

OVERVIEW AND FACTS

SAFE ENVIRONMENT PROGRAMS OF THE DIOCESE OF BRIDGEPORT

- The Catholic Bishops established Safe Environment programs in all U.S. Roman Catholic Dioceses in 2002 in a landmark document, *The Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*, a.k.a. “the Charter.” Safe Environment programs are now well established. The USCCB Charter has gone through a number of updates throughout the years, 2005, 2011 and 2018. <https://www.usccb.org/offices/child-and-youth-protection/charter-protection-children-and-young-people>.
- **Vos Estis Lux Mundi (VELM)**, was issued by Pope Francis on May 7, 2019 to expand the procedures for combatting child sexual abuse within the Church and finalized in 2023. The Diocese of Bridgeport Safe Environment Handbook incorporates these changes and we include a training on Vulnerable Adults through VIRTUS continuing education. VELM strengthens and expands Diocesan procedures for reporting and investigating allegations of sexual abuse of a Minor or a Vulnerable adult. VELM provides protections for a person who is making a report and reporting procedures for when a Bishop is the subject of an allegation. These mandates. Including the definition of a Vulnerable Adult, are included in our Diocese of Bridgeport Safe Environment Handbook.
https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/motu_proprio/documents/papa-francesco-motu-proprio-20190507_vos-estis-lux-mundi.html.
- **The Diocese of Bridgeport Office of Safe Environment** was established in 2003 by Bishop William E. Lori and experienced a significant renewal and update in 2014 by Bishop Frank J. Caggiano. The Office includes a full-time Director, and full-time Safe Environment Training and Compliance Supervisor. The office oversees the implementation of Charter mandates including, criminal background checks, written Codes of Conduct, and Child sexual abuse awareness and prevention training for Adults, Children, and Youth.
- In the Diocese of Bridgeport, we require everyone who is routinely on premise to complete awareness training; read and acknowledge receipt of our Safe Environment Handbook and clear a criminal background check prior to working or volunteering, even if the person does not come into scheduled contact with children. Our policies include Vendors, Tenants and Independent Contractors (all adults onsite, not just the owner), Adult Group Leaders, Knights of Columbus, Boy Scout volunteers, Board Members, Parish Council and even Security Guards must complete these requirements. In general, the only exception is what we would consider a one-time only visitor (under three hours) or a person contracted in an emergency like a roof leak, flooding or a dangerous tree limb etc. Guest Speakers are an example of this under 3-hour exception. Examples of when a one-time only guest or short-term visitor is required to complete all requirements include those adults in direct contact with children as in the case of a Santa Claus appearance, a magic show with student participation, pony ride staff, amusement ride operator.

Groups, Bible Studies:

For adult-only groups, it comes down to supervision and location of meeting spaces. Parishes must carefully review locations and times of meeting spaces to ensure there is no risk to any minor. Hall monitors play an essential role ensuring supervision in shared spaces and they serve as that second adult which is required when working with youth. If minors are present in a group without their own parent or legal guardian, then all adults present must be made aware of the safe boundaries which are expected (*VIRTUS training and review of our Code of Conduct*) and the adults must be free from sex crimes and crimes against children (*a criminal background check*). If spaces are shared with religious education programs or youth group, then all adults in the group who will have contact with youth, must comply with all Safe Environment requirements.

VICTIM ASSISTANCE

- The Diocese of Bridgeport has a Victim Assistance Program through the Office of Safe Environment and a full-time dedicated Victim Assistance Coordinator since 2003. All allegations of abuse involving a minor or vulnerable adult begin with contacting Erin Neil, LCSW, It is also important that you immediately communicate all allegations of abuse or neglect to the appropriate civil authorities.
- For Anyone who is not yet ready to report directly to the Diocese of Bridgeport, you may call a Third-party Survivor and Witness Hotline **ONLINE: www.lighthouse-services.com/diobpt**
TOLL-FREE TELEPHONE:
English speaking USA and Canada: 833-990-0004
Spanish speaking USA and Canada: 800-216-1288
Spanish speaking Mexico: 01-800-681-5340
French speaking Canada: 855-725-0002
E-MAIL: reports@lighthouse-services.com (must include Diocese of Bridgeport with report)
FAX: 215-689-3885 (must include Diocese of Bridgeport with report)
- Information for reporting allegations against a Bishop are located on our Pledge to Protect Website. <https://www.bridgeportdiocese.org/pledge/welcome/>. An independent, third-party entity that provides intake services: **ReportBishopAbuse.org** or by phone at **(800) 276-1562**.
- Our Diocesan Victim Assistance Program provides opportunities for healing and outreach to victims/survivors of child sexual abuse committed by any person from the Church and, in many cases, by others impacted by abuse elsewhere. Assistance may take many forms including support groups, healing retreats, counseling and other forms of outreach specific to the person's needs. We offer this outreach regardless of whether the abuse occurred recently or in the past and for as long as necessary for healing to take place. We provide outreach to victims from other Dioceses who now reside in CT. Victims/Survivors are offered an apology and a meeting with the Bishop. The Victim Assistance office has been a proven resource for people beyond the Catholic Church.

CHILD ABUSE PREVENTION AND AWARENESS TRAINING

- The Catholic Church has trained over 5 million people since 2002. In the Diocese of Bridgeport, we reached over 140,000 adults and children with live training and educational materials. We held over

4,000 opportunities for training and child-abuse prevention workshops using a number of curriculums including VIRTUS, Protecting God's Children for Adults and annual training in all of our Catholic Schools using the Child Lures Prevention, Think First & Stay Safe Program and Kidsmartz.org Netsmartz.org. A quarter of a million brochures, parent guides and child safety educational materials were distributed through the Office of Safe Environment to all parish and school communities since 2003.

- There are over 60 certified volunteer VIRTUS facilitators in the Diocese of Bridgeport who collaborate with the Safe Environment Office to deliver child safety programs. Classes and training materials are available in English, Spanish, Portuguese, Polish, Vietnamese, Italian and Korean. The Facilitators of the Diocese are dedicated volunteers who are committed to the safety and protection of children everywhere. The Office of Safe Environment staff are also certified VIRTUS facilitators who ensure there is always a full calendar of trainings offered in person and by zoom.
- Training for students includes basic information on abduction prevention, bullying prevention, and Internet safety. Child abuse prevention is facilitated in-person for every student enrolled in Catholic Schools grades K-12 every year since 2003 and an entire day of training is dedicated every calendar year. Classroom instruction is broken into age appropriate groups and parents are always offered the chance to preview these programs. The schools distribute materials to all parents in order to continue the conversation about child safety and abuse prevention in the home.

CONTINUING EDUCATION

- VIRTUS training is a live comprehensive three-hour class on Child Sexual Abuse Prevention. It is renewed every 5 Years (online or in person) by all Clergy, Employees and Volunteers who work in scheduled contact with children such as catechists, youth ministers and parent volunteers in a Catholic school.
- Volunteers who are not in scheduled contact with children are also included in these requirements and they must renew VIRTUS training (online modules or another in-person for non-internet users) and clear a criminal background check every 10 years.
- VIRTUS Protecting God's Children for Adults teaches participants the boundaries expected at all times when working with minors and vulnerable adults.
- Adults learn to recognize early warning signs of child abuse and grooming behaviors in the offenders of child sexual abuse.
- **Mandatory Reporting:** All School personnel and participants at VIRTUS training receive information on Mandated Reporting Laws and Procedures. This information is included during every VIRTUS class and is in our Safe Environment Handbook. Adults are required to report any reasonable suspicion of abuse of a minor, youth or vulnerable adult to the police, to the State of CT, Department of Children and Families Child Abuse and Neglect Care-line and to the Diocesan Victim Assistance Coordinator within 12-hours of becoming aware of the information. The reporting is required regardless of whether the incident occurred recently or in the past.

BACKGROUND CHECKS

- Every adult who works or volunteers in the Diocese of Bridgeport, including Priests, Deacons, Candidates for Ordination, Religious Sisters and brothers, Lay Employees, Lay Volunteers, School Parent Volunteers, Independent Contractors, Tenants and Vendors are required to complete a criminal background check. Over 100,000 checks were completed in the Diocese of Bridgeport and over 10,000 vendors and independent contractors across Fairfield County have completed our Safe Environment Programs.
- We have a zero-tolerance policy for convictions of a sex crime or a crime against children. All other convictions are reviewed based on the position.
- The standard criminal background check includes a National Criminal Record Search & Sex Offender Registry Search. Employment level searches add court searches and a social security number trace. Only the adults with financial responsibility complete a credit check and those with driving responsibility are required to complete the Motor Vehicle check. These additional checks require a separate authorization form sent to the Office of Safe Environment.
- Background checks must be renewed every 5-Years for Clergy, Employees and Volunteers who work in scheduled contact with children. Adults who volunteer in roles within parishes and programs that do not place them in scheduled contact with children must renew a criminal background check every 10 years.
- Background checks must be renewed when there is a gap in service; a change in role or position; upon acceptance into a formation program and upon ordination.
- School employees complete the M.Y.B., Inc. criminal background check, fingerprints and a CT D.C.F. Child Protective Services background check at time of hire.
- Confidentiality and Security of background check information is paramount. Results return to one source, the Safe Environment Office, and review of information is limited to Diocesan Legal Counsel and Human Resources for employment purposes. MYB, Inc. is our background check provider and their Security policy is located at https://bptdiocese.wpenginepowered.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/MYB_security_measures.pdf.

SAFE ENVIRONMENT POLICIES and our DIOCESAN CODE OF CONDUCT:

- The Safe Environment policies of the Diocese, including a comprehensive Code of Conduct published into a single Safe Environment Handbook. Our current Handbook incorporates feedback from the Diocesan Accountability Report, Survivors, Clergy, the Laity and our Review Board.
- The Safe Environment Handbook is part of VIRTUS class and participants are required to acknowledge receipt of this document electronically when they register for VIRTUS training and upon re-certification. Our Diocesan Code of Conduct is a critical part of our efforts to ensure everyone is aware

of the guidelines and expectations for appropriate conduct when working with Children, Youth and Vulnerable adults. The Safe Environment Handbook includes guidelines on how to avoid even the appearance of impropriety, which safeguards children and vulnerable adults as well as the adults who work with them. www.bridgeportdiocese.com under “Safe Environments.”

TRANSPARENCY & ACCOUNTABILITY IS ALWAYS A TOP PRIORITY

- **In 2019, Judge Robert L. Holzberg** conducted a comprehensive analysis of claims of clerical sexual abuse of minors, the Diocese’s knowledge of such abuse and its response to allegations and information concerning the alleged abuse and he kept key stakeholders well informed along the way. On September 12, 2019, Judge Holzberg spoke to the presbyterate of the Diocese of Bridgeport at their annual fall meeting. The judge also met with members of the diocesan survivors/victim group to share the same outline and on October 1, 2019, Judge Holzberg released the *Clerical Sexual Abuse Accountability Report*. <https://www.bridgeportdiocese.org/safe-environments/accountability-investigation/>.
- A public listing of Credibly Accused Clergy is available at www.bridgeportdiocese.com under Safe Environment.

U.S.C.C.B. AUDITS:

- All Dioceses in the United States undergo a comprehensive data collection audit on an annual basis. Every School, Parish, Diocesan Program and Catholic Charities, submit an annual report to the Office of Safe Environment verifying that all policies and safeguards were in full compliance during the audit year. The Pastor, Principal or Program Director in addition to the Local Safe Environment Coordinator signs these audit forms. Every diocese undergoes an audit in person or by zoom on a three-year cycle. The Diocese of Bridgeport was found to be in full compliance with all requirements set forth in the Charter during each independent audit since 2003.

IMPORTANT CONTACTS:

If you or someone you know is a survivor of abuse as a minor, and it involves a person from the Church, we care deeply about your healing, and you are very important to us. Please know that help is available, and your report may help to keep other children safe. We encourage you to take the important step of communicating what you know to the Safe Environment Office, the Police, The State of Connecticut Department of Children and Families Child Abuse and Neglect Care-Line, D.C.F. We encourage every victim to report directly to civil authorities and we must report the information to civil authorities.

Mandated Reporting Laws and Procedures in the State of CT require professionals who work with children and other personnel to report to D.C.F. within 12 hours of becoming aware of the information. We require everyone, even those who are not mandated reporters by state law, to follow these same guidelines because it is the right thing to do. People known and trusted by the victim most often commit Child Sexual Abuse. We understand that reporting abuse is very difficult. While we cannot guarantee anonymity in cases of suspected abuse as per mandatory reporting guidelines, we will handle your information in the highest level of confidentiality possible at all times.

The State of Connecticut Department of Children and Families Child Abuse and Neglect Care-Line, D.C.F. 1-800-842-2288. The Care-Line is open 24 hours a day 7 days a week.
Erin Neil, L.C.S.W., Diocese Victim Assistance Coordinator (203) 650-3265

For more information on the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People, please visit www.usccb.org and the Office of Child and Youth Protection.

For more information on the Safe Environment programs and Victim Assistance in the Diocese of Bridgeport, visit www.bridgeportdiocese.com under Safe Environment or call Erin Neil (203) 416-1406. Email: eneil@diobpt.org.

You may also write to The Diocese of Bridgeport
Office of Safe Environment
Erin Neil, Director of Safe Environment & Victim Assistance Coordinator
238 Jewett Avenue
Bridgeport, CT 06606

To register for a VIRTUS training session in your area, go to www.virtusonline.org. Select FIRST TIME REGISTRANT and BEGIN THE REGISTRATION PROCESS. elect BRIDGEPORT DIOCESE as your organization or, you may call the VIRTUS helpdesk at 1-888-847-8870. The helpdesk will assist you with transferring your VIRTUS account from another Diocese to the Diocese of Bridgeport if the training you completed was a live three-hour in person class called Protecting God's Children for Adults.

Recommended Websites: www.virtusonline.org
www.kidsmartz.org
www.netsmartz.org

CT Public School Safe Environment Curriculum:
<https://portal.ct.gov/sde/publications/statewide-k12--sexual-assault-abuse--prevention-awareness--program-guidelines/introduction>