News



by Heidi Schlumpf

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The six Catholic dioceses in Illinois have been sued for conspiracy to conceal a public hazard because they have not released the names of all priests with credible accusations of sexual abuse and misconduct, including those who have died and those who belong to religious orders.

But the dioceses have responded with claims that they are working to address abuse, including in some of the specific cases mentioned in the lawsuit.

The suit, filed in Chicago by four victims, also names the Catholic Conference of Illinois. It seeks damages and claims instances of abuses in three dioceses — Rockford, Peoria and Springfield — but also tries to compel all Illinois dioceses to release names of all accused priests.

A similar lawsuit in Minnesota eventually forced the St. Paul-Minneapolis archdiocese to nearly triple the number of names released, according to attorney Jeff Anderson, the longtime advocate for sex abuse victims who announced the Illinois lawsuit at a press conference Oct. 18.

Anderson also filed a similar lawsuit in California earlier this month.

In front of a poster with photos of the six current Illinois prelates, Anderson accused the bishops of being part of a "conspiracy of silence, a conspiracy of secrecy, a conspiracy of self-protection and scandal-avoidance that is causing a hazard and a danger in real time today."

"And the hazard is not just those offending priests, past and present, but those in positions of power that are complicit in these crimes," he said.

Anderson alleged that disclosures previously made by the Archdiocese of Chicago and the Dioceses of Joliet and Peoria were only "a half truth," since they did not include deceased perpetrators, those in religious orders and, in the case of Peoria, those who are not in ministry.

The dioceses of Belleville, Springfield and Rockford have not released any names of accused priests, Anderson said.

The Chicago Archdiocese said in a statement that it has already released details about the abuse the lawsuit seeks on its website. The archdiocese's list of credibly accused priests includes deceased priests, but not those who did not have an opportunity to respond to an allegation before they died. The list does not include religious order priests.

Two of the four victims in the lawsuit allege sexual abuse that occurred in the Peoria Diocese. Darin Buckman said then-Fr. John Anderson abused him between 1979 and 1984 when he attended St. Edward's Catholic Church in Chillicothe. Buckman said at the press conference that repeated attempts to contact the diocese have been ignored. "I am still waiting for a response from Peoria," he said.

In a statement, the diocese said it has had conversations with Buckman and his attorneys, even the day before the press conference. The statement also said that Peoria Bishop Daniel Jenky removed Anderson from all public ministry in 2002.

In the second Peoria allegation, an anonymous victim, identified as John Doe 595, said Msgr. Charles Beebe abused him in 1981.

The Peoria Diocese said when it received the allegation from John Doe 595 against Beebe this June, it placed the priest on administrative leave and reported the allegation to the local police for investigation. After reviewing the police report, the Diocesan Review Commission unanimously determined the allegation as

unsubstantiated and not credible. Beebe, who retired in 2016, has been reinstated in ministry.

The suit also alleges that Joshua Bollman was raped in the sacrament of confession when he was 12, in 1999, by Fr. Peter Koehler, who belonged to the La Salette Missionaries religious order and served at St. Joseph Catholic Church in Lena, Illinois, in the Rockford diocese. The La Salette order is also named in lawsuit.

In its statement, the Rockford Diocese said it is cooperating with the Illinois Attorney General's investigation into the church's handling of sex abuse cases.

"While allegations in the Rockford Diocese are rare, we remain vigilant in regularly reviewing and updating our policies and encouraging victims of abuse to come forward and report the abuse to law enforcement authorities," the statement said.

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Cyndi Yesko said she was abused by two priests in the Springfield Diocese when she was about 6 years old. In 2006, she shared her story with Bishop George Lucas (now of Omaha), whom Yesko said she met with in 2007. She thought the meeting would include an apology or acknowledgement, but did not, which she said "retraumatized" her.

She said she has received "no response, no action" from the diocese.

In its statement, the Springfield Diocese said that specific case has been "thoroughly investigated" and was reported to then-Sangamon County State's Attorney John Schmidt.

Attorney Marc Pearlman admitted that some improvement had been made in the church's handling of sex abuse, "but not nearly enough."

Yesko, who is not seeking damages but only the release of names and documents about accused priests, urged all bishops to "please do the right thing."

"This is a situation that can be changed," she said. "There is something that can be done. There are vulnerable children still out there."

Yeskko said the abuse "devastated me on all levels: mentally, emotionally, spiritually." But it also ignited "a passion in my heart to protect kids."

"I absolutely love the Catholic Church," Yesko said, but "I don't have a safe home anymore in my church."

[Heidi Schlumpf is NCR national correspondent. Her email address is hschlumpf@ncronline.org. Follow her on Twitter @HeidiSchlumpf.]