News



Archbishop Jose Gomez of Los Angeles speaks during a lecture at The Catholic University of America in Washington Feb. 6, 2019. The Los Angeles Archdiocese and five other California dioceses, Fresno, Orange, Sacramento, San Bernardino and San Diego, announced a new independent compensation program for sex abuse victims. Gomez and the state's other Catholic bishops also are speaking out against a bill to do away with the seal of confession in cases of abuse. (CNS/Bob Roller)

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The Los Angeles Archdiocese and five other California dioceses May 14 announced a new private compensation program that will be available to any person who has been sexually abused as a minor by diocesan priests.

"We have been providing pastoral care and financial support for victim-survivors here in the archdiocese for many years," Los Angeles Archbishop Jose Gomez said in a letter to archdiocesan Catholics. "We will continue to do so. But we also understand that some victim-survivors are reluctant to come to the church for assistance.

"Our hope with this new program is to give these people a chance to seek redress and healing through an independent program," he added.

The other five dioceses are Fresno, Orange, Sacramento, San Bernardino and San Diego. Together with the Los Angeles Archdiocese, they serve more than 10 million Catholics, or about 80 percent of the state's Catholic population.

The new compensation program is independent from church control, according to a statement issued by the California Catholic Conference, the public policy arm of the state's Catholic bishops. It will be overseen by an independent board that includes former California Gov. Gray Davis and Maria Contreras-Sweet, a business leader and former administrator of the U.S. Small Business Administration.

It will be run by Kenneth Feinberg and Camille Biros, nationally known mediators and private compensation program administrators.

Feinberg has wide experience in victim compensation, most famously as the special master for the September 11 Victim Compensation Fund, also the BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill and the Penn State University settlement.

He along with Biros have worked with no less than 20 diocesan and archdiocesan funds in New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Colorado. The two have been

working with the California bishops since late last year to design and administer this program.

Those abused as minors by diocesan priests of the participating dioceses can ask for assistance from the program, no matter when that abuse might have occurred.

Under the program, Feinberg and Biros will have complete autonomy to determine the eligibility of individual claims and they alone will determine the amount of compensation offered to any victim, according to the California Catholic Conference.

The six dioceses will be reaching out to victims who have previously reported allegations of abuse to alert them to this new program.

The program also is open to a broader range than are eligible to pursue claims in civil courts. Those harmed many years ago and barred from filing lawsuits because of civil statutes of limitations will be eligible to make claims under this new program. Also, this program has no proof-of-citizenship requirement, so immigrants who are without documentation are eligible to make claims.

According to a list of frequently asked questions released with the announcement of the program, victim-survivors do not need to have a lawyer to participate, and there are no fees for participating. Settlements for fully completed claims will be paid within 90 days.

In his letter, Gomez said the Catholic Church in Los Angeles will continue its programs to protect children, report abuse and support victim-survivors.

"I am grateful to all who have joined in our archdiocesan abuse prevention and protection efforts," Gomez said, noting these efforts include the work of lay staff and volunteers in the archdiocesan Safeguard the Children programs and Victims Assistance Ministry. "(They) have worked tirelessly to make our parishes, schools and ministry safer."

"Again, I apologize to the victims of priest sexual abuse and express my deep sorrow and regret for our past failures and the trust that was broken," the prelate added. "I realize, as you do, that no program, however well-intentioned and well-designed, can repair the damage done to victims and their families. But I pray that this new program might provide another avenue toward healing and hope."

In Sacramento, Bishop Jaime Soto noted the program's stated goal of paying most claims in 90 days or less. "I hope the program will be particularly helpful to persons who may fear going to court," he said in a statement.

"No amount of money can make up for the evil done to victims of priestly sex abuse," Soto said. "I acknowledge the pain that was caused, my shame and sorrow that it happened in the name of the church, and my intention to help victim/survivors heal from that abuse."

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