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People who were abused by Catholic priests in Colorado can file claims to receive unlimited payouts under a church-funded compensation program that began operating Monday.

The formation of the Colorado Independent Reconciliation and Reparations Program was announced by Denver Archbishop Samuel Aquila and Attorney General Phil Weiser in February along with a review of church records to determine which priests in the dioceses of Colorado, Denver and Pueblo have had credible allegations of sexual abuse made against them. The administrators of the program, which include Kenneth Feinberg, who oversaw victims' compensation for the 2012 Aurora theater shooting and the Sept. 11 attacks, sent out packets to 65 people who had previously reported being abused by diocesan priests to church officials. People who have not previously reported abuse have until Nov. 30 to contact the program to start the process of filing a claim.

All claims must be filed by Jan. 31 and can only made concerning clergy who worked for Colorado dioceses, not members of independent religious orders.

Feinberg said he has the final say on compensation awards and his decisions cannot be appealed. However, he said victims could wait to decide what the offer was before deciding to accept it. If they do accept it, they would have to agree not to sue the church. Victims could also receive a hearing to talk about what happened to

them, something Feinberg said is sometimes more important.

"It means a huge amount to some people," he said at press conference with Weiser and members of a volunteer board led by former U.S. Sen. Hank Brown that will oversee the process.

Payments are usually determined within 90 to 120 days, co-administrator Camille Biros said. The identities of those filing claims will not be made public.

Feinberg said Colorado's program is very similar to ones he is administrating for Catholic dioceses in four other states — California, New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania. Payments in other state have ranged from $10,000 to $500,000, he said.

The review of church records is being conducted by Colorado's former U.S. Attorney Bob Troyer. It was originally expected to be released by October but Weiser said Monday it would be released later in the fall. He said the goal was to have it available before the Nov. 30 deadline for starting the claims process.

A letter from Aquila about the program and upcoming report was read to parishioners at Denver area churches over the weekend. It said that claims would be paid out of the diocese's reserves and assets rather than donations to parishes, ministries and schools.

"We know that for survivors what has been taken from them can never be fully restored, but we hope these initiatives can provide some measure of justice, validation and healing for them and their families," he said.

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