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

Kansas City diocese's ombudsman talks sex abuse prevention

Bill Tammeus | Sep. 5, 2012 A small c catholic

As the Catholic church works through the horrific, dispiriting priest abuse scandal and attendant cover-up by bishops, there's been little to applaud. But when something does go right -- or at least mostly right -- it's worth noting.

That's especially true in the Kansas City-St. Joseph, Mo., diocese. There, Bishop Robert Finn and the diocese went to trial Thursday on misdemeanor charges of failing to report suspected child abuse by Fr. Shawn Ratigan, who has pleaded guilty [1] to using five girls to produce or try to produce child pornography. Finn was found guilty on one count of failure to report child abuse and received a two-year suspended sentence of probation.

Finn created a five-point plan [2] for the diocese to respond to abuse allegations. The second point called for "appointment of an independent public liaison and ombudsman to field and investigate any reports of suspicious or inappropriate behavior."

That ombudsman turned out to be Jenifer Valenti, a former assistant prosecuting attorney in Jackson County, Mo. After a year on the job, she issued her first report [3] in July describing the 79 cases brought to her attention, 20 of which had to do with sexual abuse.

It was a helpful step toward handling this mess properly. But I had questions for Valenti, and I want to share her answers with you.

Tammeus: Were you surprised that you handled 79 cases in your first year? The number seemed high to me.

Valenti: One single report of abuse is alarming and one too many. However, the [diocese] [4] spans 27 counties, 98 parishes and over 35 schools. There are about 2,200 employees and at least double that number in volunteers. The 79 reports include only 20 reports of abuse ... 17 stemming from allegations prior to July 1, 2011. Nearly half of the reports did not involve personnel in the diocese. A majority of the reports were previously unknown to the diocese. However, many of the sexual abuse reports named an individual who had been previously reported and removed from ministry or service for sexual abuse. There were a few instances where the same individual who had reported in the past was coming forward again.

Are you confident the diocese has in place everything that needs to be in place in terms of structure and personnel to protect children as thoroughly as possible?

I am very confident with the structure and personnel in place to protect children, youth and vulnerable adults.

In the field of child protection, the best practices are constantly evolving. It is most important that the leaders are committed to frequent analysis and evaluation in order to stay current. ... Although several components of the safe environment program existed prior to my appointment, I recommended that these parts should be unified and connected by leadership executing compliance. Bishop Finn followed this recommendation and

created the Office of Child and Youth Protection [5] [OCYP].

The personnel within [OCYP] have a wealth of knowledge and experience. Carrie Cooper was appointed to lead this office. Carrie comes qualified to help the diocese issue an effective model of compliance. She is currently in the process of evaluating the entire safety net of protection and creating an effective model of compliance. In addition to creating [OCYP], the diocese has adopted a proactive approach to addressing abuse. Our members are asked to understand and report ... suspicious behaviors. This allows the diocese to carefully examine behavior and quickly address it.

The terms of your position require that you be independent and free to do what you believe is necessary to do your job. Are you, in fact, able to be independent and free or do you experience either interference or lack of cooperation by diocesan officials?

Although I collaborate with the [OCYP] on a daily basis, I am free to do whatever I deem necessary to protect children, youth and vulnerable adults throughout the process. This includes the authority and responsibility to contact the civil authorities -- law enforcement and social services -- upon receipt of a report.

Have you come to any conclusions about the root cause of abuse and, if so, do you have recommendations for how to reduce or remove that cause (or, more likely, causes)?

There is a wealth of information available about causal connections to abuse. The most effective model to protect the vulnerable from abuse and exploitation is actively recruiting a community to share the responsibility, helping to reduce that vulnerability.

TheSurvivors Network of Those Abused by Priests[6] has asked that you attach names to the cases you report having investigated. As I understand it, you and the diocese say that when it was appropriate, the names already were released and need not be published anew. Did you give thought to providing hypertext links to your online report for those who wanted to be reminded of who was involved in which case?

I don't believe that it is appropriate for me, as an independent contractor for the diocese, to [re]publish this information. I think it is important to be mindful of the fact that I am reporting about the [internal] diocese process used to determine a person's suitability for ministry or service. My report includes information about clerics, but also employees and volunteers. Truly, the best way to ensure that all information will be in the public venue is to report abuse to the police. [Tammeus note: That's what Finn is accused of not doing in a timely way.] All criminal convictions are subject to public record and, additionally, sexual offenses must be reported on the sexual offender registry. The diocese implores all victims of abuse, both past and present, to report the crimes to law enforcement.

Has it been a hindrance to your work that the bishop is under indictment? If so, how?

I am unable to respond to this question.

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Well, I'd say unwilling, not unable. If she's unable, perhaps she's not as independent as she should be. Still, Valenti's important work is a badly needed move toward the kind of response to abuse that should have been in place all along. I'm glad she's at work. As she told me:

"I hope that my work and report provides some comfort and a sense of security to the people in our diocese to help them to know I am committed to being honest and open about the work I am doing. I firmly believe that we

can deal with the truth, if we really know what we exactly it is we are dealing with."

[Bill Tammeus, a Presbyterian elder and former award-winning Faith columnist for *The Kansas City Star*, writes the daily "Faith Matters" blog [7] for *The Star*'s website and a monthly column for *The Presbyterian Outlook*. His latest book, co-authored with Rabbi Jacques Cukierkorn, is *They Were Just People: Stories of Rescue in Poland During the Holocaust [8]*. Email him at wtammeus@kc.rr.com.]

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[1] http://www.kansascity.com/2012/08/02/3739340/kc-priest-admits-taking-pornographic.html#storylink=misearch
[2] http://www.diocese-kcsj.org/news/viewNews.php?nid=155
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