

Diocese: Camp still wholesome

By Marilyn Vise

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BELLEVILLE — The Belleville Diocese on Wednesday sought to assure parents and children that a safe and wholesome environment exists at the diocese's summer camp, Camp Ondessonk.

The diocese statement follows a report Tuesday in which an advocate for sexual-abuse victims said three people have alleged they were sexually abused while attending the camp.

"We want to assure parents, children and youth that Camp Ondessonk is a safe environment for children and youth and that it offers many positive educational and

recreational experiences," said Sister Michelle Emmerich, a spokesman for the diocese.

In the Tuesday report, David Clohessy, organizer of the St. Louis Chapter of the Survivors Network of Those Abused By Priests, said he has received allegations from three people who attended the camp between eight and 20 years ago.

Emmerich urged people to bring any allegations of sexual misconduct to the diocese.

"If such incidents have occurred, the church wants to know," she said. "We take these reports seriously. We will investigate, and we will take action."

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Emmerich said that to assure the safety of children, the diocese:

- Screens all employees and volunteers by checking references of previous service or employment.

- Requires all employees and volunteers to participate in orientation sessions before the camp opens.

- Has a strong and experienced administrative and educational staff trained in safety and conducting appropriate activities with youth.

- Invites children and parents to discuss their camping experiences.

- Invites parents to participate in some closing weekend activities.

Emmerich said about 3,000 children are expected to attend camp sessions this year.

"Enrollment is very positive," she said. "I would say we are on target with where we were last year."

Clohessy said two of the allegations involved the same priest. In the third allegation, the priest involved was not specified.

Camp Ondessonk is a 1,000-acre youth camp founded in 1959, located

near the Johnson County town of Ozark.

Emmerich noted that the diocese has hired a counselor to assist victims of sexual abuse.

Clohessy has cautioned victims of sexual abuse to avoid calling the diocese. The diocese has set up a toll-free hot line, (800) 640-3044. Clohessy's group can be reached by calling (314) 645-5915.

Four diocese priests, including a former director of the camp, have been accused of sexual misconduct in the past month.

The Rev. James Ratermann of Blessed Sacrament Church in Belleville was forced to resign March 6. On March 18, the Rev. Robert Vonnahmen stepped down as pastor of St. Joseph's Catholic Church in Elizabethtown, and the Rev. James Calhoun stepped down from St. Boniface Catholic Church in Germantown. Vonnahmen is a former director of Camp Ondessonk.

On March 30, the Rev. David Crook, of St. George Church in New Baden, was removed from his parish.