



The Safe Environment Program of the Diocese of Bridgeport

Safe Environment programs were established in U.S. Roman Catholic Dioceses by the Catholic Bishops in 2002 in a landmark document, *The Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*, a.k.a. “the Charter.”

Safe Environment programs are well established in all three Roman Catholic Dioceses in Connecticut.

The Safe Environment program in the Diocese of Bridgeport has a full time director, Ms. Erin Neil, L.C.S.W. Safe Environment programs oversee the implementation of *Charter* mandates including victim assistance, criminal background checks, written *Codes of Conduct*, and child sexual abuse awareness and prevention training for Priests, Deacons, Lay Employees, Volunteers, Children, and Youth.

All three Archdioceses and dioceses in Connecticut received an external compliance audit each year since 2003. The Diocese of Bridgeport has always been found to be in full compliance and even exceeded these standards.

VICTIM ASSISTANCE

The Diocese of Bridgeport has had a Victim Assistance Program in place since 2003. We currently have two Victim Assistance Coordinators employed full time who are both licensed clinical social workers in the State of Connecticut: Bill Hoey, L.C.S.W., and Erin Neil, L.C.S.W.

In fact, all three dioceses in Connecticut have victim assistance programs in place to provide healing and outreach to survivors of child sexual abuse committed by any person from the Church and, in many cases, by persons not from the Church.

We provide help to victims and their families including counseling, financial and other forms of outreach specific to the person’s needs. We offer this outreach regardless of whether the abuse occurred recently or in the past and for as long as necessary for healing to take place. All victims are offered an apology and a meeting with the Bishop.

Safe Environments has proven a resource for people beyond the Catholic Church.

AWARENESS TRAINING

The Catholic Church has trained close to 8 million adults and children in the past six years. In the State of Connecticut, the Catholic Church reached close to 200,000 people through child abuse prevention and awareness training.

In the Diocese of Bridgeport alone, we reached over 90,000 adults and children with live training and educational materials. More than 60,000 adults and children attended a live training program called *VIRTUS* (for adults) and *The Child Lures Prevention, Think First & Stay Safe Program* (for children and parents). An additional 40,000+ brochures and materials on child safety and abuse prevention were distributed.

Training for children includes lessons on how to spot early warning signs and grooming behaviors in sex offenders (i.e. being aware of adults who give gifts without parent's permission, go overboard wrestling or tickling or asking to meet alone in a secluded area). Children learn to identify and report the most common lures and tricks employed by child molesters.

We also provide lessons on abduction prevention, bullying prevention, and Internet safety. Child sexual abuse prevention training is provided for every student enrolled in Catholic Schools grades K-12 each year, and parents are always offered the chance to preview the programs and every parent receives training materials so that they can continue teaching these safety lessons at home. *VIRTUS* for adults teaches participants to spot early warning signs and grooming behaviors in offenders of child sexual abuse and information on how to make a report of suspected abuse to both the State of Connecticut child abuse hotline and to the Diocese.

BACKGROUND CHECKS

Every adult who works or volunteers in the Diocese of Bridgeport, including Priests, Deacons, Seminarians, Religious Sisters and brothers, Lay Employees, Lay Volunteers, School Parent Volunteers, Independent Contractors, and Vendors are required to complete a criminal background check. More than 20,000 checks have been completed in the Diocese of Bridgeport and over 50,000 background checks were conducted by all three Connecticut Catholic Dioceses combined.

We have a zero tolerance policy for any person with a sex crime or crime against children.

CODE OF CONDUCT & SEXUAL MISCONDUCT POLICY

These policies provide a set of standards and guidelines for appropriate conduct when working with children, youth and vulnerable adults. These policies are posted online at www.bridgeportdiocese.com under "Safe Environments."