News



Pennsylvania Attorney General Josh Shapiro speaks during a news conference at the Pennsylvania Capitol in Harrisburg on Aug. 14. (AP/Matt Rourke)

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Last month, after Pennsylvania Attorney General Josh Shapiro unveiled a bombshell 1,300-page grand jury report detailing the alleged sexual abuse of more than 1,000 children in his state by hundreds of Catholic priests, American Catholics called for more investigations into church documents. Some even demanded the federal government step in.

Now law enforcement officials in at least five states — Nebraska, New Mexico, Florida, Missouri and Illinois — appear to be launching their own inquiries or reviews of Catholic dioceses, often focusing on what Shapiro called secret church files thought to contain decades of allegations of child sex abuse by priests.

In addition, the Associated Press, citing a law enforcement source, reported on Sept. 6 that New York Attorney General Barbara Underwood has subpoenaed all eight Roman Catholic dioceses in the state to investigate the church's handling of sex abuse allegations.

Joseph Zwilling, a spokesperson for the New York archdiocese told RNS, "While we have not yet seen a subpoena, it is not a surprise to us that the attorney general would look to begin a civil investigation, and she will find the Archdiocese of New York, and the other seven dioceses in the state, ready and eager to work together with her in the investigation."

Previously, the Buffalo diocese told RNS they "will cooperate with any investigation initiated by the New York State Attorney General or District Attorney," and the Diocese of Albany invited the local district attorney to review their files on Sept 6.

Due to differing legal systems from state to state, the investigations promise to be tailored to the varying powers of the states' attorneys general and the states' history of investigating abuse claims. Some states' dioceses have already been investigated, or have long-standing agreements with law enforcement.

Nebraska's attorney general has also sent a letter to the state's three diocese requesting records going back 40 years, to Jan. 1, 1978. When RNS contacted the Omaha Archdiocese last week asking about a hypothetical inquiry, they said they would "allow the attorney general to review our files."

New Mexico Attorney General Hector Balderas announced his office's inquiry on Sept. 5, sending 10-page letters "in contemplation of litigation" and legal demands to dioceses asking to review any church records related to past or present allegations of sexual abuse.

"(Balderas) has sent investigative demands to all three dioceses in New Mexico requiring full disclosure and full transparency," David Carl, a spokesperson for the attorney general's office, told Religion News Service in an email. "The Catholic Church in New Mexico needs to fully reconcile and support survivors by revealing the magnitude of sexual abuse and subsequent cover up by church leaders in order to restore faith and trust in the community."



Attorney Nicole Gorovsky speaks to reporters in St. Louis on Aug. 22, with clergy sex abuse advocate and victim David Clohessy by her side. Gorovsky, Clohessy and

Mary Ellen Kruger spoke outside the St. Louis office of Attorney General Josh Hawley, calling for a wide-scale investigation of sex abuse by priests in Missouri. (AP/Jim Salter)

One of those dioceses, the Gallup diocese, has already pledged to work with the attorney general.

"We look forward to cooperating with the Attorney General to ensure the safety of all the members of our diocese," read a statement from the diocese.

In Florida, Attorney General Pam Bondi told RNS in August that "my statewide prosecutor is reaching out to all of the state attorneys to explore the matter."

Bondi's office declined to comment further this week, saying it would not remark on an ongoing matter. But at least one Florida diocese indicated that the effort has moved past the exploration phase and into a full inquiry.

"The Diocese of St. Petersburg has been contacted by the statewide prosecutor from the Attorney General and will cooperate with the inquiry," a diocesan representative told RNS in an email.

The dioceses of Venice, St. Augustine, Pensacola-Tallahassee and Palm Beach also confirmed they would cooperate with any inquiry made by Florida law enforcement or the attorney general. A representative from the Miami archdiocese did not mention any ongoing investigations but said state attorneys had already reviewed all of the Miami and Broward County dioceses' clergy files in 2002.

In Missouri, the St. Louis archdiocese voluntarily offered up its files on Aug. 23 for inspection by state Attorney General Josh Hawley. The proposal was unusual: The jurisdiction for child sex abuse crimes in Missouri technically lies with an elected local prosecutor.

But since the archdiocese offered up the files voluntarily, Hawley agreed, and he announced a formal "independent review" of the files by his office. The Kansas City-St. Joseph diocese, another diocese in the state, promptly declared it would also "cooperate with any review the attorney general requests."

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The trend spread: A spokesperson for the Jefferson City diocese told RNS it is "working with the Missouri attorney general in having a review of our files, along with the other three Missouri arch/dioceses, which include St. Louis, Kansas City-St. Joseph and Springfield-Cape Girardeau."

Meanwhile, in Illinois, Attorney General Lisa Madigan announced plans last month to meet with the Chicago archdiocese and reach out to the other dioceses in Illinois, saying she "expect(s) the bishops will agree and cooperate fully."

She said in a press release that if dioceses refused to comply, she would "work with states' attorneys and law enforcement throughout Illinois to investigate."

A spokesperson for the attorney general's office said the probe was triggered by the Pennsylvania grand jury report.

"It really is in direct response to the report that named at least seven priests that had a direct connection to Illinois at some point," the spokesperson said.

Madigan, who last year initiated the elimination of Illinois' statute of limitations on child sex abuse crimes, also created a hotline specifically for allegations of clergy abuse.



Victims of clergy sexual abuse, or their family members, react as Pennsylvania Attorney General Josh Shapiro speaks during a news conference at the Pennsylvania Capitol in Harrisburg on Aug. 14. (AP/Matt Rourke)

The Chicago archdiocese said it plans to meet with the attorney general but claimed law enforcement officials reviewed its clergy files three times — in 1992, 2002 and 2015 — and noted that files detailing allegations of abuse by priests are already published on the archdiocese's website.

"We have been contacted by the Illinois Attorney General and look forward to discussing our policies and procedures related to misconduct issues with her and her office," read a statement from the archdiocese. "We have worked cooperatively with the Cook County and Lake County State's Attorneys for many years."

Other Illinois dioceses offered similar answers but declined to comment further for fear of interfering with the attorney general's effort.

It remains to be seen whether any of the state-level inquiries will produce the kind of bombshell that came out of Pennsylvania. None appears to be led by a grand jury, for instance, and it's unclear what, if any, new allegations will surface.

But for now, the broader trend of investigating the American Catholic Church seems far from over.

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