

**STATEMENT OF ERIN NEIL**

**DIRECTOR OF THE SAFE ENVIRONMENT PROGRAM FOR THE DIOCESE OF  
BRIDGEPORT**

**On Raised Bill No. 5473**

**“An Act Concerning the Statute of Limitations for  
Bringing an Action for Damages for the Sexual Assault of a Minor”**

There is no institution public or private that is as serious about preventing child sexual abuse as the Catholic Church. In 2002, the Catholic Bishops launched child abuse prevention efforts known as safe environment programs; and these are unmatched in the United States.

Anyone in ministry must clear a criminal background check, read and acknowledge the written Codes of Conduct and complete primary child sexual abuse awareness and prevention training. In Connecticut, the Catholic Church provided over 2,500 classes on identification of early warning signs in offenders and training on the mandatory reporting of suspected abuse to civil authorities in accordance with Connecticut law. Connecticut Catholic Dioceses trained 234,000 clergy, lay employees, volunteers, parents, children and youth. Additionally we've conducted over 68,000 criminal background checks.

The Catholic Church provides the largest and most consistent child sexual abuse prevention effort in the State. In fact, I was invited to attend a Town Hall meeting in Fairfield with sexual assault crisis centers and town officials and was surprised to learn how much more extensive our programs are than those in the public schools. For example, in public schools parent volunteers are not included in prevention training or background checks and children's training programs are inconsistent. This example makes it clear that Safe Environments is a resource beyond the Catholic Church. It is our hope that the State considers implementing these same standards for our public school children.

Raised Bill 5473 is problematic. If there is anything we've learned about prevention, early detection and timely reporting are critical; something this Bill does not include. Extending the time period for victims to come forward does nothing to keep children safe.

Thank you



## CT CATHOLIC ARCHDIOCESES AND DIOCESES: SAFE ENVIRONMENT PROGRAMS COMPREHENSIVE CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE AWARENESS AND PREVENTION

One victim of child sexual abuse is one too many. Sadly, there are an estimated 40 million survivors of child sexual abuse in the United States occurring in both public and private institutions and committed most often (89% of the time) by people by people we know and trust and who we may even be related to. Child molesters seek environments with access to children and there is no specific gender, age, sexual orientation, occupation or physical profile of a child molester. Child sexual abuse is not unique to private institutions yet the response by the Catholic Church in CT to protect children is greater than any other institution public or private. *Carol Shakeshaft analyzed data collected by the American Association of University Women in 2000 and reported that an estimated 4.5 million students sometime between k-12 are subject to sexual misconduct by an employee of a school including teachers, classroom aides, school principals, school counselors and coaches.*

In 2002, Safe Environment programs were established by U.S. Bishops in a landmark document, *The Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*, a.k.a. “the Charter.” Safe Environment programs are fully established in all three CT Catholic Archdioceses and Dioceses with a Program Directors and Victim Assistance Coordinators. Safe Environment Directors oversee prevention programs for adults and children, criminal background checks and the mandatory reporting of suspected child abuse to civil authorities in accordance with the law. All three Archdioceses and Dioceses in Connecticut receive external compliance audits annually on these child safety standards and are found to be in full compliance with the Charter. Codes of Conduct are in place to ensure that Safe Environments are created and maintained and that every prudent and reasonable effort is made to keep children safe.

### **VICTIM ASSISTANCE**

Every diocese has a 24-hour victim assistance program in place that employs highly trained personnel including licensed clinical social workers to ensure an immediate response to victims and families. Outreach includes counseling, financial and other forms of assistance specific to the person’s needs. We offer outreach regardless of whether the abuse occurred recently or in the past and for as long as necessary for healing to take place. All victims are offered an apology and a meeting with the Archbishop or Bishop.

### **ABUSE PREVENTION TRAINING & CRIMINAL BACKGROUND CHECKS: “ZERO TOLERANCE”**

CT Archdioceses and Dioceses provided more than 2,500 classes on child sexual abuse prevention educating adults and children to report suspected abuse to civil authorities. Programs instruct adults and children to identify the most common warning signs (grooming behaviors) in offenders and avoid the most common tricks employed by child molesters in person and online. 234,000+ Priests, Deacons, Seminarians, Religious, Lay Employees, Volunteers, Parents, Children and Youth in 7 years have gone through these primary prevention programs. CT Archdioceses and Dioceses conducted approx. 68,000 criminal background checks on all of our priests, deacons, lay employees and volunteers, including parent volunteers.

The more people who work in or around our environments that are cleared by a criminal background check and the more people we make aware of the warning signs, the safer our children will be.

**For more information about the USCCB Charter and Safe Environment Programs please visit [www.usccb.org](http://www.usccb.org); [www.archdioceseofhartford.org](http://www.archdioceseofhartford.org); [www.bridgeportdiocese.com](http://www.bridgeportdiocese.com); [www.norwichdiocese.org](http://www.norwichdiocese.org)**

***There is no institution public or private that is doing as much as the Catholic Church to prevent child sexual abuse.***

**FACTS**

- The Catholic Church requires Safe environment training in every Archdiocese and Diocese. 7.5 million Adults and children received training on the prevention of child sexual abuse.
- The Catholic Church Conducts Background checks on all Church personnel who have contact with children. *The Church conducted criminal background checks on over 1,826,000 adults.*
- The Church maintains a Zero Tolerance policy on abusers which means that if there is a credible accusation against a priest or deacon, they are out of public ministry forever.
- Codes of conduct and policies on reporting abuse to authorities are in place
- Victim Assistance Coordinators and Safe Environment Coordinators are in every diocese to ensure prevention education, criminal background checks, a timely response to allegations and mandatory reporting of suspected child abuse to civil authorities. Counseling and other forms of assistance are provided to victims.
- Bishops and their representatives meet with victims.
- Diocesan Review Boards exist in every diocese and with that, their increased lay involvement.
- Dioceses are cooperating with public authorities on allegations of abuse.
- A National Review Board has been established that is composed of lay experts.
- Dioceses are audited on these requirements annually.
- The Catholic Church in the U.S. issues a national public report annually which is shared with the Holy See.