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Costs for clergy sex abuse at $2.6 billion

Nancy Frazier O'Brien Catholic News Service | Mar. 14, 2009

Cover of the 2009 report on clergy abuse

WASHINGTON
U.S. dioceses and religious orders spent more than $436 million in 2008 on settlements and other costs related to clergy sex abuse, a decrease of 29 percent over the $615 million paid out in the peak year of 2007.

Those figures were in the information made public March 13 in the sixth annual report on implementation of the "Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People," adopted by the U.S. Catholic bishops in 2002. The report was produced under the direction of the all-lay National Review Board, established by the bishops to monitor compliance with the charter.

The report summarized data collected from dioceses, eparchies and religious orders for calendar year 2008 by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University, as well as the results of audits of most U.S. dioceses and eparchies conducted between July 1, 2007, and June 30, 2008.

CARA found that in 2008 U.S. dioceses and eparchies received 625 new allegations of child sex abuse by clergy, but only 10 of them involved children who were under the age of 18 in 2008. Similarly, in 2008 U.S. religious orders that include priests and brothers or priests alone received 178 new credible allegations of sexual abuse of a minor, only three of which involved children who were minors in 2008.

Twelve percent, or 78, of the new allegations made against diocesan clergy in 2008 were unsubstantiated or determined to be false by the end of the year. Another 51 allegations received prior to 2008 were unsubstantiated or proven false during 2008.

The majority of new allegations were related to abuse reported to have occurred in the 1970s, for diocesan clergy, and in the 1960s, for members of religious orders.

In a letter submitted with the report, Teresa M. Kettelkamp, executive director of the Office of Child and Youth Protection at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, said the report contains "good news" that often goes unreported.

"Clearly, we have faced horrible situations, but I believe that the Catholic Church has turned a corner on addressing sexual abuse of children," she said. "Is every diocese doing everything perfectly? No, we are not there yet, though we're far closer than we were last year and the year before that and all previous years."

Kettelkamp said the Catholic Church is becoming "one of the safest havens in our world for children and young people" and "a resource for people beyond the Catholic Church who seek to confront this societal scourge."

"The bishops can be proud of what they have accomplished and their ongoing commitment to address this issue," she added. "That's progress and that's good news."

Victims' advocates, however, raised questions about a section in the report that said "many dioceses are conducting ... investigations themselves without also making a report to civil authorities," which would be a direct violation of the bishops' 2002 reforms.

David Clohessy, national director of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, told Religion News Service that he worries that children may be at risk while church officials sift through allegations without first alerting law enforcement.

"To be honest, this is precisely what got us into this mess to begin with: untrained, biased church amateurs trying to be cops, investigators, forensic experts and prosecutors," Clohessy said.

Kettlekamp, however, said her report raised the issue only as a cautionary warning to dioceses not to try to handle criminal behavior on their own. She said she would not include it in a "problem category."

"Our rule of thumb is that if it involves a current minor, you involve the civil authorities immediately and rely on their expertise," she said in an interview. "I'm not saying we have this problem; I'm saying I don't want this to become a problem."

The increase from 691 total allegations in 2007 to 803 in 2008 appears to be fueled by a 93 percent spike in abuse involving members of religious communities. Those allegations nearly doubled, from 92 to 178; 40 percent of the 2008 allegations involved one religious order.

By comparison, the total number of allegations reported by the nation's 195 dioceses increased by 26, or 4 percent, from 2007.

The report showed that dioceses, eparchies and religious orders spent nearly $2.1 billion in the years 2004-2008 on settlements, therapy for victims, support for offenders, attorneys' fees and other costs related to clerical sex abuse.

The Associated Press reported that total costs to the U.S. church have run to $2.6 billion.

The $23 million spent by dioceses and eparchies on child protection efforts in 2008 represented a $2 million increase over the previous year but a $2 million decrease over the amount spent in 2006.

The other costs -- totaling $4.2 million in 2008 -- included payments for investigations of allegations, medical costs and other support for victims or survivors, costs for mediation, travel expenses for victims, costs for victims' assistance offices and victim hot lines, clergy misconduct review boards, public service announcements and outreach materials, canonical trials and case processing, bankruptcy expenses and USCCB compliance audit costs.

Two dioceses -- Baker, Ore., and Lincoln, Neb., -- and five ethnic Eastern rite jurisdictions refused to allow on-

site audits of their compliance with the bishops' sex abuse policies. Bishop Fabian Bruskewitz of Lincoln also refused to cooperate with researchers from Georgetown University who collected data from all 194 other dioceses.

Participating in the CARA study in 2008 were 194 of the 195 U.S. dioceses and eparchies and 160 of the 219 clerical or mixed religious orders belonging to the (U.S.) Conference of Major Superiors of Men. .

The CARA study also found that:

- Allegations of sex abuse reported by dioceses or eparchies predominantly involved male victims (84 percent male vs. 16 percent female), but females made up 33 percent of the alleged victims of religious-order priests in 2008.
- More than half (51 percent) of the allegations against diocesan or eparchial clergy in 2008 were reported by the victim, while 60 percent of those against religious-order priests were made by an attorney.
- Sixteen priests or deacons were returned to ministry in 2008 after sex abuse allegations against them were found to be unsubstantiated or proven false.
- More than half (52 percent) of the victims who made new allegations of sex abuse against diocesan/eparchial clergy in 2008 and 30 percent of those making new charges against religious-order priests were between the ages of 10 and 14 when the abuse began. But in 5 percent of the diocesan cases and 45 percent of the religious-order cases the age of the victims at the time the abuse started was not known.
- Forty-one percent of the diocesan priests and deacons and 55 percent of the religious-order priests accused of abuse in 2008 had had no prior allegations against them.
- The vast majority of priests or deacons against whom new allegations of sex abuse were received in 2008 -- 83 percent of the diocesan/eparchial clergy and nearly 70 percent of the religious-order priests -- were deceased, already removed from ministry or missing when the charges were made. Another 5 percent of diocesan and 12 percent of religious-order priests were permanently removed from ministry because of allegations received against them that year.

Editor's Note: The full report is available online at www.usccb.org/ocyp/annual_report2008.shtml.

(Report by Kevin Eckstrom of Religion News Service was included in this article.)

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