

Dept. of Justice: Attorney General Kaul releases update in advance of two-year anniversary of Clergy and Faith Leader Abuse Initiative

Posted on Monday, Apr 17, 2023

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MADISON, Wis. – As Wisconsin approaches the two-year anniversary of the launch of the Wisconsin Department of Justice's (DOJ) Clergy and Faith Leader Abuse Initiative, Attorney General Kaul is releasing additional information, including statements from several survivors who have reached out to DOJ, and highlighting progress being made through the initiative.

"Survivors of abuse by trusted leaders deserve to be respected and supported," said Attorney General Kaul. "The progress that's been made through the clergy and faith leader abuse initiative is due to the fortitude of those who've made reports, and I encourage anyone who is considering making a report to contact us."

Dr. Michael Bielmeier from Green Bay, who gave Wisconsin DOJ permission to use his name, said, "For fifty-five years, out of guilt, I kept secret the sexual abuse I suffered at the hands of three Norbertine priests," each of whom was on the list released by the Norbertine order in 2019 of priests with credible abuse allegations against them. "Although the pedophiles died decades ago, the painful emptiness perpetrated by the trauma remained very present. Voicing the truth to the DOJ was essential in beginning my healing process, and I implore all the other silent survivors to do the same. Please take the emotional risk and reach out to DOJ's Clergy and Faith Leader Abuse victim services specialist. She is a trained and empathetic professional. Doing so has given me a sense of delayed justice and unimagined psychological and spiritual freedom."

A survivor from the Wausau area shared, “The Wisconsin DOJ has been the one steady and constant source of support for me as I navigate the uncharted waters of coming forward with my secret. A secret I have held with sometimes unbearable pain, for 40 years.

“Wisconsin DOJ’s victim services specialist was the first person who heard my story and reflected my suffering back to me,” the Wausau survivor continued. “She understood and received me with grace and compassion. She offered me light while I was in a pretty dark corner. Wisconsin DOJ has been on my side throughout this whole ordeal. I am beyond grateful for their wisdom, support, and for being my voice when I didn’t have one or when no one at the church level would hear me. This initiative is the single most important advocacy tool to demand accountability and justice for those of us who have experienced sexual abuse by a church leader. I am so thankful.”

Wisconsin DOJ Takes Every Report Seriously

Shortly after launching the initiative, Wisconsin DOJ organized training for victim advocates in Wisconsin so that they would be prepared to support survivors of sexual abuse by clergy and faith leaders. The training offered live presentations by national experts on working with survivors of clergy sexual abuse. Victim advocates at Wisconsin DOJ and throughout Wisconsin are prepared to respond.

After Wisconsin DOJ receives a report of abuse, a victim specialist evaluates the report to determine what follow up is appropriate. If the reporting party has indicated a willingness for Wisconsin DOJ to contact them, a victim specialist will reach out to help with identifying survivor support resources. The report is then evaluated by a multi-disciplinary team (MDT) comprised of a victim advocate, an investigator, and a prosecutor. The MDT confers and recommends next steps, which can include follow-up questions for the survivor, gathering of additional documents, or referral to local law enforcement for further investigation. Each and every report of abuse made to Wisconsin DOJ has been or will be reviewed by an MDT. Throughout, one Wisconsin DOJ victim specialist continues to work full-time on the initiative to answer questions from survivors and follow up with survivors as appropriate.

“Speaking up shatters the wall offenders hide behind. Prior to my report, I had little hope for any form of justice. Unlocking my secrets, sharing them with a professional that I could trust, proved to me that what happened, matters. Sharing changed me

in ways I didn't anticipate. It opened windows, releasing a deep heaviness I carried for decades," said a survivor who resided in Milwaukee at the time of her alleged abuse by a priest currently on the list of restricted priests released by the Milwaukee Archdiocese.

A survivor from Madison reflected, "I am glad that the state of Wisconsin has opened up an investigation and allowed abuse survivors the chance to come forward, as many people don't know where to turn. Like myself, many people have kept their abuse hidden for decades. Due to the years of efforts from some of my abusers' victims including myself, my abuser is currently serving a 30-year prison sentence. But many survivors have not had that outcome-yet." The priest who allegedly abused this survivor was on the credibly accused list released by the Superior Diocese late last year.

The Reports Received by Wisconsin DOJ Are Making a Difference

As of April 17, 2023, the Wisconsin DOJ Clergy and Faith Leader Initiative has received a total of 248 completed reports to the toll-free tip line and the online reporting tool.

As another survivor said, "I will be forever grateful that our Attorney General knew that this initiative was an absolute necessity for the people of Wisconsin. The time is long past where these matters can be swept under the rug."

Additionally, Wisconsin DOJ has received a significant number of reports from those who had not previously reported to anyone.

For example, a survivor used the Wisconsin DOJ online reporting tool (www.supportsurvivors.widoj.gov) to report abuse by faith leader Remington Nystrom that had occurred at a church camp. Prior to reporting to Wisconsin DOJ, the survivor had never previously reported the abuse to law enforcement. Following the report, a Wisconsin DOJ victim specialist reached out to the survivor to discuss the possible paths forward, including whether he was willing to proceed with further investigation by law enforcement. In addition, an MDT at Wisconsin DOJ convened to evaluate the report, ultimately deciding that it should be referred to local law enforcement, if the survivor agreed. Following a discussion with the survivor, Wisconsin DOJ reached out to the local district attorney and sheriff's office about the case, informing them about the details and encouraging further investigation. Following an investigation, in February 2022, the Waushara County District Attorney

charged the case (*State of Wisconsin v. Remington Jon Nystrom*, Waushara County Case No. 2022 CF 27). Prior to trial, on April 13, 2023, Nystrom pled no contest to and was convicted of Second-Degree Sexual Assault of a Child. A sentencing hearing is scheduled for July 18, 2023.

Another case reported through the Wisconsin DOJ online reporting tool (www.supportsurvivors.widoj.gov) recently resulted in criminal charges. The survivor reported alleged abuse by Theodore McCarrick, a former cardinal of the Catholic Church. Following the report, an MDT at Wisconsin DOJ convened and decided to refer the report to local law enforcement with consent from the survivor. With assistance from the DOJ Division of Criminal Investigation, local law enforcement interviewed the survivor and subsequently referred the matter to the local district attorney. On April 14, 2023, the Walworth County District Attorney charged McCarrick with one count of Fourth-Degree Sexual Assault for an incident that is alleged to have occurred in April of 1977. (*State of Wisconsin v. Theodore McCarrick*, Walworth County Case No. 2023 CM160). The complaint alleges that McCarrick engaged in repeated sexual abuse of the victim over time, including the charged incident that involved the alleged fondling of the victim's genitals while staying as a guest at a Geneva Lake residence.

As another example, three survivors used the Wisconsin DOJ online reporting tool to report alleged abuse in the early 1970s by John Cullinan, a deceased Catholic priest who served in the La Crosse diocese. Prior to contacting Wisconsin DOJ in response to its initiative, none of the survivors had ever previously reported the alleged abuse to law enforcement. Following the reports to Wisconsin DOJ, an MDT at Wisconsin DOJ convened to evaluate the separate reports, ultimately deciding that information about the abuse alleged by the survivors should be sent to the La Crosse diocese, if the survivors agreed, so that the diocese could consider adding the priest's name to the church's list of clergy with substantiated allegations of child sexual abuse. A victim specialist at Wisconsin DOJ spoke with the survivors about their willingness to share information about their alleged abuse with the church. The survivors agreed to share the information, with the support of a Wisconsin DOJ victim specialist. Once the diocese received this information, it conducted its own review, which included consensual interviews with the survivors. Following this review, on December 20, 2022, the church added John Cullinan's name to its [credibly accused list](#).

Survivors are Still Encouraged to Report

Although many survivors have already come forward, Wisconsin DOJ encourages survivors of sexual abuse by clergy and faith leaders to contact Wisconsin DOJ, either through the online reporting tool, www.supportsurvivors.widj.gov, or by calling the toll-free tip line at 1-877-222-2620.

“Even if you’re afraid you can be courageous!” said a survivor from Milwaukee. “Like me, survivors may have trusted our offenders, and now it’s time to trust ourselves. I encourage anyone unsure to come forward.”

Wisconsin DOJ to Issue Final Report

After following up as appropriate with each and every report made to Wisconsin DOJ as part of the initiative, the department will issue a final report. The report will provide an overview of the initiative, the reports made to Wisconsin DOJ, and what has been done in response to those reports. The report also will discuss institutional responses to allegations of sexual abuse, including responses to the Wisconsin DOJ initiative.

Because the timeline for appropriate follow up for each report to Wisconsin DOJ is uncertain and depends on various factors, the release date for a final report has not yet been determined.

In Summary

A survivor from Madison summarized, “I suffered in silence for fifty years, thinking no one would hear the pleas of a 9-year-old boy. However, with the heroic efforts of the DOJ this shadow of mine is being dimmed, by a beacon of understanding and empathy, DOJ listened and understood.”

The Wisconsin DOJ Clergy and Faith Leader Abuse Initiative is making progress for survivors of abuse by a trusted leader in their faith community. The initiative has resulted in one conviction of an accused child assailant, criminal charges against two alleged abusers, and the addition of a priest’s name to a diocesan list of individuals with substantiated allegations of child sexual abuse. In addition, the initiative has helped connect many survivors with victim services. Wisconsin DOJ will continue to work with survivors and their loved ones to follow up on information reported to Wisconsin DOJ and to provide support to those who have been impacted by clergy and faith leader abuse.



Find this press release on the Wisconsin DOJ website [here](#).