News



by Brian Roewe

NCR environment correspondent

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broewe@ncronline.org
Follow on Twitter at @brianroewe

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July 3, 2018
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A recent investigation by the Diocese of Cheyenne, Wyoming, found that allegations of sexual abuse of minors against retired Bishop Joseph Hart are "credible and require disciplinary action," challenging a past inquiry by a local district attorney that has now been called "flawed."

Hart, who served as Cheyenne bishop from 1976 to 2001, has been restricted from public ministry since September 2015. He has faced allegations of sexual abuse dating back to his time as a priest (1956-1976) in the Kansas City-St. Joseph, Missouri, Diocese.

The ministerial restrictions will remain in place, said Cheyenne Bishop Steven Biegler, 59, following an outside investigator's report that concluded Hart, 86, as bishop had sexually abused two boys in Wyoming.

"Nothing is more important than the safety of our children. We have zero tolerance for sexual abuse of any kind," Biegler said in a statement issued Monday. "If there is

ever any indication of abuse brought to our attention, it will be reported to the civil authorities and investigated thoroughly, even when the allegations involve a Bishop."

Hart has repeatedly denied all accusations of sexual abuse of minors.

Biegler, who arrived in Cheyenne last June, directed in December an investigation into accusations against Hart. In its statement, the diocese said an outside investigator "obtained substantial new evidence" and concluded Hart had sexually abused two Wyoming boys, one who came forward earlier this year, and another who in 2002 alleged the bishop abused him in the confessional and on outings.

The diocesan review board reviewed the investigator's report and affirmed the allegations were "credible and substantiated."

In his report, the investigator called a 2002 report from the Natrona Country District Attorney "flawed" in its findings of no evidence to support the allegations brought by the Wyoming man.

The diocese joined in questioning the 2002 report and in March reported the alleged abuse to the Laramie County District Attorney. The Cheyenne Police Department have since opened an investigation.

In May, the diocese passed an initial report of its investigation to the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

"I hope that our investigation will lead to a final determination by the CDF that these sexual abuse allegations against Bishop Hart are credible and require disciplinary action," Biegler said.

The Cheyenne Diocese said it initiated its investigation believing the matter of Hart's guilt or innocence was not resolved, since allegations against him have never gone to a trial.

"It was in search of truth and justice that the diocese undertook the investigation," Fr. Carl Gallinger, vicar general, told NCR.

In a statement released by his lawyer, Hart said he was confident the latest investigation by authorities would reach a similar conclusion to the one in 2002 that concluded the accusations have "no merit." He said he intends to fully cooperate.

"In the interest of fairness to all involved, I have no further comment except to say that I will continue to pray that those who have suffered abuse, no matter at whose hands, receive justice and healing," Hart said.

In his own scathing comments, Hart's attorney Thomas Jubin called the Cheyenne Diocese's press release "bizarre … shocking and appalling, suggesting that current Bishop Biegler has some personal interest in substantiating sexual abuse allegations against one of his predecessors."

Jubin challenged the diocese's use of a private investigator, whose findings he said "are not public and tested in a court of law," and accused Biegler of "improperly seeking to inflame public opinion against one of his predecessors for unfathomable reasons. This is the opposite of seeking truth or justice."

Allegations of sexual abuse have been brought against Hart since 1989, the diocese said, extending into his time as a priest in the Kansas City-St. Joseph, Missouri, Diocese, where he was ordained in 1956. That diocese said in a statement Monday that 10 individuals named Hart in lawsuits it settled in 2008 and 2014.

Allegations in Kansas City accused Hart of abuse in the late 1960s and 1970s. Within a 2004 lawsuit, brought by three men, Hart was accused of sexual improprieties at Kansas City parishes and of providing alcohol to minors. He was also alleged to have had sex with one boy during a trip through the western United States, and after he became bishop in Cheyenne to have brought boys from Wyoming to Kansas City where he engaged in inappropriate sexual activity.

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In a statement, Kansas City Bishop James Johnston said, "I want to assure those harmed by sexual abuse, especially by leaders in the Church, of our diocese’s commitment to create safe environments and accompany abuse survivors as they travel through the journey of healing."

The diocese also encouraged anyone harmed by Hart or others in the diocese to first make a report to the state abuse hotline and to local authorities, and then to notify the diocesan ombudsman.

In addition to continuing Hart's ministerial restrictions, Biegler said he has decided that Hart's name should be removed from a building at St. Joseph's Children's Home in Torrington. The issue had come up in in 2005 amid lawsuits brought against Hart in Kansas City. Then-Cheyenne Bishop David Ricken, now of Green Bay, said no name change would occur since "none of the accusations against Bishop Hart have been deemed credible."

In an April 2002 letter to Cheyenne's Catholics, before the U.S. bishops met that year in Dallas to create the Charter for the Protection of Young People, Ricken addressed allegations of abuse by Hart in Kansas City, writing, "I have discussed this matter with Bishop Hart, reviewed the information available to me, and have confidence that Bishop Hart is telling the truth. He has my full support."

In a statement, the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests said it commended the alleged victims who came forward and also were "encouraged" that Biegler viewed the allegations as credible.

"This action also helps to validate those victims who have credible allegations against Hart while he was located in the Kansas City-St Joseph diocese in Kansas City. Mo.," Judy Jones, SNAP Midwest regional leader, said in a statement.

[Brian Roewe is an NCR staff writer. His email address is **broewe@ncronline.org**. Follow him on Twitter: @BrianRoewe.]

A version of this story appeared in the **July 27-Aug 9, 2018** print issue under the headline: Cheyenne Diocese: Abuse allegations against retired bishop 'credible'.