

VOLUNTEERS

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hanced existing diocesan policies for preventing sexual abuse. He also decreed that all diocesan employees — as well as all volunteers — who work with children, young people and vulnerable adults must undergo training; agree to abide by a code of pastoral conduct; and consent to criminal background checks.

The diocese conducted employee training over the summer; a similar process for volunteers is currently under way through "Creating a Safe Environment" workshops. Volunteers have until May 31, 2004, to fulfill diocesan requirements. Individuals who have not yet completed the requirements may continue volunteering in the interim — except for those volunteering for such overnight events as the National Catholic Youth Conference taking place Nov. 13-16 in Houston.

In August the diocese began conducting numerous "train the trainers" sessions for designated parish and school staff members who will, in turn, train their local volunteers. The bulk of the trainer training — which was more than 90 percent completed as of late October — has been done by Sister Carroll and Maribeth Mancini, diocesan director of evangelization and catechesis.

Ellen Keough, director of faith formation for Blessed Trinity/St. Patrick's Parish in the Southern Tier, is one of five trainers for her region. She said more than 100 volunteers — mostly in faith formation, youth ministry and at St. Patrick's School in Owego — already have attended training sessions and signed codes of conduct as well as releases for background checks.

"We took this effort on the part of the diocese very seriously," Keough said.

THOROUGH PROCEDURES

As a cornerstone of their training, volunteers must view a diocesan-produced video featuring opening and closing statements by Bishop Clark. The video and accompanying written materials cover various aspects of sexual abuse — including warning signs of an abuser or that someone has been abused, and what to do when a volunteer learns of a



As members of a film crew watch at left, diocesan staff members Barbara Pedeville (in circle at center, from left), director of management and staff relations; Maribeth Mancini, director of evangelization and catechesis; and Doug Mandelaro, director of communications, practice their lines for the videotape "Creating a Safe Environment." The video presentation is being used to train volunteers about the new code of conduct.

situation involving sexual abuse.

The training also explains the code of conduct, which binds volunteers to numerous conditions. Among these are prohibitions against being alone and out of view with children, youth or vulnerable adults; giving or receiving expensive gifts; and using inappropriate language or physical contact.

In addition to taking mandatory training and promising in writing to abide by the conduct code, volunteers also must authorize criminal records checks. The checks are being run only on volunteers age 18 or over. These confidential checks allow the diocese, through outside agencies, to verify Social Security numbers and to determine whether volunteers have any criminal offenses or are listed on the state's sex-offender registry. Volunteers have a legal right to protest any adverse findings.

Depending on the nature of their offenses, the diocese may still grant permission to volunteer to individuals whose records reveal adverse findings. Random checks also will be done in the future for offenses that may occur after a volunteer has been screened.

Mancini said that previous to the tightened policies, volunteers were

expected to fill out applications and provide references. The new requirements, she said, will provide an even better safeguard against the possibility of sexual abuse — both in parish ministry and in society at large. Mancini and Sister Carroll noted that more than 90 percent of sexual abuse occurs in the home, and that one in every four females as well as one in every six males are sexually abused.

Keough said the training serves to make employees and volunteers "more aware of what is around us. Different behaviors we take for granted — it doesn't hurt to be more watchful," she said.

One of the parishes Keough serves is St. Patrick's in Owego, which was named as a defendant along with the Diocese of Rochester in several lawsuits filed in late 2002 and early 2003. The suits alleged sexual abuse by Albert H. Cason, who was St. Patrick's co-pastor for 12 years before being removed from priestly ministry in 1985 due to allegations of sexual misconduct. All these lawsuits since have been dismissed, according to Father Daniel Condon, diocesan chancellor.

Acknowledging that her region has been affected by the subject of sexual abuse, Keough said she hopes volunteer training will enable parish programs to thrive, rather than cause people to be overly concerned that sexual predators are lurking.

"We don't want children to be afraid of their own shadows, and neither do we (employees and volunteers)," Keough remarked.

STRENGTHEN, NOT HINDER

The new diocesan policy has gone over well, Keough said: "People

seem to be responding well. They're more than willing to sign (the consent forms)," she said. "For the most part they understand that it's for the children, and they've been willing to err on the side of caution."

At Irondequoit's Church of Christ the King, the 15 adult chaperons recruited for the upcoming National Catholic Youth Conference were "on the whole satisfied with the training," according to Paul Anastasi, youth minister. "They think it's very important."

Yet the need to authorize background checks is apparently causing the same discomfort among volunteers it has created for some diocesan employees. Once again the chief sticking point is the release of Social Security numbers to an outside agency, the Rochester Business Alliance. Although this action is governed by the Fair Credit Reporting Act, the diocese has emphasized the process does not involve accessing individuals' credit histories. Instead, the process is intended only to verify that a person has provided the diocese with his or her true identity.

Keough reported questions from some volunteers about authorizing background checks, whereas Anastasi said many of his NCYC volunteers have strongly considered not signing the consent forms due to the potential for identity theft and of exposing their credit histories. Some adults signed the forms against their will, he said, because they had already committed to the NCYC before the new volunteer requirements were introduced.

"The parents have shared with me that — had they had this information about mandatory checks before — they may have reconsidered being chaperons," Anastasi said. "But to give that up now would be a tremendous disappointment."

Asked whether some of the adults might be concerned about revelations stemming from a criminal background, Anastasi said he doubted it, but that "anything is possible."

Mancini and Sister Carroll acknowledged that the rush to train NCYC volunteers was unfortunate but necessary. Although a background check may be uncomfortable for somebody who's never undergone one previously, they said, such measures are becoming more commonplace in society. The end result, Mancini said, is "intended to help us minister more effectively, not hinder us."

Mancini and Sister Carroll also emphasized that these procedures are being done not to erode the volunteer base, but to strengthen it.

"Volunteers are the heart of our ministry. The church depends on their goodness," Mancini said.

"Our reliance on volunteers is essential," Sister Carroll added.

Calling all writers, musicians, videographers

In its special Books, Music and Video issue Nov. 20, the Catholic Courier will publish a list of diocesan individuals or groups who have produced books, music tapes and CDs and videos in 2003.

If you or someone you know released such a work this year, send us in writing by noon on Nov. 17 the name(s) of the author(s)/performer(s), the name and brief description of the work and a contact number in case we have any questions.

Please keep in mind we need your submissions — in writing — by noon on Nov. 17. Send to: E-mail: newsroom@catholiccourier.com or Catholic Courier, PO Box 24379, Rochester, NY 14624



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