News



Attorney General Josh Shapiro of Pennsylvania speaks at a news conference in the state Capitol after legislation to respond to a landmark grand jury report accusing hundreds of Roman Catholic priests of sexually abusing children over decades stalled in the Legislature, on Oct. 17, 2018, in Harrisburg, Pa. Shapiro is flanked by lawmakers and victims of child sexual abuse. (RNS/AP/Marc Levy)

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The United States Department of Justice is launching a federal grand jury investigation into Roman Catholic dioceses in Pennsylvania just months after a state-level investigation unearthed decades of allegations of widespread child sexual abuse by hundreds of priests that impacted more than 1,000 children over several decades.

The Associated Press reported on the investigation Oct. 18, citing two anonymous sources within the Justice Department.

The Archdiocese of Philadelphia also confirmed to Religion News Service that it is aware of the inquiry and is cooperating with investigators — including handing over documents.

"The Archdiocese of Philadelphia has received a subpoena issued by a federal grand jury, which requires the production of certain documents," Kenneth A. Gavin, the archdiocese's chief communications officer, said in an email. "The Archdiocese will cooperate with the United States Department of Justice in this matter."

The Diocese of Pittsburgh also confirmed the probe.

"The Diocese of Pittsburgh has received the subpoena from the U.S. Department of Justice and will cooperate fully with any and all investigations of the sexual abuse of minors by clergy in Pennsylvania," a representative said in an email.

The Department of Justice declined to comment, saying the agency generally does not confirm or deny the existence of investigations.

The federal probe comes in the wake of a rash of state-level investigations into Catholic dioceses across the country after the scathing report issued by the Pennsylvania grand jury in August. At least 11 states, including New York and New

Jersey, have now launched some form of inquiry into local dioceses regarding allegations of child sexual abuse, with many demanding access to internal church files said to contain documentation of decades of allegations.

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Advocates for abuse victims, such as Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, have ramped up calls for a federal investigation in recent weeks.

RNS reached out to almost every Catholic diocese in America over the last two months to ask whether they would be willing to share internal documents with law enforcement voluntarily. Many of those that responded to RNS' survey said their files were inspected by authorities in years past, either during an investigation or during bankruptcy proceedings, often as a result of a costly settlement of a child abuse case.