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The newspaper of record for Reading and Berks County, Pa.

Sunday June 26, 2016 12:01 AM

Silent Struggles: Church wields heavier hand, but even tougher stances sought

By [Liam Migdail-Smith](#)

The way Catholic leaders respond to allegations of sexual abuse of children by clergy or lay people has changed since the mid-2000s, local church leaders say.

And they said, the culture and process victims faced when confronting church leaders about the abuse in the past is not the same as today.

In the Philadelphia Archdiocese, which includes the Pottstown area, all reports of abuse are now immediately forwarded to law enforcement, spokesman Kenneth A. Gavin said.

At the same time, the victim is put in touch with a services coordinator who can help line up church funding for therapy, medication and related transportation and child care costs, he said. And after the legal investigation is complete, the church conducts its own, separate canon-law review, he said.

He said victims' services and the internal investigation are handled independently and by former law enforcement professionals, not clergy.

That's a stark contrast from the response detailed in reports issued by a Philadelphia grand jury from 2005 to 2011.

Those reports found church leaders shielded accused priests from prosecution, often allowing them to continue operating as clergy after finishing incomplete, internal investigations. At the same time, the reports found, leaders investigated victims who came forward.

"The way that we do things now is drastically different from the way we did things in '05 or '02," Gavin said. "There were difficult lessons learned. But they were also taken to heart."

Abuse survivors and their advocates say church leaders' recent changes ring hollow given that they're leading the lobbying effort against a plan to hold organizations accountable for cover-ups of child sex abuse.

"Only when they got caught with their hand in the jar is when they started to do something," said state Rep. Mark Rozzi, who's led the push to reopen a window for some abuse survivors to file

lawsuits. "If they had not been caught, they would still be doing today what they were doing in the '70s and '80s."

Rozzi, a Muhlenberg Township Democrat, is a victim of childhood sexual abuse by a priest. Immediately referring reports of abuse to outside law enforcement and handing over related evidence is the most important step for organizations to take, said Abbie Newman, executive director of Mission Kids Child Advocacy Center in Montgomery County.

Newman is also past president of the statewide group representing such centers, which provide and organize centralized services for children who are abused.

She said it's encouraging that church leaders have made reporting abuse their policy but it will take time to know how well that is put into practice.

"It's kind of hard to tell at this point because it's forward-looking," Newman said. But she added, organizations that are interested in protecting children should be supporting the changes Rozzi has demanded.

"If we really are supporting victims and not the abusers, let's put our support behind the victims," she said.

The Philadelphia Archdiocese also operates a public website that includes photos, names and biographical information about priests the church has defrocked or banned from ministry as a result of "credible allegations of sexual abuse of a minor."

And Gavin said clergy and lay employees and volunteers go through regular training to report and prevent abuse.

Matthew Kerr - spokesman for the Allentown Diocese, which includes Berks County - outlined similar protocols for forwarding allegations to law enforcement and training clergy and employees about preventing and reporting abuse.

He said the diocese's response to abuse has evolved since the early 2000s. The victim assistance efforts are now headed by a professional counselor, he said.

"It doesn't matter how long ago whatever happened happened," he said. "She is still there to offer assistance in any way."

Allentown Bishop John O. Barres said in an emailed statement that he has reached out to those affected by abuse through prayer and encouraged church faithful throughout the diocese to do the same and help with the healing process.

"I have met with survivors of clergy sexual abuse, their families, their friends and their loved ones," Barres wrote. "I have listened at a deep level to their stories of tragedy, betrayal, lifelong trauma and their heroic efforts to engage in the process of healing. They carry lifelong wounds of

trauma, wounds that are so deep that only the power of the Holy Spirit can begin to touch, relieve and heal them."

Past changes

Victims of sexual assault before reaching age 18 now have until age 50 to bring criminal charges and age 30 to file lawsuits.

Those limits are relatively new, and many victims abused in the past faced much shorter limits. But because past extensions were not retroactive, those survivors have not had the chance to take legal action despite the limits being increased.

Here's the history:

Before 1984: Victims had two years from the time of abuse to take civil or criminal action.

1984: Criminal limit changed to five years from the time of abuse; civil limit set at age 20.

2002: Both criminal and civil limits increased to age 30.

2006: Criminal limit increased to age 50.

Source: Pennsylvania law

About the bill

More childhood sexual abuse survivors are coming forward to tell their stories as Pennsylvania lawmakers consider a proposal to overhaul time limits for victims to take legal action. Here's a look at the plan:

What it would do: Eliminate any limit for criminal charges (it's now age 50) and increase the time limit for lawsuits to age 50 (it's now age 30). The civil change would be retroactive, allowing victims up to age 50 to file lawsuits even if the time limit has already run out.

Where it stands: The bill passed the House and is now before the Senate Judiciary Committee. The committee is reportedly considering changes that would remove the retroactive language but allow old cases to advance if victims can prove evidence was fraudulently concealed. Supporters say that would weaken the bill and gut the part needed to open a long-blocked path for many victims to seek justice.

What supporters say: Advocates say most victims aren't ready to come forward until years later and must have a path to justice once they are. They say lawsuits can help victims recoup the financial damage of abuse and also serve to expose pedophiles, encourage other victims to come forward and deter institutions from covering up abuse.

What opponents say: The bill is opposed by Catholic Church leaders and the insurance industry. They call the retroactive part unconstitutional and say it would punish today's Catholics for wrongdoings of the past by opening the church to a flood of lawsuits that would be difficult to defend against and would sap resources from other church functions.