

Additional abuse data to be gathered

Agostino Bono/CNS

WASHINGTON — The U.S. bishops approved a proposal to gather annual information on the number of new sex-abuse accusations against clergy and other church personnel, the resolution of existing cases and the related costs of handling such cases for dioceses.

By a 137-85 vote Nov. 17, the bishops decided to include the gathering of this data in the annual audits to see if dioceses and eparchies, or Eastern-rite dioceses, are complying with sex-abuse prevention policies.

Having such national data "on the aggregate will be good news," said Bishop Blase J. Cupich of Rapid City, S.D., member of the bishops' Ad Hoc Committee on Sexual Abuse, which drafted the proposal.

The information is needed to show how effective church policies are in curbing child sex abuse, he said.

"Getting accurate information to our people is to our advantage," he said, noting that news organizations and other groups will be gathering partial information on abuse.

Having only partial facts can give a distorted image of the situation, he said.

In a separate 189-35 vote, the bishops approved streamlining the 2005 audits, allowing for less on-site inspections and more self-reporting. Under the modifications full on-site 2005 audits will take place only in dioceses and eparchies that did not participate in the 2004 audits or were in complete noncompliance.

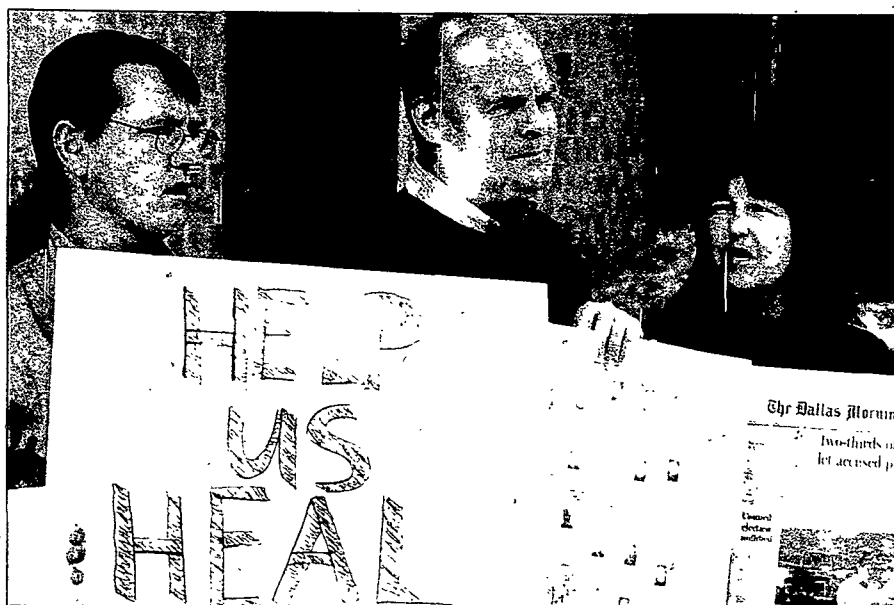
Dioceses and eparchies that were not in compliance with only some aspects of prevention policies will have an on-site audit of only those aspects, with the diocese or eparchy completing the rest of the audit questionnaire on its own.

There are still some dioceses and eparchies that are not in compliance regarding background checks of clergy and lay employees and in implementing safe environment programs to educate children and adults on how to prevent child sex abuse, said Archbishop Harry J. Flynn of St. Paul-Minneapolis, chairman of the ad hoc committee.

Lack of progress on these issues is "a matter of serious concern," said the archbishop.

The approved 2005 audit modifications explicitly require limited on-site audits of those dioceses and eparchies that had not begun to implement background checks and safe environment programs at the time of their 2004 audit.

At the same time, many dioceses and eparchies are moving forward



Paul Haring/CNS

Members of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, or SNAP, including, from left, David Clohessy of St. Louis, Michael Ross of Spokane, Wash., and Terrie Light of Oakland, Calif., protest outside the hotel where the U.S. bishops were meeting in Washington Nov. 16.

on these two issues and partial 2004 audit returns show that at least 2.3 million children have been educated about safe environments, said Archbishop Flynn.

Bishop Cupich said that no diocese is noncompliant with all the policies established in the bishops' 2002 "Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People."

Regarding the collection of new data, the 2004 audits already are asking for information on new accusations, but 2005 will be the first year that data on costs and the resolution of ongoing cases will be included.

Bishop Cupich said the data is needed because the bishops currently do not have mechanisms for measuring the success of their policies. The data will update the information gathered by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, which did a massive statistical study on the clergy sex abuse from 1950 to 2002 for the bishops' National Review Board, he said.

The bishops' Office of Child and Youth Protection and the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate based at Georgetown University will collate the new data by the dioceses yearly, said Bishop Cupich.

In answer to a question from the floor, he said that some form of auditing system will continue indefinitely. Currently, the audits are authorized by the bishops through 2005.

Archbishop Flynn said that a planned vote on creating a national database for background checks on church employees or prospective employees would have to be post-

poned pending more information about possible legal problems. For example, some legal issues could involve privacy rights.

Several systems have been inves-

tigated which would involve establishing lists of people identified as child abusers or dismissed from previous church employment because of child abuse issues or not admitted to seminaries because of possible child abuse problems, he said.

The archbishop favored establishment of a national database as an aid in stopping child sex abuse and said his committee will continue to consult about ways of overcoming possible legal difficulties.

At a news conference after the vote, Bishop Cupich said that one of the issues being considered in the review of the 2002 charter is how to update the understanding of what constitutes child sex abuse.

"There are questions about how we fold in emerging situations such as Internet porn and child pornography," he said.

The aim is to keep up with the ongoing efforts in the general society to combat sex abuse, he said.

The bishops already have been asked to consult widely in their dioceses about issues in the charter that need to be reviewed. The bishops plan to formally review the charter at their June 2005 meeting.

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