

Church sexual-abuse policy criticized

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Five months after it announced the formation of a child sexual-abuse policy, the Diocese of Jefferson City was castigated by the man who filed a lawsuit that many believe inspired the policy.

In August, David Clohessy sued the diocese, Bishop Michael McAuliffe, St. Pius the X Catholic Church in Moberly and the Rev. John Whiteley in Cole County Circuit Court. He claimed Whiteley had sexually molested him more than 20 years ago when he was a member of St. Pius.

A month after the suit was filed, McAuliffe issued the new policy to diocesan personnel.

Friday, Clohessy issued a statement condemning the policy.

"On the one hand, something is usually better than nothing," Clohessy said. "So I'm pleased the diocese has finally come up with some type of policy on child abuse.

"On the other hand, this particular policy is at best vague and at worst meaningless. It is long on rhetoric but short on specifics."

Most of his criticisms were leveled at the sections of the plan dealing with pre-employment screening, reporting procedures for suspected abuse and the diocese's role in caring for victims of sexual abuse.

Clohessy said the plan outlined "what in most organizations would be considered standard operating procedure."

Louis DeFeo, counsel for the diocese, defended the plan.

"This is one document out of a large context. Most of the people who would relate to children in the diocese are school teachers and so forth, and there are additional policies that relate to them. It's only one document out of an integrated system."

Priests and ordained religious personnel are not screened through DFS, but DeFeo said this was remedied by virtue of their manner of preparation.

"All of the priests in this state are trained through seminaries," he said. "As part of that system, there are psychological screens that are a lot more detailed and specific to the person than just calling DFS."

Although this screening stops once the candidate is ordained, DeFeo said he didn't see that as a problem.

Once abuse is detected, the policy instructs diocesan personnel to "report to the appropriate person or agency." Clohessy said this would encourage those who detected abuse to contact their diocesan superiors instead of DFS.

DeFeo said the ambiguity of the policy was the fault of the General Assembly.

"I'm pretty sure the policy tracks what the law says," DeFeo said. "In addition, it informs the diocese of the situation. There's nothing in that policy that says 'don't report to DFS when you should report to DFS.'"