

U.S. Catholic bishops take steps to respond to sexual abuse crisis

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Lawyers and advocates for survivors of clergy sexual abuse are assailing as inadequate steps announced by U.S. Catholic bishops to curtail the abuse scandals that have deeply shaken the church this year.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops administrative committee took several “actions within its authority” at a meeting in mid-September, including developing a code of conduct for bishops regarding sexual abuse and harassment and establishing a confidential hotline—to be run by a third party—to receive complaints of sexual misconduct by bishops and relay such complaints to appropriate church and civil authorities.

Critics called on the bishops to go further by allowing outside investigators full access to church sexual abuse records and by supporting changes to statutes of limitations so that more cases could be addressed in court.

“Until they allow professional investigators inside the secret archives, there will be no real transparency,” said Jeff Anderson, a Minnesota lawyer who has handled many sexual abuse lawsuits. “They are incapable of handling this internally.”

Marci Hamilton, a University of Pennsylvania professor who has studied sexual abuse statutes of limitations, depicted the bishops’ statement as “little more than words . . . while they lobby against justice for the victims.”

Until the bishops support major statute of limitations reforms, she said, “they are enemies of the victims and the public seeking to know the actual risk posed by their policies.”

In the wake of the grand jury report in Pennsylvania detailing decades of abuse and cover-up in six dioceses, law enforcement officials in New York, New Jersey, Nebraska, New Mexico, Florida, Missouri, and Illinois took steps toward investigating Catholic leaders' handling of accounts of sexual abuse.

Pennsylvania attorney general Josh Shapiro expressed regret that the bishops did not endorse the grand jury's recommendations for reform, including eliminating the statute of limitations for child sexual abuse.

"That is the true test to determine whether the church has changed, and thus far, no bishop has answered the call," Shapiro said. "The time for words has passed."

The bishops endorsed a full investigation into the Theodore McCarrick case, including the church's response to accounts of abuse by him. In July, Pope Francis removed McCarrick as a cardinal after church investigators said an allegation that he groped a teenage altar boy in the 1970s was credible. Subsequently, several former seminarians and priests reported that they too had been abused or harassed by McCarrick as adults.

"Such an investigation should rely upon lay experts in relevant fields, such as law enforcement and social services," said the bishops' administrative committee statement. It made no mention of the bishops' earlier request for a Vatican role in investigating McCarrick, 88, who now lives at a Capuchin friary in Victoria, Kansas.

The bishops asked forgiveness for harm some bishops have caused and described their steps as "only a beginning."

"Consultation with a broad range of concerned parents, experts, and other laity along with clergy and religious will yield additional, specific measures to be taken to repair the scandal and restore justice," they said.

Mitchell Garabedian, a Boston lawyer who has represented many hundreds of clergy sexual abuse victims since the 1990s, described the statement as "insincere."

"If they were truly interested in prevention and helping victims heal, they would release all documents in their possession concerning clergy sexual abuse," he said. "They would announce they would not oppose amendments to statutes of limitation."

The bishops' reference to working with lay experts encouraged John Gehring, the Catholic program director at Faith in Public Life, a Washington-based clergy network.

"Some of these proposals could have been adopted years ago and possibly prevented abuses, but it's good to see the conference moving from expressions of shame to action steps," Gehring said. "Bishops can't police themselves. There seems to be a growing acknowledgment that to get this right, we need agents of accountability from outside the institution."

The Catholic Archdiocese of New York provided evidence of that approach, hiring a former federal judge, Barbara Jones, to review its procedures and protocols for handling allegations of sexual abuse. New York cardinal Timothy Dolan said he ordered the review because Catholics have demanded action from church leadership after a "summer of hell."

David Clohessy, a longtime leader with Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, known as SNAP, was skeptical of both the bishops' statement and Dolan's announcement.

"Until secular authorities start charging, convicting, and jailing bishops who enable abuse, little or nothing will change, especially if Catholic officials keep claiming they can handle these crimes and cover-ups internally," he said.

Clohessy had recently returned to SNAP as a spokesman after [resigning in December 2016 as national director of the organization](#) amid controversy over a lawsuit from a former employee. Gretchen Rachel Hammond, its former director of development, claimed SNAP fired her in 2013 because she questioned whether the organization was referring potential clients to attorneys in exchange for donations. She sued after being fired. That suit was settled earlier this year.

Hammond said the terms of the settlement prevented her from commenting. SNAP leaders also declined to discuss details.

"We just see it as resolved and are pleased with that," said Tim Lennon, president of SNAP.

Ken Chackes, an attorney who has represented abuse victims in lawsuits against the Archdiocese of St. Louis, said, "Lawyers like myself who believe that SNAP is doing a good job . . . have made some contributions, but it's never been, 'You refer me cases

and then got some of the fees.’”

The 62-year-old Clohessy, who is serving in a voluntary capacity, said he left the organization in 2016 because of internal conflicts and because of concerns about his health. He is undergoing treatment for cancer. Barbara Blaine, the founder of SNAP, announced her resignation in January 2017 and said the move was unrelated to the lawsuit. She died in September 2017.

The group recently hired a new executive director, Zach Hiner, and hopes to move on with its work of supporting survivors and parish members. After the Pennsylvania report, perhaps five times as many people were contacting SNAP as were prior to the report’s release.