNUAL
SAFE
ENVIRONMENT
BUDGET

\$488,067

ACTIVE
FACILITATORS

150

TRAINING
SESSIONS
DURING
THIS PERIOD

240

STUDENTS
TRAINED
TEACHING
SAFETY –
EMPOWERING
GOD'S CHILDREN

6,977

ADULTS
TRAINED
PROTECTING
GOD'S
CHILDREN
FOR
ADULTS

3,574



USCCB AUDIT

The diocese successfully completed the 2022/2023 Data Collection Audit. We remain in compliance with the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People.



MANDATED AND ETHICAL REPORTER TRAINING 1.0: CARING ADULTS AND REPORTING CHILD ABUSE

During this audit period the office of Safe Environment encouraged all clergy, lay employees and volunteers to participate in the VIRTUS Mandated and Ethical Reporter Training. This training addresses what is required by law for mandatory reporting situations of child abuse or maltreatment, and tips for caring adults who all share the commonality of ethical reporting. Within the Catholic Church, this is also a moral obligation, as protecting children and youth from harm is aligned with the teachings of the Gospel.

In accord with Va. Code 63.2-1509;

“Any person 18 years of age or older associated with or employed by any public or private organization responsible for the care, custody or control of children is a mandated reporter.” We all have a legal responsibility to report suspected abuse, neglect and exploitation of a minor.

SAFE ENVIRONMENT INITIATIVES

In May 2023, the Office of Safe Environment held training sessions across all three vicariates to assist employees and volunteers in understanding safe environment protocols and compliance requirements. We had an overwhelming turnout in each vicariate.

- a. **Eastern 86 attendees**
- b. **Central 64 attendees**
- c. **Western 29 attendees**

In addition to these training sessions, the Office of Safe Environment participated in training sessions for business managers and clergy in conjunction with the Offices of Finance and HR. We visited four locations across the vicariates, provided training, and answered safe environment related questions and concerns.



CHILD ABUSE PREVENTION MONTH 2023



In observance of Child Abuse Prevention Month, His Excellency, Bishop Knestout celebrated Mass at the Pastoral Center chapel on April 4, 2023.

Father Michael Boehling, Vicar General and Moderator of the Curia and Father Tochi Iwuji, Director of the Office for Black Catholics and Pastor, Holy Rosary Catholic Church in Richmond, concelebrated Mass with Bishop Knestout. About 150 viewers watched this through livestream.



In 1989, Bonnie Finney tied a blue ribbon to the antenna of her minivan as a way to honor her grandson, Michael Wayne "Bubba" Dickenson, who tragically lost his life because of the abuse he endured. Each year for Child Abuse Prevention Month, Pastoral Center employees wear blue to honor Bubba and all victims of child abuse.

This year, we partnered with Commonwealth Catholic Charities (CCC) for raising awareness during Child Abuse Prevention Month. Established in 1923, CCC

is one of the largest human services agencies in Virginia. Its mission is to provide quality, compassionate services to all people, especially to the most vulnerable. CCC provides critical services in 30 distinct programs across 11 locations in the Commonwealth, from Virginia Beach to Norton. Services offered include foster care, pregnancy counseling and adoption, refugee resettlement, housing and financial counseling, employment services, homelessness diversion and outreach, permanent supportive housing, mental health counseling, public guardianship and case management for individuals with disabilities, and senior connection.



On April 12, we welcomed presenters, Anita Wallen, Chief Operating Officer; Cinnamon Langley, Counselor/Group Facilitator; and Jennifer Ward, Program Manager, Foster Care to the Pastoral Center to talk about CCC programs and learn how we can help as responsible and caring adults.

On April 18, at the Mission Basilica San Diego de Alcala, in California Bishop Knestout concelebrated Mass with Bishop Michael Warfel of the Diocese of Great Falls-Billings, Auxiliary Bishop Ramon Bejarano of the Diocese of San Diego and Bishop Alberto Rojas of the Diocese of San Bernardino. Mass was celebrated for the safe environment and victim assistance coordinators from dioceses and eparchies across the country who had come to attend the 17th annual Child and Youth Protection Catholic Leadership Conference in San Diego.



Diocesan Child Sexual Abuse Reporting Policy

First, contact the Civil Authorities

Child Protective Services 24-Hour Hotline (800) 552-7096 or the local police.

Second, contact the Diocesan Victim Assistance Coordinator 877-887-9603.

Office of Safe Environment



Contact Information

Nazia Shafi: Director of Safe Environment

Phone: 1-804-359-5661 | email: nshafi@richmonddiocese.org