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Independent Oversight Board Issues Report on Altoona-Johnstown Diocese Child Protection Efforts

Review finds progress; pushes for further steps to fully implement and enforce reforms

[Altoona, PA] – The Independent Oversight Board for Youth Protection of the Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown today issued its first Annual Report on reforms developed and implemented by the Diocese for protection of children and youth, concluding that “much has been done, but much is left to do.”

The Oversight Board was formed to oversee the implementation of child protection reforms mandated by a 2017 Memorandum of Understanding between the Office of the United States Attorney for the Western District of Pennsylvania and the Diocese. The involvement of the United States Attorney’s Office had its origins in a 2016 Pennsylvania Grand Jury report which documented a series of scandals involving sexual abuse of minors by members of the clergy and alleged subsequent coverups by two previous Diocesan bishops.

In its report, the Board concluded that the Diocese has made “significant headway” in developing and putting in place policies and procedures necessary to protect children and youth who come into contact with its clergy, employees, lay ministers and volunteers. The Board’s report covers numerous reforms including: public disclosure of the names of priests and others credibly accused of sexually abusing minors; automatic and immediate referral of credible allegations to law enforcement authorities; appointment of all new members to the Diocesan Allegation Review Board; improved mandatory background checks and training programs for Diocesan clergy, employees and volunteers; a new policy for youth protection and a new Diocesan code of conduct that apply to all clergy, employees and volunteers; counseling and financial assistance for victims; a 24-hour child sexual abuse hotline; retention of an outside expert on child sexual abuse prevention; and appointment of a full-time youth protection director. A spreadsheet summary of what has been accomplished and what remains to be done is attached.

However, the Board emphasized that “all the policies in the world won’t work if they are not implemented and enforced.” It also issued several additional recommendations to bring about “a Diocesan culture that places the highest value on protecting and nurturing its children.” They include:

Establish Parish Level Leadership Teams/Safety Committees. The Board strongly recommended that the laypeople in each parish take a more active and formal role in making sure that reforms are carried out and monitored for effectiveness. Specifically, it called for each parish to create a parish-level Leadership Team/Safety Committee with real authority for ensuring the protection of its own children.

Promote the Child Sex Abuse Hotline. Finding that the number of calls received by the Diocese' 24-hour child sex abuse hotline has been minimal, the Board recommended that the hotline be more widely and effectively promoted.

Implement Procedures for Following Up on Referrals to Law Enforcement Authorities. The Board commended the Diocese for instituting and following a policy of immediately reporting allegations of child sexual abuse to appropriate authorities, including law enforcement agencies. It recommended that the Diocese implement an agreed-upon procedure for follow-up on referrals to law enforcement authorities, especially to the district attorneys in the counties within the Diocese.

Strengthen a Culture of Child Protection. The Board highlighted the importance of instilling a culture of child protection that is embraced by clergy, lay ministers, teachers, employees and parishioners. Noting that "culture almost always trumps policy," the board found that the Diocese "has put the policy in place" but "must continue to work on the culture."

In accordance with the Memorandum of Understanding, the Board has provided its report to the United States Attorney's Office and to the Diocese. The full report of the Board can be accessed on the Diocese' website at <https://www.dioceseaj.org>.

The Independent Oversight Board consists of outside experts and is responsible for overseeing the development and implementation of policies and procedures for child protection. It does not handle specific allegations of abuse; that is the responsibility of the Diocesan Bishop, the Allegation Review Board of the Diocese and law enforcement agencies. Short bios of the five members of the Independent Oversight Board and the Diocese' outside consultant are attached.

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Biographies of the Independent Oversight Board for Youth Protection of the Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown:

James W. Brown is a former Chief of Staff to both U.S. Senator Robert P. Casey, Jr. and Pennsylvania Governor Robert P. Casey. Mr. Brown is also a former founding partner of a family of venture capital funds and a former partner of a major law firm. He has extensive experience with issues involving children and education, including service on the boards of three schools that educate underprivileged children. Mr. Brown serves as Chair of the Board.

Walter “Pete” Carlson is a former criminal investigator for the Pennsylvania State Police. During his service with the State Police, Mr. Carlson investigated and helped prosecute child abuse cases for over 15 years. He also served as Chief of Detectives for the District Attorney’s Office of Lackawanna County, Pennsylvania. He has taught classes and lectured extensively on the subject of child abuse protection.

Eileen Dombo, PhD is an Associate Professor and Assistant Dean of the National Catholic School of Social Service at The Catholic University of America. Dr. Dombo is also a practicing psychotherapist and has written and lectured extensively on trauma, child sexual abuse and mental health treatment. Dr. Dombo is currently the Chair of the Child Protection Advisory Board of the Archdiocese of Washington, DC.

Mary Herwig is an expert in the field of Formative Spirituality and provides spiritual formation counseling, having studied under Adrian van Kaam C.S.Sp., PhD and Susan Muto, PhD. Ms. Herwig is an advocate for child protection in all its forms, including for those who have suffered child abuse. She experienced abuse herself as a young child. At present, Ms. Herwig promotes the Catholic Church’s call for a “New Evangelization”, nurturing others on the importance of ongoing spiritual formation. She is a longtime resident of Somerset, Pennsylvania.

Jerry Johnson, Esq. served as the United States Attorney for the Western District of Pennsylvania for eight years. In that role, he led the prosecution of thousands of criminal cases, including numerous matters involving child abuse. Mr. Johnson is a practicing attorney in Pittsburgh.

Biography of the Diocese’ outside consultant:

R. Leslie Nichols, CPP, is an expert with broad experience in child protection within organizations. Before starting his consulting practice in 2016, Mr. Nichols spent more than 20 years as the Vice President for Child Protection for the national headquarters of Boys & Girls Clubs of America. He has written and lectured extensively on child abuse protection. Since its formation, members of the Board have had extensive discussions and meetings with Mr. Nichols.

Independent Oversight Board, Diocese of Altoona Johnstown (IOB)-- Oversight Responsibilities

Note: This spreadsheet is a summary. For full information, see the Annual Report or underlying documents.

RESPONSIBILITY	Source	Completion/Deadline	Status	Comments
Memorandum of Understanding Diocese and US Attorney (MOU)	US Attorney	3/6/17	Completed.	
Appointment of Independent Oversight Board Members	MOU	7/2/17	Completed.	James W. Brown, Walter "Pete" Carlson Eileen Dombo, Mary Herwig, Jerry Johnson
Appointment of Consultant	MOU	2017	Completed.	Les Nichols
Appointment Of Youth Protection Director for Diocese	MOU	1/12/18	Completed.	Cynthia O'Connor
Reform of Allegations Review Board, Appointment of New Members	MOU	2017	Completed.	
Code of Conduct For Diocese Document	MOU	9/30/18	Completed. Ongoing responsibility.	Revised Code of Conduct.
Training Program for Clergy, Employees and Volunteers	MOU	2018	Completed. Outside contractor selected and retained. Ongoing responsibility.	Virtus retained. Training in progress for current employees and new hires. New hires must complete before starting work.
Review of Outside Audit by Independent Oversight Board	MOU		Completed for 2016-2017. Completed for 2017-2018.	Audit for 7/1/2016 - 6/30/2017 (on site) completed by Stonebridge Business Partners, indicates full compliance with Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People. Stonebridge compliance letter reviewed by IOB. IOB also reviewed Stonebridge additional recommendations. Report reviewed by IOB on 2017-2018 desk audit indicates compliance.
Policy Concerning Supervision of Clergy	MOU		Completed. Ongoing responsibility.	
Public Disclosure of Information	MOU		Completed as to past and current allegations. Ongoing responsibility.	Diocese discloses allegations and criminal referrals of misconduct by clergy, employees and other personnel on Diocesan website.
Financial Assistance for Victims	MOU		Completed. Ongoing responsibility.	Diocese helps pay for private counseling for victims, including co-pays, deductibles and costs in excess of insurance.
Partnering with Independent Victim Assistance Services	MOU		Completed. Ongoing responsibility.	Diocese working with Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape (PCAR) and local sexual assault centers.
Victim Advocate	MOU		Completed. Ongoing responsibility.	Jean Johnstone
Child Sex Abuse Hotline	MOU		Completed. Ongoing responsibility.	Must be widely publicized and distributed.
Youth Protection Policies for Diocese Document	MOU	9/30/18	Completed. Ongoing responsibility.	Includes policies mandated in MOU.
Background Check System	MOU	2018	Completed. Outside contractor selected and retained. Ongoing responsibility.	Selection.com chosen and retained. Implementation in progress. Must also conform with Pennsylvania State requirements. Clergy are reviewed by Diocesan staff, Selection.com, FBI and PA background checks. Employees are reviewed by Diocesan HR, Selection.com, FBI and PA background checks. Volunteers are Reviewed by FBI and PA background checks. Everyone signs an application.
Youth Protection Communications Program	Stonebridge Recommendation		Completed. Ongoing responsibility.	

RECOMMENDATIONS	Source	Status	Comments
Parish Level Leadership Teams/ Safety Committees	Consultant Recommendation	Recommended.	
Physical Inventory of Diocesan Properties	Consultant Recommendation	Recommended.	Inventory of Diocesan properties to identify and eliminate "entrapment areas."
Promotion of Nulton hotline	Independent Oversight Board recommendation		
Additional Education & Training Programs, Youth Protection Staff, Adequacy and Funding	Independent Oversight Board recommendation	Ongoing responsibility.	IOB has reviewed with Youth Protection Director.
Procedure for Following Up on Referrals to Law Enforcement Agencies	Independent Oversight Board recommendation	Recommended.	
Diocesan Culture of Protection	Independent Oversight Board recommendation		