NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

What good are clergy sex abuse review boards?

Joshua J. McElwee | May. 18, 2012 NCR Today

In light of historic criminal trials of church officials this year in Philadelphia and Kansas City, that's the question many Catholics are asking.

Both trials find church administrators on the defensive for not utilizing their lay review boards, which were set up by the U.S. bishops' in 2002, when they passed the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People, and were designed to help bishops evaluate allegations of clergy sexual misconduct.

Yet, as a report in *U.S. Catholic* today makes clear [1], the Kansas City and Philadelphia cases show a key flaw: The value of the boards hinges entirely on how bishops choose to use them.

A reminder:

In Philadelphia, a grand jury report released last year (the third such governmental investigation into the archdiocese's handling of abuse cases) found the archdiocese had left 41 priests who had been credibly accused of abuse in ministry.

Yet, the chair of the review board there wrote following release of the report in 2011 that the board had seen only 10 cases involving these priests. [2]

A criminal trial of two Philadelphia priests resulting from the 2011 grand jury investigation is ongoing. The prosecution rested yesterday in the case of Msgr. William Lynn [3], a former secretary of clergy for the archdiocese, and the first church administrator to be charged with the cover-up of abuse.

In Kansas City, the bishop and the diocese face separate criminal trials this September regarding the case of a priest prosecutors say the diocese knew had taken lewd photos of children for at least six months before church officials reported him to police.

Following that priest's arrest on child pornography charges in May 2011, the head of the Kansas City review board told *NCR* [4] the board first learned of the allegations against Fr. Shawn Ratigan after hearing news reports of his arrest.

"We haven't been presented the case; we haven't been asked to look at the case," Jim Caccamo, who has since retired as the head of the board, said at the time.

In today's report, *U.S. Catholic* speaks to Kathleen McChesney, the first head of the U.S. bishops' office of child and youth protection, which was set up following passage of the 2002 Charter.

In their report [1]:

> McChesney, a former FBI agent, says that boards work if the bishops trust them -- and let them review any case of alleged abuse along with giving them all the information about the case that the diocese has.

> ?You have to convince the bishops they have to do that,? she says. ?The bishops have to tell their subordinates to do that.?

U.S. Catholic also speaks to two bishops, members of the U.S. bishops' national review board for clergy sex abuse cases, and representatives from the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests about the system.

More of McChesney's analysis:

> [McChesney] says that dioceses have been inconsistent in how they use the boards.
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> ?I would say that 60 or 75 percent of dioceses have good programs -- but they still struggle,? she says. ?They don?t have a handle on pornography yet.?

A gathering of some of the leading experts on the clergy sexual abuse crisis last week found many of them coming to similar conclusions. For more on that, see *NCR*'s report: **California abuse conference focuses on bishops' accountability** **[5]**.

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Links:
[1] http://www.uscatholic.org/church/2012/04/take-it-board-how-effective-are-lay-review-boards-preventing-sex-abuse
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