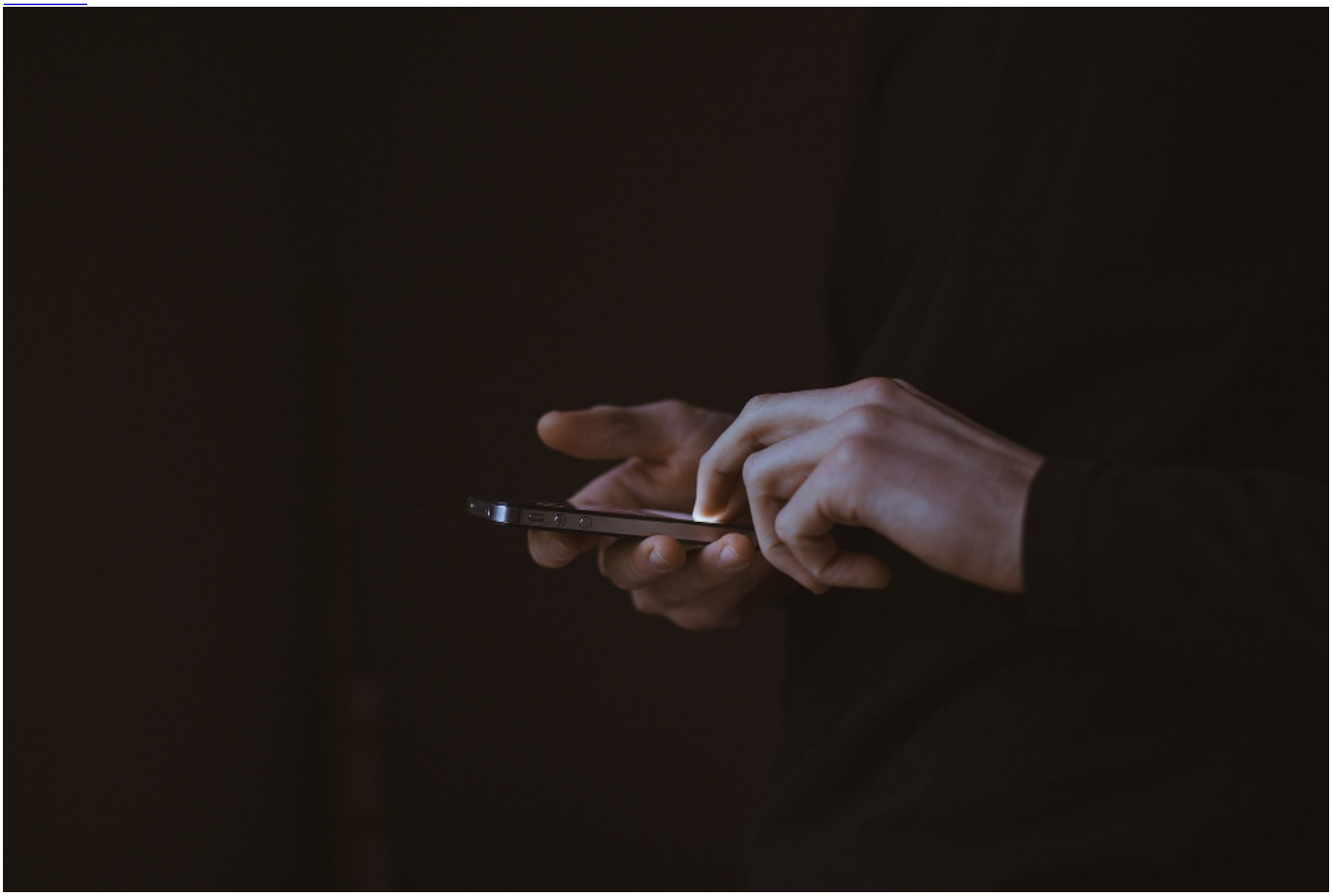
News



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by Heidi Schlumpf

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The U.S. bishops gave themselves until next spring to implement a new nationwide, third-party reporting system for complaints of misconduct against bishops, but at least one region has already launched its own confidential website and toll-free number for such reports.

But victims' groups and at least one attorney are skeptical about the new system, citing a lack of mandated lay involvement that they see as amounting to only "fraternal correction."

The bishops of the Boston Province — which includes the Boston Archdiocese and dioceses in four states: Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Vermont and Maine — announced the new system Aug. 14. It includes a website and toll-free number operated by an outside firm, not directly by any of the dioceses or through their websites or intranets.

"The province determined it wanted to move ahead sooner while the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops designs and develops the national third-party system," Terrence Donilon, secretary for communications and public affairs for the Boston Archdiocese, told NCR in an email interview.

"The bishops from the province met earlier this summer [and] decided to act now rather than wait," he said. "The USCCB is still moving forward with the development of a national reporting system, and we expect to transition to the new system at the appropriate time."

Both the national and New England systems are a response to Pope Francis' call for "public, stable and easily accessible systems" for reporting of abuse allegations in his apostolic letter *Vos Estis Lux Mundi* ("You are the light of the world"), released motu proprio (by his own accord) May 9.

That document mandates priests or members of religious orders to report suspicions of abuse or cover-up, including by bishops, and requires every Catholic diocese to create procedures for such reporting by June 1, 2020. The U.S. bishops passed a plan for a nationwide third-party system at their June meeting.

The Boston Province system allows anonymous reporting or with identification. Reports may be about personal misconduct by a cardinal, bishop or auxiliary bishop

of the seven dioceses, including "allegations of sexual abuse, other criminal conduct, personal misconduct which is not criminal, or gross negligence in the function of their ministry," according to the website.

The system reflects the so-called "metropolitan plan," in that allegations are forwarded to the senior bishop in a geographic region, or "metropolitan" bishop, according to the site. The Boston Province's metropolitan is the archbishop of Boston, currently Cardinal Sean O'Malley.

Any criminal allegations will be forwarded immediately to law enforcement and the apostolic nuncio, the Vatican's diplomatic representative in the United States, according to Donilon.

If the allegation involves the archbishop, it will be sent to the next most senior bishop in the region and then to the nuncio. In the case of the Boston Province, the next senior bishop is Bishop Robert Joseph McManus of Worcester, Massachusetts, based on his number of years in his position, Donilon said.

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Opponents of the "metropolitan plan" have criticized the lack of required involvement of lay people. And at least one victims' group has expressed similar concerns about the Boston Province's system, calling it "yet another promise to self-police."

"Since 2002, bishops have promised that 'fraternal correction' would help ensure that reports of child abuse were taken seriously, routed to the proper places and that zero tolerance would be enforced," said Zach Hiner, executive director of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests (SNAP), in an email interview with NCR.

"Yet as we have seen over the years, these internal church systems and procedures have not been enough, and the reforms and discipline that we have seen have come from secular officials, not religious ones," he said.

The new Vatican norms do not require lay involvement in the process but instead call for bishops' conferences to "establish lists of qualified persons" to assist metropolitans in their investigations. Some have expressed hope that will mean

involvement of lay review boards.

Donilon noted that while the archbishop of Boston is responsible for reviewing allegations and taking the next steps, "he may use lay experts at his discretion."

SNAP and other lay groups have consistently advocated for more lay involvement, especially when responding to allegations of abuse or cover-up by bishops.

Attorney Mitchell Garabedian, who has represented many clergy sex abuse victims in the Boston area, said his clients are "skeptical that the reporting system is truly independent" and instead urges victims to file police reports.

"Given the massive cover-up of clergy sexual abuse within the Catholic Church, it is highly probable that the information reported to the system will just be covered up," Garabedian said in a statement.

The president and co-director of BishopAccountability.org, which tracks reports and data about the sex abuse crisis, also believes allegations should be reported directly to the law enforcement and the media.

"We're a long way from any feeling of confidence that the bishops are going to deal promptly and fairly with such reporting," Terrence McKiernan told NCR.

"Without a parallel, external system, this kind of reporting isn't going to work as well as we would all hope," he said.

Hiner said it isn't a lack of reporting processes or mechanisms that has led to the cover-up in the church, but rather a "refusal to do what is necessary and immediately turn information related to those cases over to police."

"It's hard to see how this move from the bishops of the Boston Province will do anything to change that," he said.

Boston's secure system is operated by EthicsPoint, a division of the software company NavexGlobal. The Boston Archdiocese has used a separate EthicsPoint website for allegations of financial mismanagement and other non-abuse related concerns since 2011, Donilon said. "It is a very effective, confidential and independent system with a proven track record," he said.

The dioceses included in the new reporting system include the Boston Archdiocese and the dioceses of Worcester, Fall River and Springfield, Massachusetts; Manchester, New Hampshire; Burlington, Vermont; and Portland, Maine.

Two bishops of Springfield have previously been accused of sexual abuse. The late Bishop Thomas Dupre resigned in 2004 after being indicted on charges he raped two boys in the 1970s.

Last month, the Springfield diocese announced an internal investigation of allegations of sexual misconduct against the late Bishop Christopher Weldon to be conducted by a retired judge, since the new Vatican procedures do not apply to a deceased bishop.

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