News



The Cathedral of Sts. Peter and Paul serves as the home church of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Providence, Rhode Island. A report released March 4 by the Rhode Island attorney general identified 75 clergy members who sexually abused more than 300 children since 1950.(AP/Charles Krupa)

Leah Willingham

View Author Profile

Kimberlee Kruesi

View Author Profile

Associated Press

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Providence, R.I. — March 8, 2026
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

The sound of the school nurse's office door opening. Light reflecting off a stained-glass window. Tearful outbursts and fear of getting on the school bus.

For many survivors of clergy abuse, memories like these linger for decades.

A report released March 4 by the Rhode Island attorney general detailed decades of abuse inside the state's Catholic Diocese of Providence, identifying 75 clergy members who sexually abused more than 300 children since 1950. The investigation drew on thousands of church records and years of interviews with victims and witnesses. Officials said the true number of victims is likely much higher.

But survivors say the numbers capture only part of the story. Behind each case, they say, are childhood fragments that resurface years later — along with the long struggle to understand what happened.

Many survivors spent decades searching for answers and pressing authorities to investigate. Now some are speaking publicly about what they endured and what they hope will come next: broader support for survivors, help from the church to pay for therapy and counseling, and accountability from Catholic leaders.

From survivor to advocate

"I can still hear the click of the hardware in that metal door opening to this very day," said Dr. Herbert "Hub" Brennan, an internal medicine doctor who lives and works in his hometown of East Greenwich, Rhode Island, where he grew up in a devoutly Catholic family.

> 'They say that rape is one of the few crimes where the victim feels the shame. But the shame is enormous. And then the secrecy that follows to hide that shame gets in the way of healing.'
> — Dr. Herbert "Hub" Brennan

Tweet this

Brennan was sexually abused in elementary school by Fr. Brendan Smyth, an Irish priest who arrived in the community in the 1960s. Brennan was an altar server at Our Lady of Mercy Parish when the abuse began in the church sacristy.

Brennan says a nun would pull him from class and send him to wait in the principal's office until Smyth arrived and led him into the nurse's room.

"They say that rape is one of the few crimes where the victim feels the shame," Brennan said. "But the shame is enormous. And then the secrecy that follows to hide that shame gets in the way of healing."



Dr. Herbert "Hub" Brennan, a clergy abuse survivor, displays a 1995 newspaper showing a headline that reads "Diocese has no complaints about jailed priest" at his internal medicine office in East Greenwich, R.I., March 5. (AP/Leah Willingham)

Brennan confronted it years later when a newspaper arrived on his doorstep in 1995. The headline about Smyth's arrest in Ireland read: "Diocese has no complaints against jailed priest."

Smyth was later convicted of assaulting children at least 100 times over four decades.

When Brennan later tried to discuss the abuse with a parish priest, he said he was assured there had been no complaints, only to learn later the priest had been Smyth's roommate.

The revelation pushed Brennan to seek accountability. He later worked with attorney Mitchell Garabedian and settled in Massachusetts Superior Court.

"I needed to make sure that others knew exactly what was going on in this diocese — if it happened to others, who was responsible and how they were hiding it," Brennan said.

The report released last week felt like a culmination of that effort, he said: "That allowed me to switch from survivor-victim to advocate."

Breaking the 'wall of secrecy'

For Claude Leboeuf, amber light streaming through stained-glass windows still triggers painful memories.



Claude Leboeuf, a clergy abuse survivor and advocate, poses at his home in Providence, R.I., March 5, after a report by the Rhode Island attorney general detailed decades of abuse within the Catholic Diocese of Providence. (AP Photo/Leah Willingham)

Leboeuf, who was abused by a priest as a child in neighboring Massachusetts and now advocates for victims in Rhode Island, called the report an important step toward dismantling what he calls the church's "wall of secrecy."

The retired U.S. postal worker said his memories resurfaced only a few years ago, prompting him to pursue legal action and speak publicly about what happened to him.

"There's a need to do something for these people — something real: money, tuition, therapy," Leboeuf said. "The effects are real; they last a long, long time."

In a video statement, Bishop of Providence Bruce Lewandowski said the report describes a "tragic history" of abuse that caused lasting harm to victims and their

families. He said he felt "extreme sadness" and "intense shame" while reading it and apologized to survivors for church leaders' past failures to protect children. Lewandowski said the diocese has since implemented safeguards aimed at responding quickly to allegations and preventing abuse.

Leboeuf rejects any framing that abuse by clergy is "old history."

"It's justice denied for more than 60 years for some people," he said. "These are people who brought their complaints to the diocese as kids in the 1960s, and they were ignored, ridiculed, even punished."

Fighting to be believed

Ann Hagan Webb remembers the dread she felt before the school bus arrived each morning. Webb was only a kindergartner when her parish priest began sexually abusing her at school in Rhode Island.



Church abuse survivor Ann Hagan Webb speaks during an interview at the Rhode Island Attorney General's Office in Providence, R.I., on Wednesday, March 4. (AP/Leah Willingham)

The abuse took place between 1957 and 1965, during which Webb — who was abused from the age of 5 to 12 — remembers tearful outbursts before school, sometimes needing to be pulled onto the bus.

It wasn't until decades later, at 40, that Webb — a trained psychologist — turned to therapy herself to help process the memories. But when she was ready to report the abuse, Webb was met with hostility.

Initially, she asked only for compensation to cover her therapy bills. Still, she was met with skepticism, with leaders at the Diocese of Providence demanding her medical records and questioning the veracity of her claims.

Webb turned to advocacy, becoming known as a force for survivors of clergy abuse. In 2019, she helped convince the Rhode Island Legislature to enact legislation dubbed "Annie's Law," which allows child sexual abusers to be held civilly accountable to victims.

The advocacy has been exhausting, Webb said, and she still faces stigma when speaking publicly. Her abuse is often overlooked, she says, because many assume clergy abuse affected only boys.

"For 32 years, the diocese has called me not credible. I can't tell you what that feels like," Webb said.

Advertisement

The release of the attorney general's investigation has renewed her hope that change and justice are still

on the horizon.

"It feels like vindication," she said.

"I hope the public demands their church be different," she added.

A long-coming reckoning

The Rhode Island investigation comes at a time when examining possible clergy abuse is no longer unusual.

The shift is a far cry from 2002, when The Boston Globe exposed the Boston Archdiocese's practice of moving abusive priests between parishes without warning parents or police, prompting investigations around the world.

That reckoning took decades longer in Rhode Island. With one of the highest Catholic populations per capita in the country — nearly 40% — the Diocese of Providence maintained secrecy around clergy abuse even as accusations and lawsuits surfaced over the years.

Attorney Tim Conlon, who has long represented sex abuse victims in Rhode Island, said that when he first filed suits against the Diocese of Providence, many people were unwilling to believe such allegations could be true in their own parishes. At one point in the late 1990s, he said, even his mother questioned whether he was doing the right thing.

State law has also made it difficult for victims to seek justice, Conlon said, citing strict limits on civil suits against institutions like the Catholic Church and narrow statutes of limitations for second-degree sexual assault.

"Clearly there's a call for reform," Conlon said. "The magnitude of the need is well documented."