

Sexual-abuse audit report issued

Jerry Filteau/CNS

WASHINGTON — By the end of 2003, nearly 90 percent of U.S. Catholic dioceses were in compliance with the bishops' national policy to protect children and respond to clergy sexual abuse of minors, according to the first national audit report released Jan. 6.

On most elements the report said 98 percent to 100 percent of audited dioceses were judged to be in compliance with the 17-article "Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People" adopted by the bishops in June 2002.

"The audit represents solid progress on the journey toward fulfilling the vision set out by the charter," Bishop Wilton D. Gregory of Belleville, Ill., president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, said at a press conference on the report.

The audit consisted of two main sections: a 30-page national report with an executive summary of the study, a report on the audit structure and procedures, an overall analysis of the findings and the general recommendations to the bishops' conference; and a 388-page section on the audits themselves, summarizing the findings in each diocese.

In the initial on-site audits, conducted by the Boston-based Gavin Group between June and November, a little more than one-fourth of dioceses were in full compliance on everything. Another two-fifths were basically in compliance but received one or more recommendations to im-



Nancy Wiechec/CNS

Auditor William A. Gavin explains the results of a nationwide review of diocesan practices and policies mandated by the U.S. bishops' "Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People." He was among those addressing the Jan. 6 press conference in Washington. Looking on is Kathleen McChesney, executive director of the bishops' Office for Child and Youth Protection.

prove their policies or practices in certain areas.

About one-third were given instructions on changes they needed to make in order to come into compliance with the 2002 charter. Many of those that received instructions on some elements of the charter received recommendations to improve their policies or practices in other areas as well.

The report said recommendations were given instead of instructions when implementation of a particular

article was "incomplete" or when "significant improvement" could be made by an additional or changed procedure.

The report also noted that many dioceses received commendations for the quality of their programs prior to adoption of the charter or for notable actions such as "exemplary pastoral outreach and candid, educational communications."

By the time follow-up reports on audit compliance — and three re-audits — were completed near the end of 2003, only 20 of the dioceses that received instructions had not yet taken remedial action.

An additional 14 had not yet implemented recommendations for improvement in one or more areas. The recommendations meant the diocese was basically in compliance with the charter but could do a better job by making certain changes.

Any corrective actions taken or reported after Dec. 12, 2003, were not included in the report.

Of the 195 U.S. dioceses and eparchies, 191 were audited.

The report says the Diocese of St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands, and the Armenian Catholic Exarchate of U.S.A. and Canada were not audited due to scheduling difficulties, but are scheduled for audits this year.

The Diocese of Davenport, Iowa, was "cooperative," but the nature of current litigation it faced led the auditor and bishop to agree "that a full and fair review could not be completed without interference from outside entities," the report said.

The California-based Chaldean

Eparchy of St. Peter the Apostle, just formed in July 2002, was not included in the first round of audits.

The report noted that three Latin-rite and three Eastern-rite dioceses did not participate in the nationwide survey by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice on the nature and scope of clergy sexual abuse of minors in the last 50 years. A report on the John Jay survey is scheduled for release in late February.

In the audit report, two areas proved particularly difficult for dioceses to comply fully with charter requirements: implementation of diocesan safe environment programs, and full background checks on all diocesan employees and volunteers who work with minors.

A complete safe environment program would include training sessions for all church employees and volunteers on abuse policies, appropriate boundaries to maintain in dealing with minors, and how to recognize and report signs of possible sexual abuse. It would also include parish-based education on sexual abuse for parents and other adults and age-appropriate education for children and youth on recognizing and reporting improper conduct.

Twenty-eight dioceses received instructions on safe environment programs, indicating that what they had in place so far was inadequate, and 47 received recommendations for further improvement.

Thirty-two dioceses received instructions on implementing the charter's requirement of background checks for all church employees and volunteers who work with minors; 39 received recommendations for improvement in that area.

At the press conference Kathleen McChesney, executive director of the bishops' national Office for Child and Youth Protection, highlighted a third area of difficulty as well — the need for clear, written standards of conduct for church personnel. In the original audits 15 dioceses received instructions in that area and 14 got recommendations. In the final report, only three of the dioceses not yet in full compliance had instructions on codes of conduct.

William A. Gavin, president of the Gavin Group, said the audit was initially a source of concern to many bishops, but it "turned out to be extremely helpful in demonstrating some deficiencies that were not yet known to them. It provided best practices from bishops and eparchs of other dioceses and perhaps introduced diocesan and eparchial leaders to new ways and methods of achieving results."

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