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The U.S. Catholic bishops' latest annual report on child and youth protection shows abuse allegations are down, while safe environment protocols have taken root in the church — but guarding against complacency about abuse prevention is critical, as is providing ongoing support for survivors.

On May 28, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Secretariat of Child and Youth Protection released the "2023 Annual Report — Findings and Recommendations on the Implementation of the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People."

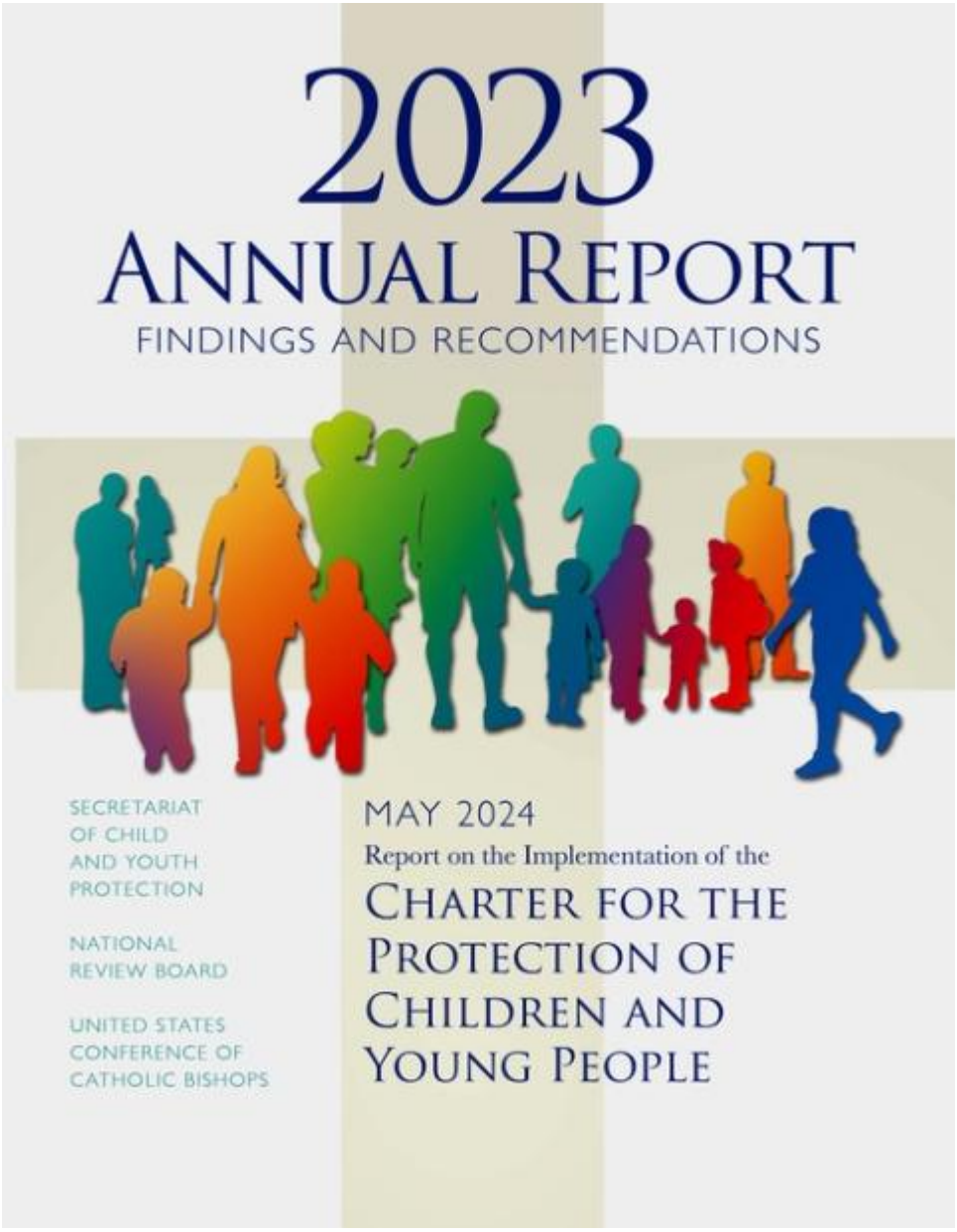
The 2023 report is the twenty-first since the charter was established by the U.S. Catholic bishops in 2002 as a number of clerical abuse scandals emerged. Commonly called the Dallas Charter, the document lays out a comprehensive set of procedures for addressing allegations of sexual abuse of minors by Catholic clergy, and includes guidelines for reconciliation, healing, accountability and prevention of abuse.

Data for the report came from audits conducted by StoneBridge Business Partners, a Rochester, New York-based consulting firm that provides forensic and compliance

services to a range of organizations. In addition, the report includes a 2023 survey by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate on allegations and costs related to the abuse of minors.

For the July 1, 2022-June 30, 2023, period, CARA's report found a more than 51% drop in historical allegations from those reported in the same period last year, from 2,704 in 2022 to 1,308 in 2023. The decrease was partly due to the resolution of allegations received as a result of lawsuits, said the report.

Another milestone was the full participation of all 196 dioceses and eparchies in the Charter audit, a 100% response rate that was unprecedented. Of those, 28 were visited on-site by StoneBridge, with another 17 audited remotely by the firm and 131 other dioceses and eparchies submitting data for the report.



This is the cover of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Secretariat of Child and Youth Protection's 2023 annual report on the "Findings and Recommendations on the Implementation of the 'Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People'" released May 28, 2024. (OSV News/courtesy USCCB)

At the same time, "the number of new allegations from minors remained similar to the prior year, at 17," wrote Suzanne Healy, chairwoman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' National Review Board, a lay-led group that advises the bishops on preventing sexual abuse of minors, in a Feb. 21 letter to USCCB president Archbishop Timothy P. Broglio that was included in the report.

Healy — a licensed marriage and family therapist who served as the victim assistance coordinator for the Archdiocese of Los Angeles from 2007 to 2016 — also cautioned against "charter fatigue or complacency" in addressing sexual abuse in the church.

"Even as we move forward with progress, we must acknowledge that without ongoing diligence and commitment, there is the possibility that failures can happen and we must be ready to act if they do. ... We must remain vigilant," wrote Healy. "One new allegation is one too many."

She wrote that 70% of the nation's dioceses and eparchies "conduct their own parish audits on the implementation of safe environment programs and policies," with the data showing "a correlation between parish audits and charter compliance."

Yet Healey warned, "Without monitoring implementation at the parish level, the risk of abuse increases." She noted the National Review Board supported the use of high reliability organization principles — used to maximize safety in complex organizations where error stands to inflict great harm — to examine the 17 new claims for "any holes or practices that need to be shored up to prevent future abuse."

One such deficit was highlighted by a recent discovery in the Diocese of Greensburg, Pennsylvania, that several safe environment clearance documents were missing from the file of a parish staffer who had previous criminal charges flagged in an FBI fingerprint check.

The gap came to light when the employee was arrested May 8 for unrelated alleged sexual assaults against a minor, which were said to have occurred off site from the two parishes at which he had worked. The pastor who oversaw both parishes had attested that he had personally reviewed the clearances and had found them in order. Bishop Larry J. Kulick of Greensburg took swift action, removing the pastor, placing the parish staff involved on leave and ordering an immediate audit of all safe environment clearances throughout the diocese.

StoneBridge wrote in its assessment that "chancery offices (that) maintain regular face-to-face contact with parishes have better results in implementing training and background check procedures than those (that) do not," and recommended that diocesan officials periodically visit parishes and schools to review safe environment documentation.

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Four dioceses and eparchies audited by StoneBridge were found to be noncompliant with various articles of the charter, but subsequently took steps after the audit to address the issues and attain compliance: St. Mary Queen of Peace Syro-Malankara Catholic Eparchy in USA and Canada, the Chaldean Diocese of St. Thomas the Apostle USA and the Archdiocese of Milwaukee initially failed to meet review board requirements. St. Mary Queen of Peace along with the Ukrainian Eparchy of St. Nicholas in Chicago also lacked safe environment training for minors during the 2023 audit period.

StoneBridge also found several issues at more than 25% of the dioceses and eparchies audited:

- A struggle to maintain functioning review boards, which serve as consultative bodies for their bishops, due to lack of meetings, members, bylaw compliance, policy reviews and understanding of member roles.

- A lack of language in child protection policies regarding either child sexual abuse content or "individuals who habitually lack the use of reason."

- Ineffective monitoring by dioceses and eparchies to ensure compliance with their existing safe environment programs, with a lack of updated documentation and visitation to parishes and schools.

- Outdated or missing letters of promulgation from bishops on their safe environment programs.

Among the problems StoneBridge identified in less than 25% of the dioceses and eparchies:

- Some clergy, employees and volunteers were not trained or background checked, but nonetheless had contact with minors.

- Offers by the bishop or his representative to meet with victims and their families were not specified in the policies or were not made on a timely basis.

- Abuse reporting procedures were not consistently displayed at parishes and schools, or were not available in all languages in which liturgies were offered, thereby limiting the ability of non-English speakers to file complaints.

- Documented policies regarding accused clergy were lacking with regard to a presumption of innocence, retention of civil and canonical counsel, steps to restore a cleric's good name in the case of an unsubstantiated allegation, or clergy transfers.

- Lack of a formal policy on communicating with the public regarding clerical sexual abuse of minors.

The CARA survey included in the 2023 report showed that between July 1, 2022-June 30, 2023, reporting dioceses and eparchies paid more than $260.5 million in allegation-related costs — 99% higher than that paid during the previous fiscal year. Of the 2023 total, 73% represented victim settlements, with 19% dedicated to attorney fees.

Over the past 10 years, the Catholic dioceses and eparchies in the U.S. alone have paid more than $2 billion in costs regarding abuse allegations.

But the cost to abuse survivors is far greater, said both Broglio and Healy in the report.

"Theirs is a lifelong journey and the mission of the church is a lifelong commitment to accompany them on this healing journey ... to minister, even to those who believe they have lost God along the way and left the church," wrote Healy, noting that during the audit period, 183 new survivors and their families received pastoral care and 1,662 survivors and their families receive ongoing pastoral care.

"I am deeply sorry for their suffering," wrote Broglio in his preface to the 2023 report. "These numbers are not just numbers. The statistics are the many stories and accounts of the betrayal of trust and the lifelong journey towards recovery."

The archbishop also wrote that he was "grateful" to victim survivors "for holding all of us accountable," stressing as well the importance of countering abuse amid a landscape "in flux," given both technological and therapeutic developments.

"I pray that together, we continue working toward the goal of ending the scourge of child sexual abuse, not only in the church but in society," wrote Broglio.