



A reason for hope: The Diocese of Jackson's commitment to our children

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The history of abuse in the church has had two key turning points – the adoption of the Charter for the Protection of children and young people in 2002 and the current work being done from the Vatican down to strengthen our response to abuse on every level of church hierarchy. Both of these turning points have come after the painful revelation that the church had not done enough.

We have to be vigilant at all times. We must constantly renew our commitment, strengthen our policies and work in tandem with law enforcement to keep children and vulnerable adults safe in our parishes, schools and centers.

The Diocese of Jackson has a plan and a team in place to prevent and to respond to allegations of sexual abuse against minors. The topic is a fresh wound in our Church since the release of a grand jury report out of Pennsylvania detailing a horrifying pattern of abuse and coverups in six dioceses in that state and revelations of years of abuse at the hands of Theodore McCarrick, former cardinal and bishop.

In response to those meetings as well as the many calls, emails and conversations chancery staff and pastors have had with you, the faithful, we want you to know what has been done, what we continue to do and what's in store for the future. Bishop Kopacz describes this approach as having four aspects: our safe environment program, victims' assistance, cooperation with law enforcement and transparency.

To start- an assurance of transparency: A handful of bishops across the U.S. are inviting their state Attorneys General to review their files. The Diocese of Jackson did that back in 2002. In response to both the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' pending *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*, and a contemporary case being presented to the state attorney, diocesan leadership decided the best course of action was to be proactive. A member of the diocesan review board and the vicar general at that time reviewed an accounting of all known cases with staff at the attorney general's office.

Since that time, all new credible allegations have been turned over to the district attorneys in the counties where the abuse is alleged to have happened.

The bishop has reviewed these cases in-depth in the last few weeks to make sure the diocese has done its due diligence in offering care to victims of abuse, reporting cases to law enforcement and informing local communities about cases. Bishop Kopacz will approach the current Mississippi Attorney General's Office to offer review of all substantiated cases of the abuse of minors by clergy reported since the 2002 meeting.

Safe Environment:

Anyone who offers to volunteer at any parish, school, or institution affiliated with the Diocese of Jackson will first be asked to submit to a criminal background screening. Some 16,000 employees and volunteers have been vetted in this way since the diocese initiated criminal background screenings in 2003. If the screening is clear, the volunteer or employee will begin to receive training in how to recognize the warning signs of abuse, how to report it and how to protect the children in their care from predators.

The diocese uses a company called VIRTUS for safe environment training. It starts with an initial VIRTUS live training session with a VIRTUS facilitator. The live training session instructs adults on the continuous awareness and vigilance in protecting children. Ongoing adult training continues every month in the form of VIRTUS Online, a state-of-the-art, web-based monthly email platform with an article about the latest research or information on fostering safe environments in the Church, in the home and in society. VIRTUS has developed both the lessons and the database management program used to show who is continuing to take their training and who is not compliant. There are about 4,700 adults currently active, including clergy, religious, and lay employees.

Moreover, children are better informed now than ever before. This year, the diocese has implemented VIRTUS' curriculum for children in parish religious education programs as well as the Catholic schools. In these lessons, children learn about safe and healthy boundaries and what they can do if someone tries to violate them in Church-sponsored programs, and in their daily lives. The program gives children the tools they need to overcome the advances of someone who intends to do them harm. During the last fiscal year, 7,602 children received an age-appropriate safe environment lesson.

Vickie Carollo, the safe environment coordinator, and Fran Lavelle, director of faith formation, will visit every parish and school during this fiscal year to audit their participation in the Protection of Children program. Carollo has performed these audits since 2003 because we know that a chain is only as strong as its weakest link.

The Diocese of Jackson has had a policy to respond to credible allegations of sexual abuse since 1987, long before the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops released the Charter. The early document was less detailed than today's version but delineated the commitment of the diocese on responding to abuse, removing offenders, assisting victims, and promoting safe environment. The policy was revised in 1994 when an Independent Fitness Review Board of lay Catholics was established. This is a consultative body that assesses the credibility of all allegations of sexual abuse against

minors and advises the bishop accordingly. This board remains an essential resource for Bishop Kopacz, as it was for Bishop Houck and Bishop Latino. The current one includes social workers, physicians, attorneys parents and community leaders.

Victim's assistance:

When an allegation is made, it triggers a number of responses. First, if the victim is a child – even if the abuse is just a suspicion – the case is turned over to the Mississippi Department of Child Protection Services and then to either Carollo's office.

In all cases, he or she is offered professional counseling at no cost. A victim does not need to give his or her name to the diocese to receive this service. Valerie McClellan is the victims' assistance coordinator for the diocese. She can offer counseling based out of Jackson. If the victim lives out of state, she can arrange for a counselor in the victim's community. The goal is to offer a healing opportunity to the victim and his or her family.

Likewise, McClellan will gather as much information about the abuse as possible and, with the victim's consent, turn it over to the diocese. The diocese hires a private investigator to begin to look into the case and the accused is removed from active ministry or suspended while the investigator prepares a report for the review board.

The review board meets without the bishop present and votes on what actions to recommend to the bishop. When the allegation is judged to be credible the abuser is removed from ministry as soon as possible.

Cooperation with Law Enforcement:

If a case is deemed credible, the diocese will inform the district attorney in the county where the abuse happened. The bishop withdraws faculties from an ordained accused abuser at this time.

The diocese prepares a statement to be read at Masses or other parish gatherings in the communities where the alleged abuser has served. The statement will never name a victim, but will name the alleged perpetrator and encourage other victims to come forward. These statements are now also posted to the diocesan website.

Even if there are no active cases of abuse being investigated, each parish must regularly publish a statement encouraging victims to report abuse. A recent study indicates that it can take an average of 34 years for a victim to report abuse. This means the diocese has to constantly offer the invitation for all victims to come forward.

For some perspective, since 2002, the Diocese has received nine credible reports of abuse. In all of these cases, the abuse happened 20 or more years prior to the report. The ministers reported were either deceased or already removed from ministry.

Transparency:

Most importantly, we want you to be assured of the Diocese's commitment to transparency as we move forward. Since a group of lay journalists in Boston in 2002 exposed a pattern of abuse and cover-ups, the church has undergone a culture shift. In biblical language, this is metanoia which entails repentance and conversion, a change of heart, mind, and practice.

This horrible scandal prompted new social science research into the psychology of abusers and forced bishops to remove priests who were a danger to their flock.

What we now understand about abuse, its devastating impacts on individuals, families and whole communities is dramatically different than it was in the 20th century. Dioceses, parishes, and schools have a new paradigm for caring for those placed in their care, especially those most vulnerable to predators. Those same communities have resources for identifying abusers and protocols for removing them from ministry as quickly as possible.

That's the good news.

The sad truth is there were predators in the Church. Piled on that is the fact that there were leaders in the church who were willing to protect their fellow clergymen rather than expose them or the Church to scandal. The Church must now face yet another reckoning.

The Diocese of Jackson has a team of people who share your anger, sorrow, concern and commitment to our Church and our children. The diocesan policy, including protocols for responding to allegations, is available on the website ([link here](#)) and in printed form by emailing Vickie Carollo at Vickie.carollo@jacksondiocese.org.

We are unflinching in our commitment to our promise to protect and pledge to heal as a serious part of our vocation. With the mind and heart of Jesus Christ we echo his words: "Let the children come to me for to such belong the Kingdom of Heaven.."

Resources: [USCCB Charter](#)

[Office for the Protection of Children](#)

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(Bishop Joseph Kopacz, Vicar General Father Kevin Slattery, Chancellor Mary Woodward, Safe Environment Coordinator Vickie Carollo and Director of Communications Maureen Smith collaborated on this statement.)