News



Advocates for survivors of clergy sexual abuse held a news conference at the Ohio Statehouse (seen in a 2020 file photo) Aug. 16, calling on Attorney General Dave Yost to investigate the state's six Catholic dioceses. (OSV News/Reuters/Seth Herald)



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Cleveland — August 17, 2023

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Advocates for survivors of clergy sexual abuse said it's time for Ohio's top law enforcement official to investigate the state's six Catholic dioceses.

Members of Ohio chapters of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, Ohioans for Child Protection and the Greater Cincinnati Voice of the Faithful urged Ohio Attorney General Dave Yost in an Aug. 16 letter to follow the examples of abuse investigations that have occurred in other states in recent years.

Daniel Frondorf of SNAP's Cincinnati chapter told NCR that reports released after investigations in Pennsylvania, Illinois and Maryland included references to 49 priests who had lived, worked or had other ties to Ohio and had been accused of sexually abusing children.

"I think there's enough compelling evidence in the news media the last 15, 20 years that a larger investigation is warranted than just these spotty investigations of individual claims of abuse," Frondorf said.

> 'It's time to get on the justice train and protect kids.'
> —Claudia Vercellotti
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"I think in the last five years, those types of investigations in Pennsylvania, Maryland, Illinois show that there's a benefit to doing that. If we know as much as we do from these sporadic investigations as they come up (in Ohio), just think what a full investigation by a more robust investigating body would turn up," he said. Frondorf said he was abused by a priest while a high school student.

The advocates released the letter during a news conference at the Ohio Statehouse Aug. 16. Speakers said they were aware of allegations of sexual abuse where no criminal investigation has emerged or charges have not been filed.

In an email to NCR, Yost's office said that, unlike in other states, Ohio law prevents him from investigating "matters like this."

"The General Assembly has the power to change the law, but at present, SNAP's concerns should be addressed to local prosecutors," the office said in its statement.

Officials at the Catholic Conference of Ohio said no one was available to discuss the advocates' letter.

Rebecca Surendorff, co-chair of Cincinnati-based Ohioans for Child Protection, stressed the need for accountability among church officials as the reason the groups are seeking a statewide investigation. She pointed to the convictions of five Ohio priests on various sexual abuse charges in recent years to illustrate that the problem is ongoing and not relegated to the past.

"This is a current safety issue," she said. "We think between the current cases plus looking at the attorney general reports (from other states), that's a fair indicator that we have a more complex issue that's not being addressed."

The letter to Yost is the latest effort by SNAP and abuse survivor advocates to call on Ohio officials to investigate the Catholic Church's handling of clergy sexual abuse.

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Claudia Vercellotti of SNAP's Toledo chapter said the organization in 2018 asked then-Attorney General Mike DeWine, a Catholic who is now Ohio's governor, to open an investigation into the church's handling of abuse cases. Advocates made similar requests to previous attorneys general without success, she told NCR.

She suggested Yost's office could conduct a review of the dioceses under Ohio law governing the operation of a charitable trust or a nonprofit organization and coordinate with local prosecutors in filing charges when necessary.

"It's time to get on the justice train and protect kids," Vercellotti said. "It is 2023. It may be uncomfortable. It may not even be politically correct in polite company to talk about. But we are talking about the lives of children. We are talking about the sexual abuse of children."