

# FROM YOUR DIOCESE

APRIL 2024

FROM BISHOP RICHARD G. HENNING

## PREVENTING CHILD ABUSE IS A SACRED TASK

*April is National Child Abuse  
Prevention Month.*

As we raise awareness around the protection of young people, I would like to share with you my own experiences both here in the Diocese of Providence and in the wider Church. You may already be familiar with some or all of what I will say, but the importance of this topic bears repeating, and I invite your response and active participation as the People of God.

The year I was ordained to be a priest, a story made national news of a priest who had serially abused children including the abuse of his own child after leaving the priesthood to marry. Along with so many Catholics, I felt horror and revulsion. At the time, it seemed unthinkable that an

ordained priest could so violate his promises and the trust of those in his pastoral care. Then in 2002, the scandals in Boston sparked a renewed nationwide examination of the sin of child sexual abuse by clergy. I once again felt revulsion, shame, and grief. I was horrified but also mystified by the revelations because they did not reflect my own experiences growing up Catholic. In my own personal life, I am blessed by a close family and I experienced Catholic schooling and parish life as a place of strong community and abundant safety. I knew then, and know now, that such injustice cries out for our dedicated response. Determined to prevent any more such horrors, my focus on the protection of children has not diminished during more than thirty years of ministry.

As a young priest, my first pastor assigned me to work with young people in the parish school, religious education, youth group, and with altar servers. While the best practices of child protection were then still nascent, I consulted experts and implemented their recommendations, introducing rules around adult supervision, eliminating one-one-one interactions and transportation, incorporating

parent chaperones, adding windows to meeting rooms, and more. Together with the parents and volunteers, we also began to educate and empower the youth concerning their own safety, boundaries, and healthy relationships.

As child protection practices developed, my home diocese introduced a new training program, Virtus, developed by experts in childhood sexual abuse who had worked extensively with victim-survivors. The program offered a systematic approach to the protection of children and the prevention of abuse. I was so impressed by it that I later underwent training as a facilitator to help train others in the work of prevention.

Those who work with victim-survivors understand how difficult it is for young people to come forward in the midst of their abuse and so another important aspect of prevention concerns exposing the sinister methodologies of the abusers. Rarely strangers to their victims, abusers typically “groom” their intended victims and families by earning their trust. Effective prevention includes exposing these behaviors so as to stop abuse before it can happen.

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CONTINUED FROM FRONT SIDE

Collectively, preventing child abuse requires a latticework of strategies that all work in concert together:

- Train clergy, staff, parents, and volunteers to recognize the warning signs of child abuse and grooming behavior.
- Control access to children by utilizing background checks and supervision of all those who work with children.
- Control physical access to children including by locking buildings, locking rooms not in use, and supervising spaces when in use.
- Encourage clergy, staff, parents, and volunteers to report concerns to law enforcement and program leadership.
- Educate children concerning boundaries and their own sacred dignity.

These efforts, introduced across Catholic dioceses, religious orders, parishes, schools, and institutions in the US since the 2002 Dallas Charter, have proven to be highly effective. Allegations of abuse in the last two decades have plummeted in Catholic settings. Statistically, Catholic institutions are among the safest environments for young people today.

While there will always be the evil of predators among human communities, responsible and caring adults can create the safest possible environments for children through a mixture of education and vigilance.

Every child is sacred and made in the image and likeness of God. I want you to know that I remain as committed as

In addition to coordinating prevention efforts, the Office of Compliance vigorously and independently investigates, and promptly reports, every allegation to law enforcement regardless of credibility. Years ago, the Diocese of Providence signed agreements with the State Attorney General formalizing this long-standing and consistent practice of reporting

every allegation, and fully cooperating with any resulting investigation.

We cannot undo the harm done to the innocent in the past, but we can remain ever vigilant in preventing any such harm again. The protection of the most vulnerable among us is

a shared duty and one that we must uphold every hour, every day, every year. This month of April is a good time to remind, to renew, and to rededicate ourselves to this sacred task.

## TO REPORT AN INCIDENT

The Diocese of Providence urges anyone who has been the victim of sexual abuse, or with credible knowledge of such abuse, by any member of the Catholic Church, to report allegations to the R.I. State Police, local law enforcement, the R.I. Attorney General's Office, and **Kevin O'Brien**, *Director*, Diocesan Office of Compliance, 401.941.0760, [kobrien@dpvd.org](mailto:kobrien@dpvd.org).

To seek assistance for victims or family members affected by such abuse, please contact **Michael Hansen**, *Director*, Diocesan Office of Outreach & Prevention, 401.946.0728, [mhansen@dpvd.org](mailto:mhansen@dpvd.org).

For more information on the abuse policy of the Diocese of Providence, please visit: [www.dioceseofprovidence.org/compliance](http://www.dioceseofprovidence.org/compliance).

ever to the prevention of child abuse. In 1993, the Diocese of Providence was among the first in the country to establish an office focused on the protection of children. For decades the diocese has utilized the methodologies I outlined to protect children across our churches, schools, and ministries. Those efforts include training for all volunteers, the Circle of Grace program to help children understand proper boundaries, and a dedicated victim's assistance coordinator. I am grateful for these hard-working folks and for the good and compassionate work they do for the young people of the diocese.



**MOST REVEREND RICHARD G. HENNING, S.T.D.**  
Bishop of Providence

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