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Lincoln Diocese pays woman who accused priest of sex abuse \$75K to release claims

Chris Dunker | Lincoln Journal Star

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Jolene Collins kept a secret for more than 30 years. Now she's speaking publicly about abuse allegations and the Diocese of Lincoln's response.
KENNETH FERRIERA, Journal Star

Chris Dunker | Lincoln Journal Star

For decades, Jolene Collins kept it secret.

It was 1993, the summer her family had welcomed a pair of seminarians into their home a half-block from St. Joseph's Catholic Church in Lincoln.

Collins was 12, one of four children, all of whom had been taught at home and in school that priests were infallible, she recalled. The seminarians, who were training to become priests, were to be treated the same way, she remembers being told.

But late one night, Collins awoke to someone in her bed. It was a man, Scott Courtney, one of the seminarians who slept in a bedroom with an adjacent wall to hers.

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She felt the bed shift as Courtney crawled into the top, twin-sized bunk where she slept, pressing her against its metal railing. She felt his hot breath on her neck and shoulders, his hand sliding into her shorts and under her shirt.

The fear and pain paralyzed Collins: "I didn't know what else to do, so I pretended to be asleep. I have no idea how long he was there, just that it felt like hours."

Three nights that summer, Collins said she woke up to Courtney in her bed, squeezing her against the cold frame as his hands rubbed her breasts and against her genitals over her underwear.

In 2025, Courtney denied Collins' allegations **in a news release sent by the Catholic Diocese of Lincoln**. The church said Courtney was "entitled to the presumption of innocence under both canon law and secular law," but had limited his duties.

At roughly the same time, the diocese was finalizing a settlement with Collins, who now lives in Dunlap, Iowa, through a new process it said aimed to promote healing, not establish the guilt or innocence of the accused.

In exchange for Collins giving up any legal claim she may have against the Diocese of Lincoln, even after the statute of limitations had long expired, the church would agree to pay whatever amount a third-party administrator determined was appropriate.

After an investigation and review by a retired federal judge in New Mexico, the payment made to Collins last fall, which was not disclosed in the diocese's statement about Courtney, totaled \$75,000.

Long before that, however, Collins kept what had happened in her childhood home a secret, burying it deep even as it began to consume her life.

If priests could do no wrong, who could Collins tell?

Finally coming forward

One evening, in late August 2023, with the encouragement of her therapist, three decades after she buried the secret as deep as she could, Collins opened up to her sister about the abuse she had suffered.

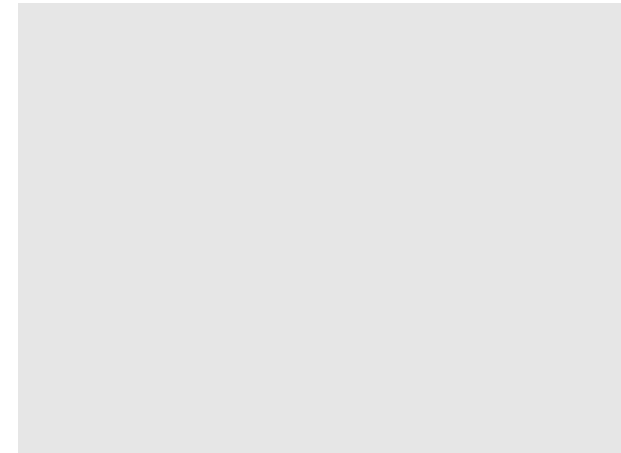
It marked a milestone in her reasserting control of her life, she said, after years of self-torment, recurring nightmares and frayed relationships with family and friends.

Collins said her sister was shocked by the revelation, but unsurprised when she mentioned Courtney's name. A quick web search revealed why.

The priest, who had ministered in several parishes and taught at several high schools within the Lincoln Diocese — and had even appeared on a **national TV program aimed at young Catholics** to promote boys' and girls' youth groups he led — was **placed on administrative leave in 2018** following allegations he had sexual contact with an adult woman.

Collins would learn later that shortly after those allegations surfaced, Courtney had called her father — the priest had remained friendly with him for 30 years — and asked for his prayers.

The church removed Courtney from the parishes he served in Roseland and Juniata following an internal review and in 2021 assigned him to minister in prisons and nursing and retirement homes, and to provide administrative assistance to the diocesan chancery.



Scott Courtney

Courtesy photo

“My sister told me about it and was like, ‘You already know this on a different level,’” Collins recalled. “I thought, that’s a good way to put it.”

That night, unable to sleep, Collins reported the abuse for the first time through an online portal on the Diocese of Lincoln’s website.

The next day, Collins was contacted by Jeff Hohlen, a victim assistance coordinator employed by the diocese, informing her that the report needed to be submitted to law enforcement and asked if she wanted to speak directly with an officer.

Collins drove the two hours to Lincoln a little more than a week later, in September 2023, to meet with Hohlen and a Lincoln police officer at the chancery.

She told the story of how the seminarian had come into her room and climbed into her bed, as well as the years of mental and emotional anguish she had suffered as a result.

A report was filed, but the LPD officer told her the case would likely come down to a she-said/he-said. “To be honest, that’s what I expected,” Collins said.

But the officer also suggested she could call Courtney and try to get him to make an incriminating admission.

The last time Collins had seen Courtney nearly a decade earlier in Bellwood, he was celebrating Mass at the time. Seeing him there had sent Collins spiraling, she said, but she agreed to call the priest: “He didn’t answer the phone.”

Sometime later, the officer requested an interview with Courtney, she said, but an attorney representing the priest declined. The diocese requested she submit another written statement in mid-December 2023.

A week went by and Hohlen called to inform Collins that after an internal investigation Courtney had been reassigned to minister to prisons only.

Collins protested the decision and requested to speak with Bishop James Conley. Whatever the diocese’s process had been, Collins told the leader of the diocese in January 2024, she had not been part of it.

Nor was her demand met that, if permanent removal from the priesthood was off the table, Courtney be put in a place where he “could not have contact with anyone that could be made a victim,” Collins said.

The church offered to pay for counseling and asserted Courtney’s responsibilities had been limited further than before, but Collins pointed out his profile and duties on the diocese’s website remained unchanged.

No amount of counseling could replace what Collins was seeking: accountability for what happened to her. Collins was told “it was a personnel matter,” she said, and that diocese officials would not discuss it further.

“I was able to say this is what I want, they were able to dismiss it outright,” she said. “The whole thing felt very performative, something they were doing because they felt like they had to, not because what I told them mattered.”

Investigation renewed

While she expected little to come from finally sharing her story with the Catholic Church, Collins said meeting with the leaders of the Lincoln Diocese left her feeling ignored and defeated.

Collins experienced what many victims of sexual abuse fear if they report what happened to them, said Sara Larson of Awake, a community of abuse survivors and concerned Catholics that was founded in 2019.

“When this abuse is committed by a religious leader who is seen as representing God, the trauma is often amplified by spiritual injury and a profound sense of betrayal,” Larson said.

It can take years, even decades, for those injuries to heal and the feeling of being betrayed to subside to the point where an individual is ready to come forward, she added.

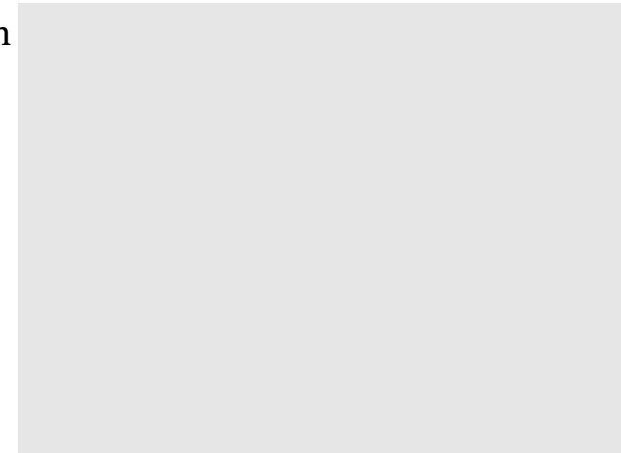
Even then, survivors may not come forward, Larson said, particularly if they “are not sure if they will be believed or treated with respect.”

Collins was one of those people who, for decades, felt ashamed and stigmatized, like she could never get out from underneath what happened to her. After reporting her abuse and running into a wall, she said she was ready to bury the secret once more.

Then her phone rang.

It was Hohlen calling, in late September 2024, months after she last had spoken to anyone from the diocese. He wanted to check in and see how she was doing, she recalled.

“They blew me off and I was ready to be done and move on with my life,” she said, “but then they opened the door, so I decided I’m going to walk right through it.”



Sara Larson of Awake

Courtesy photo

The diocese chalked up the previous interaction as “a misunderstanding,” Collins said, of not grasping the gravity of what she was telling them, nor what it had taken to finally come forward and share the secret that had altered the course of her life.

Collins said she later learned a priest outside the diocese heard her story and questioned leaders in the Lincoln jurisdiction about its formal process — or lack thereof — for investigating reports of sexual abuse by clergy.

Those questions led to Collins being invited a second time to meet with Conley in January 2025, when she was informed the diocese had reopened the investigation into her complaint against Courtney.

This time, the diocese wanted her to meet with an investigator it hired, Tom Gorgen, a former police detective who had previously done work for the Archdiocese of Omaha looking into allegations of sex abuse.

Talking with Gorgen, who later shared his findings with a third-party administrator, would be part of a new initiative the Lincoln Diocese was billing as an alternative to litigation.

The Independent Healing and Restoration Program, or IHRP, was a private “non-adversarial process by which survivors may receive financial support, in an amount determined by an experienced, independent professional unaffiliated with the Church.”

According to a May 2025 letter sent to Collins from the Rev. Tom Brouillette, the diocese's vicar general, the IHRP sought to be "victim-centered and to meet the needs of survivors on their terms."

Collins would not be required to speak with anyone from the diocese, should she voluntarily participate, nor would it affect any legal rights she had — including the right to sue — "unless and until" she signed a form releasing any claims related to the abuse.

For its part, the Lincoln Diocese engaged retired Judge Linda Vanzi, a former trial judge at the Second Judicial District Court in New Mexico and chief judge of the New Mexico Court of Appeals, to administer the program.

"She is highly regarded, most important in this context for her work with victims of sexual abuse, including administering IHRP programs," the diocese said in a statement.

It was the first time the Diocese of Lincoln had invited a victim of sexual abuse at the hands of a priest to participate in such a program, the diocese confirmed to the Journal Star.

'Inherently constrained'

Restorative programs, like the IHRP offered by the Diocese of Lincoln, are used in a variety of settings.

But they are typically ordered by a judge only after a court of law has handed down a conviction and sentence, according to Angela Walker, executive director of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, or SNAP.

"In clergy abuse cases, this is rarely the situation," Walker said. "Restorative models assume identifiable responsibility, but here the institution itself was part of the harm dynamic, which makes the process inherently constrained."

Catholic youths like Collins, who were taught priests were representatives of God, can often feel dissuaded from reporting their abuse until it's too late.

For example, **a 2021 report from the Nebraska Attorney General's Office** documented 258 victims of sexual abuse and misconduct by 57 Catholic Church officials going back decades, but **none of those cases were ultimately prosecuted.**

Angela Walker, executive director of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests

Courtesy photo

In Nebraska, children who suffered sexual abuse before Aug. 24, 2017, must have reported the instance to law enforcement before they were 33 years old. There is no look-back period in state statute.

By the time Collins reported the abuse at age 42 — younger than the average age of 52 at which victims report having been sexually abused by clergy as children — the statute of limitations had already run out.

Courtney was not arrested nor charged with a crime. The diocese reassigned him to ministering to retired priests in Lincoln, as it has with other clergy accused of sexual abuse, but has not included Courtney on its **public list of priests with substantiated allegations** made

against them.

Walker said without accountability, either against an individual or the institution itself, the offer of restorative justice often rings hollow.

Churches can claim the programs are being administered independently, she added, but they make themselves the only option for survivors to seek recompense, which creates an inherent conflict of interest.

Walker likened the situation to requiring the victim of a crime to work with a defense attorney and a judge picked by that attorney to get restitution, cutting out any involvement from a prosecutor.

“When a diocese hosts the process, facilitators ultimately report within the same institutional structure,” she said.

And when receiving a settlement is tied to participating in the program and giving up legal rights, Walker said “it ceases to be fully voluntary and risks becoming part of institutional liability management.”

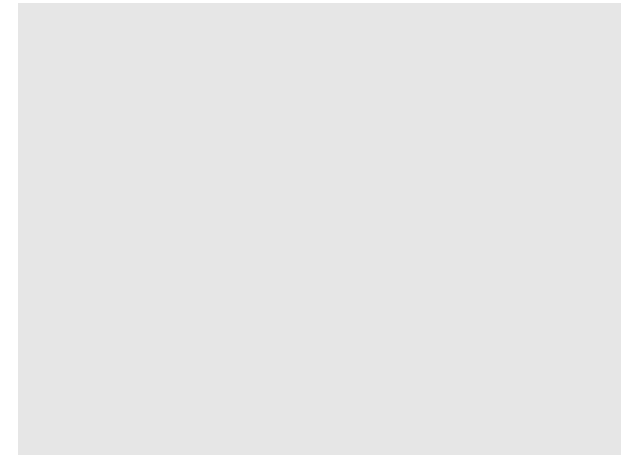
What becomes shared in those settings may not remain separate from church leadership or legal teams, she said, adding that despite her group’s reservations, it was up to “each survivor to make that decision for themselves.”

The last piece

Rev. Caleb La Rue, the chancellor of the Diocese of Lincoln, said the diocese followed church law when handing down punishment for Courtney, which was governed by specific canonical procedures.

The IHRP was not designed as a form of accountability for the accused, he wrote in a statement to the Journal Star, but rather to assess what an “independent, administrative professional or professionals believe is needed to help a reporter of harm heal.”

“There is no trial and the purpose is not to establish guilt or innocence, but to provide support for healing,” La Rue said.



Caleb LaRue, the chancellor of the Diocese of Lincoln

Courtesy photo

In terms of accountability, La Rue said the diocese “takes its obligations to the faithful and the broader community seriously, including reporting allegations to law enforcement and fully cooperating with any criminal investigation.”

The church reported the incident to law enforcement as soon as it became aware of the reported abuse, La Rue said. When criminal charges were not filed, the diocese “demonstrated its commitment to extending care” and support for Collins’ healing, he said.

“The claimant accepted the judge’s award voluntarily,” the chancellor said. “The Diocese believes the IHRP process was properly administered.”

Collins, who was not barred by the IHRP from speaking publicly about her alleged abuse, said she believes the program was thrown together in haste because of multiple allegations made against Courtney.

The program was not offered when she initially made her report to the church but a year and a half later, she said, and only after others had begun inquiring about what appeared to be a stalled investigation into her claim.

Participating in the program had its benefits aside from the one-time payment, she said, which eased her family’s finances after years of expensive therapy and medications.

Through Gorgen’s investigation, Collins learned just how she ended up being alone in her room with an adult man crawling into her bunk bed late at night: There was a week in July 1993 when Collins’ sisters, with whom she shared a room, were both away at camp.

“That was the last piece falling into place for me,” Collins said.

But does she feel like the Independent Healing and Restoration Program helped her find closure? Collins said the answer to that question is complicated.

“I don’t know if going through this has helped my healing,” she said. “It didn’t hurt. I’m in a much better place than I was three years ago before I reported this and started the whole process, but that’s having to confront these issues head-on.

“There has been some healing, but that has not been due to the church’s involvement.”

Collins said she came forward not seeking monetary compensation but out of a desire to prevent others from being taken advantage of in the way she was. At the end of the process, she feels conflicted about whether that goal was accomplished.

“They made the payment, they reassigned him, but have they taken accountability?” she said.

“No, it doesn’t feel like it.”

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