



Office of Safe Environment

Keeping you informed ...



Thank you for taking the time to learn about the Office of Safe Environment process for the Catholic Church and, specifically, for the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston.

The topic of child sex abuse is extremely painful and difficult to discuss; and, unfortunately, it is a significant part of the recent history of the Catholic Church. Those who are affected by sex abuse deserve our most heartfelt prayers. Their lives are changed forever. This information is to inform you and reassure you of the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston's commitment and efforts to keeping children and young people safe.

Why Is There an Office of Safe Environment?

This is a frequently asked question by newcomers, and there are even many long-standing members of the Church who are unsure why we have an Office of Safe Environment. Offices of Safe Environment all across the country are making a difference in the Catholic Church.

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) requires that all Dioceses/Eparchies have in place a Safe Environment Program for the protection of children and young people. The *“Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People”* was adopted by the USCCB in June 2002 as a response to sexual abuse of minors by Catholic priests and deacons, particularly from the time period of the 1950s to the 1980s. The *Charter* is the basis for the Safe Environment program in every Diocese in the United States. The USCCB established an **Office of Child and Youth Protection** to oversee the application of the *Charter's* principles and to create the means for accountability for ensuring implementation of standards.

Each year, Dioceses in the United States – including the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston - are audited by the USCCB through an independent audit agency for compliance with the Safe Environment mandate. The results of these audits are published in an annual report that is made public. At any given time, the most recent report, as well as other reports, videos, and information related to this subject, may be found on the USCCB's web site: www.usccb.org › at the bottom of the page, click on “Child and Youth Protection” › then down the left side of the page, click on “Reports and Research”.

To illustrate the magnitude and impact of Safe Environment nationwide, the following statistics are from the USCCB's web site under the “Audit” section:

“Faced with the crisis of child sexual abuse by clerics that dramatically came to light, in 2002, the church set up an aggressive safe environment program that is the envy of other organizations that work with children. From the annual audits, we can say the Catholic Church in the United States:

- **Trained more than 2.1 million clergy, employees, and volunteers in parishes in how to create safe environments and prevent child sexual abuse.**
- **Prepared more than 5.2 million children to recognize abuse and protect themselves.**
- **Ran background checks on more than 1,887,000 volunteers and employees, 166,000 educators, 52,000 clerics and 6,000 candidates for ordination.”**

The Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston has a Process Administrator for the Office of Safe Environment and a full-time Office of Safe Environment Coordinator to help ensure the Diocese's commitment to its children and young people and compliance with the Diocese's Safe Environment Policy. In addition, at the local level, each parish, school, or organization appoints a local-level coordinator to help carry out the Safe Environment process.

The Three Components of Safe Environment for Adults

The Safe Environment Program by the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston consists of the following three components:

- ✓ Background Check

- ✓ Policy Relating to Sexual Abuse of Children (Summer 2014)
- ✓ Awareness training for adults (for our Diocese, the awareness training provider is VIRTUS – www.virtusonline.org – and training may be accomplished online or live/in person.)

All three components (Background Check, Policy Relating to Sexual Abuse of Children, and Awareness Training for Adults – VIRTUS) are mandated by the Diocese for **persons seeking employment or seeking to volunteer directly or indirectly with children** within the Diocese of Wheeling–Charleston and any entity that falls under the Diocese.

An employee or volunteer is considered in compliance with the Safe Environment Policy upon successful completion of all three components.

The background check is provided by a professional, secure background screening service and includes a nationwide sex offender search. Every employee and volunteer is issued the ***Policy Relating to Sexual Abuse of Children*** so that he or she clearly knows the Diocese’s stance on this issue. And lastly, the online or live training is intended to raise awareness regarding sex abuse. The Safe Environment process is applied to up to several thousand volunteers and employees in any given year in our Diocese.

Safe Environment Program for Children

A Student Awareness Program has been implemented since the fall of 2005 in the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston to give children information (appropriate for their age levels) and skills to help recognize acceptable and unacceptable behaviors and how to effectively deal with those behaviors. This is a VIRTUS awareness training program called “**Touching Safety**”.

The program is taught in Catholic schools and as part of Parish Schools of Religion. Two lessons are taught each year, along with the showing of an age-appropriate introductory DVD.

Recognizing the sensitivity of this subject matter and that some parents prefer to address it directly with their children as opposed to having someone else address it, before a “Touching Safety” class is taught, parents must be sent an Opt-Out Letter at least two weeks in advance of the lesson(s). Parents are also provided Touching Safety materials if they would like to teach the lessons themselves at home.

For the last audit cycle, nearly 9,000 children throughout the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston completed the Touching Safety program through their church or school, and approximately 600 children opted out.

Reporting:

To report an incidence of suspected child sexual abuse, please contact your local law enforcement agency, or you may confidentially contact the West Virginia Bureau for Children and Families/Child Protective Services by calling the Child Abuse Hotline at **800.352.6513**.

To report suspected cases of sexual abuse of children by personnel of the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston to the Diocese, please contact one of the Bishop’s designees at: **304.233.0880 or 1.888.434.6237**: Sr. Ellen F. Dunn, O.P., ext. 264; Mr. Bryan Minor, ext. 263; Rev. Msgr. Frederick P. Annie, V.G., ext. 267; Rev. Msgr. Anthony Cincinnati, STD, V.E., ext. 270; Office of Safe Environment Direct Dial: **304.230.1504**.

For more information, please go to www.dwc.org, click “Diocese,” then “Office of Safe Environment” or www.usccb.org and click “Issues and Action,” then “Child and Youth Protection.” To further raise awareness, please go to www.virtusonline.org.

Please know that all priests and deacons in the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston have met all three components of the Safe Environment policy.

The Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston remains in good standing and compliance with the USCCB’s yearly audits of its Safe Environment program.