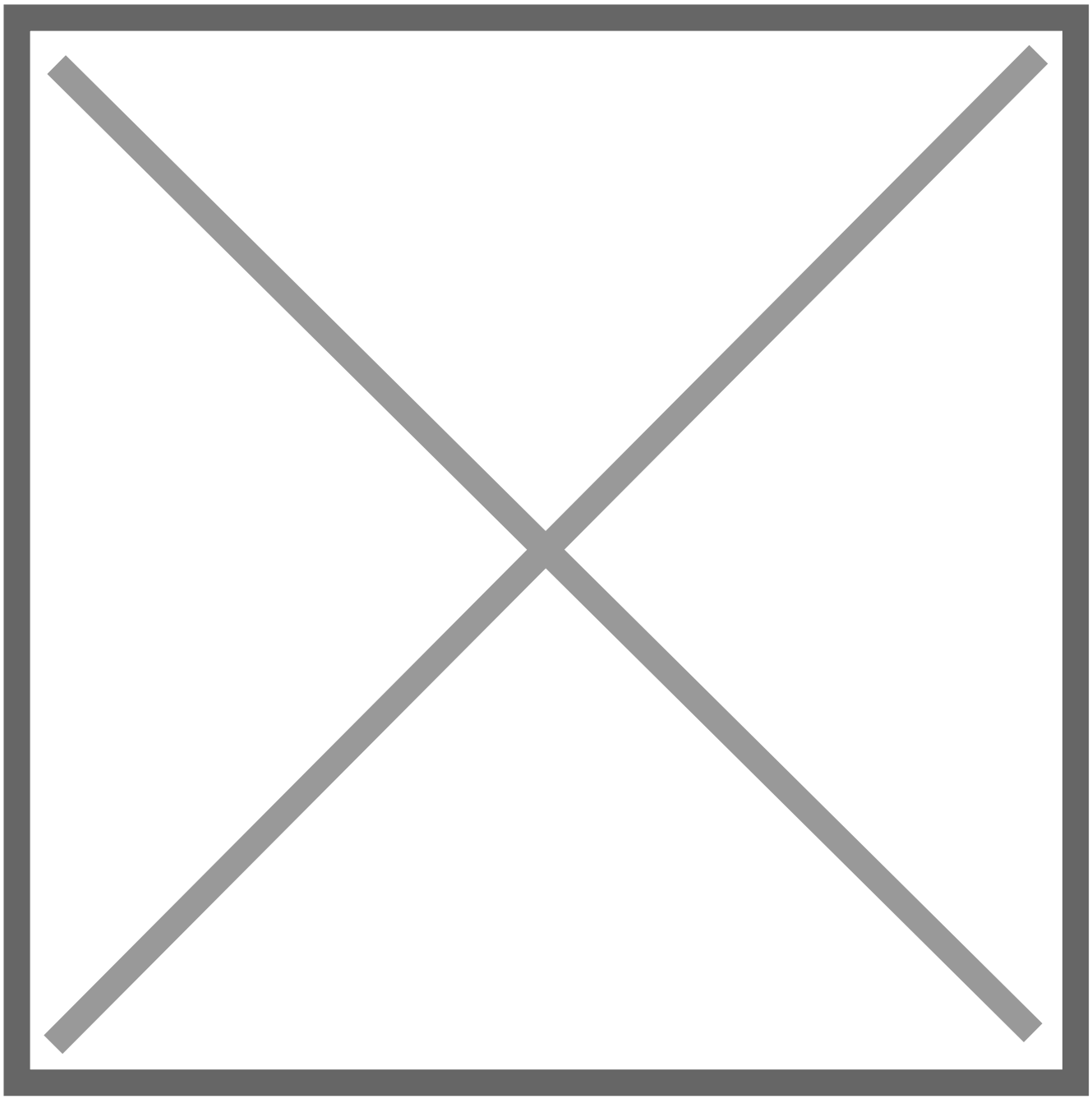
News



Wisconsin Attorney General Josh Kaul is seen in this 2020 file photo. (CNS/Reuters/Stephen Maturen)



by Catholic News Service

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Madison, Wis. — April 27, 2021
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Editor's Note: *This story was updated on April 28 at 1:30 p.m.*

The Wisconsin Department of Justice is opening a statewide investigation of abuse by clergy and faith leaders within the state's five dioceses.

"We're conducting this review to promote greater accountability and to promote healing for victims" as well as improving the response to abuse and preventing future abuse cases, said Attorney General Josh Kaul during an April 27 news conference outside the Wisconsin State Capitol.

Leaders of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee and the dioceses of Green Bay, La Crosse, Madison and Superior, and the Norbertines at St. Norbert Abbey acknowledged in statements released as Kaul was meeting with reporters that they joined the attorney general during a teleconference April 26 to discuss the planned investigation.

Each diocese also said the review will look at historical cases rather than reports of new allegations of sexual abuse.

The statements from the dioceses and the religious order said requests for documents from the Wisconsin Department of Justice will undergo legal review before a decision is made on how to respond.

"Although we will take a look at the specific details of the attorney general's request when it is received, we have concerns about the negative impacts this could have on abuse survivors because the publicity has the potential to re-victimize individuals," Jerry Topczewski, chief of staff to Milwaukee Archbishop Jerome E. Listecki, said in a statement.

Topczewski said the archdiocese does not "understand the legal basis for the inquiry."

"We also question why only the Catholic Church is being singled out for this type of review when sexual abuse is a societal issue," his statement said.

With the announcement, Wisconsin becomes the 23rd state to investigate reports of abuse within Catholic entities.

Kaul said the inquiry will include working with the district attorneys in the home county of each diocese.

In preparing for the investigation, Kaul said his office has looked at how other states have conducted their reviews of Catholic clergy sexual abuse. "We've looked to ensure this review is victim-centric," he explained. "And we've made sure that we have the resources in place to conduct this review effectively."

Investigators will be seeking documents from dioceses and religious orders, Kaul said. He also asked "anyone with knowledge of abuse and institutional response to contact us."

The Department of Justice has established a toll-free line, 877-222-2620, and an online reporting system to accept reports. Kaul invited abuse survivors, family members and supporters to make reports whether they have done so in the past or have not done so yet.

"We strongly encourage anyone who knows anything to report. No detail is too small," Kaul said. "If you have reported before, we would like you to contact us. If you haven't reported before, we would like to you to contact us."

Four of the Wisconsin dioceses, the Society of Jesus and the Norbertines' St. Norbert Abbey in De Pere, Wisconsin, have published lists of clergy with credible abuse allegations against them. The Superior Diocese has said it is continuing to compile its list and plans to release it by the end of the year.

Each diocese stressed that it has taken sexual abuse seriously and has complied with the "Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People" since its adoption by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in 2002.

The La Crosse Diocese said its Protect and Heal initiative led to the rewriting of procedures for reporting and investigating sexual abuse allegations to ensure independence in its review process.

The Madison Diocese said in its statement that it has "worked vigilantly to take decisive actions to address sexual abuse, and has worked closely with the appropriate law enforcement agencies and investigators, and has created and maintained a safe environment in the Catholic Church and our communities."

The Superior Diocese said it "recognizes that some cases were mishandled in the past," adding, "That is not today's church."

In a statement, the diocese explained how it has implemented a morals and ethics policy in 1988. It also said it had hired Defenbaugh & Associates of Kaufman, Texas, to review clergy files with the goal of releasing a list of clergy credibly accused of sexual abuse.

The Norbertines said in a statement that it had hired the same Texas law firm to review its files and estimated the process will take up to six months.

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