

SNAP leaders resign, group faces suit on legal practices

by [David Gibson](#) in the [March 1, 2017](#) issue

Two leaders in an organization advocating for children sexually abused by Catholic priests have resigned. Meanwhile, the group faces a lawsuit from a former employee alleging that the group colluded with lawyers to refer clients and to profit from settlements.

David Clohessy, longtime executive director of SNAP, Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, said January 24 that he left in December and that his departure had nothing to do with the lawsuit, which was filed in Illinois on January 17.

“My last day was five weeks ago, before this lawsuit ever happened,” Clohessy said by phone from his home in St. Louis, where SNAP has its main office.

Barbara Blaine, SNAP president and founder, who is a survivor of clergy sexual abuse, resigned February 3.

“The recent lawsuit filed against SNAP, as the others in the past which have no merit, had absolutely no bearing on my leaving,” she wrote in an e-mail to supporters. Rather, the personnel changes are part of a transition “from a founder-led organization to one that is board-led.”

The lawsuit by Gretchen Rachel Hammond names Clohessy and other SNAP leaders as defendants and alleges that “SNAP does not focus on protecting or helping survivors—it exploits them.”

The group, which more than any other is responsible for revealing the scandals that have continued to rock Catholicism in the United States and around the world, “routinely accepts financial kickbacks from attorneys in the form of ‘donations,’” Hammond alleges. “In exchange for the kickbacks, SNAP refers survivors as potential clients to attorneys, who then file lawsuits on behalf of the survivors against the Catholic Church. These cases often settle, to the financial benefit of the attorneys and, at times, to the financial benefit of SNAP, which has received direct payments from survivors’ settlements.”

Hammond, who worked on fund-raising for SNAP from 2011 until 2013, said she feared reprisals from SNAP leaders over her objections to the lawyers' payments and suffered serious health problems as a result. She said she was fired in 2013, allegedly because she confronted her bosses over their practices with victims' attorneys, and that the dismissal has hurt her career.

The lawsuit was first reported by the *National Catholic Reporter*. It has long been assumed that SNAP received substantial donations from some of the high-profile attorneys who specialize in these cases and who have won multi-million-dollar settlements from the U.S. Catholic Church and its insurance companies.

Hammond's filing makes specific claims in that regard, for example, that 81 percent of the \$437,407 in donations SNAP received in 2007 came from victims' lawyers and that 65 percent of the \$753,596 it raised in 2008 came from lawyers.

More problematic is Hammond's claim that SNAP worked hand in glove with victims' attorneys and received "direct payments from survivors' settlements."

Mary Ellen Kruger, chair of SNAP's board, wrote in a statement: "Like all nonprofits, SNAP solicits and accepts donations from anyone who believes in our cause. . . . This has also included attorneys who have filed lawsuits against priests and 'the system.' To be clear, SNAP has never and will never enter into any 'kickback schemes' as alleged by Ms. Hammond in her lawsuit, nor has SNAP ever made donations an implied or express condition of the referral of victims."

Clohessy said SNAP "didn't have any clue at all" that it was coming. "We've heard nothing from her for four years since she quit. So that caught everybody by surprise."

Asked why his departure was not announced until after the lawsuit was filed, Clohessy said it was only because there were many details to work out with the board after three decades of work at the organization.

"We have always been under attack by somebody at some point, legally and otherwise," Clohessy said. "So it's never been a factor in any decision making, at least not for me certainly."

Barbara Dorris, outreach director for SNAP, also said the timing of the Clohessy announcement and the lawsuit's filing was "just an unfortunate coincidence."

Clohessy was a victim of sexual abuse by a priest when he was a teenager. That fueled his efforts to reveal what he and others insisted was a national and global scourge, starting in the 1980s when initial reports of the scope of the abuse began to emerge.

SNAP faced years of criticism from Catholics in the pews and denials from the hierarchy until the *Boston Globe's* landmark 2002 series on clergy abuse finally blew the lid off the scandals and vindicated SNAP's claims and efforts. Clohessy was invited to address an emergency meeting of the U.S. bishops in 2002 and delivered a powerful, tearful appeal for them finally to take action against abusive priests.

Shortly afterward, as donations started to come in and lawsuits and settlements began to pile up, Clohessy went from being an overworked volunteer to holding a full-time position as SNAP's executive director.

It was a "cause," Clohessy said, as he and SNAP pushed the church to hold bishops accountable.

SNAP became known as a persistent skeptic of claims that the church was doing anything substantive to tackle the problem. The organization has spawned chapters around the world, including ones connected to other Christian traditions such as the Orthodox and Presbyterian churches.

Clohessy acknowledged that the years of advocacy had left him exhausted, and he was taking some time off to recharge and look after his health before starting to work again.

Kruger wrote on behalf of SNAP's board that "David will always be a friend and an inspiration to SNAP and its many dedicated and hardworking volunteers." —Religion News Service

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