



DIOCESE OF WHEELING-CHARLESTON

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February 23, 2023

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

I write today to inform you of some updates regarding the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston's requirements for maintaining a Safe Environment for children and vulnerable adults. The worldwide sex abuse crisis in the Catholic church continues to impact our methods for keeping children and vulnerable adults safe here in the United States. In our diocese, we continue to make every effort to create and maintain a culture of safety. In October of 2022, our Independent Review Board, at my request and as a matter of best practice, initiated a policy review relative to Safe Environment, and I would like to inform you of the updates that resulted.

First, some history: As you know, since 2002, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) has adhered to the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*, a document which mandates Safe Environment requirements and mechanisms to hold U.S. dioceses accountable in these efforts. Here, and in dioceses across the U.S., members of the clergy are required to undergo background checks, sex abuse awareness training, receipt and review of our Diocese's Sex Abuse Policy, and acknowledgements related to mandated reporting and our Code of Conduct. In addition, the diocese requires fingerprinting and completion of monthly training bulletins for clergy and those who are employed in Catholic schools. Every quarter, we convene an Independent Review Board which ensures that any matters are reported in a proper and timely fashion. These volunteers also advise the Diocese on matters of concern, credibility, and courses of action on sex-abuse related matters.

As a result of the recent policy review, and in addition to the requirements mentioned above, we have strengthened our Safe Environment efforts by:

- **Expanding the scope of the diocese's Independent Review Board:** The Independent Review Board will always prioritize clergy-related sex abuse of minor claims, in accordance with the *Charter*. However, the board's scope now also includes boundary violations and other adult behavioral issues and concerns relative to clergy as well as employees and volunteers. Diocesan review boards across the U.S. are implementing best practices to address other areas of concern and impropriety, in addition to those central to the clergy sex abuse of minors issues. The Review Board in the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston has been moving in this direction for the past several years and formalized this best practice through policy changes at its January 2023 meeting.

- **Updating language to include guidelines and best practices** for use of social media, digital and internet platforms, and electronic communications; expanded and

modern reporting mechanisms; and clarification regarding the inappropriateness of all types of pornography.

- **Including a comprehensive list of employee and volunteer roles** at the parish and school level to which the Safe Environment process applies in an effort to assist our clergy and staff as they manage the administration of locations and programs.

These updates were formalized and took effect on January 11, 2023, at the Independent Review Board's first quarterly meeting of the year.

In our Diocese, we continue to encourage reporting to civil authorities first and foremost if a crime has been alleged. We also continue to promote the use of EthicsPoint, a mechanism for anonymous reporting of various concerns that are not limited to sex abuse. We also encourage reporting to the national Catholic Bishop Abuse Reporting website.

Regarding sex abuse-related claims, the Diocese does not request or require non-disclosure agreements as part of civil settlements. However, the Diocese does respect confidentiality when requested by victims. Funds to settle claims are paid from investment income. They are not paid using any funds donated through parishes, schools, or fundraising appeals.

We also have resources to help any priest, employee, or volunteer navigate disclosures, sex abuse-related issues, or any other issues related to inappropriate conduct should they receive one throughout the course of their ministry, work, or service here.

As a diocese, we continue to focus on prevention and healing and offer support to all who assist in carrying out this important and necessary work.

Sincerely in Christ,



+Mark E. Brennan

Bishop of Wheeling-Charleston