

Victim Assistance Coordinators: They Gotta Have Heart

By Mary Hart



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Barbara Thorp
Director
Office of Pastoral Support
and Outreach
Archdiocese of Boston



It’s the rare job description that includes the word “compassionate,” yet a crucial part of a victim assistance coordinator’s job is to respond compassionately to the victims of abuse whom they assist. Since 2002, in compliance with the bishops’ Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People, a victim assistance coordinator has been on staff in virtually every diocese across the country.

The formal description of their duties is threefold – to assist abuse victims in making a formal complaint of abuse to the diocese, to help arrange a personal meeting with the bishop or his representative, and to obtain support for the victim’s specific needs.

Working closely with those who have suffered abuse, victim assistance coordinators are profoundly aware of the trauma the victims and their families have endured.

The root of the word “compassion” means to “to suffer with,” and the word has been expressed at its deepest level in the Archdiocese of Boston, where the child abuse scandal has left deep wounds. In her role as director of the Office of Pastoral Support and Outreach, Barbara Thorp of the Archdiocese of Boston – hired in her position shortly after the child abuse scandal became public in early 2002, speaks of the “myriad ways” the clergy sexual abuse has traumatized the survivors of abuse, their families, the church and the community as a whole, even non-Catholics.

She describes herself as “privileged” to work with survivors and expresses her deep respect for them (she prefers the word “survivors” to “victims”) and their families. “It takes an extraordinary amount of trust,” she says, “for survivors of clergy abuse to call upon our office for help. We’re honored to be able to do what we can to help those who’ve been so hurt.”

Those who contact the office are often referred by their attorneys, but some become aware of the assistance through the archdiocesan Web site or from therapists or social workers. Every claim of sexual abuse is taken seriously and treated with the utmost respect. The victim assistance coordinator does not investigate a case. Every complaint reported to the office is referred to the state attorney general. Most victims want their name included in the report, but they may file anonymously if they prefer.

Thorp is available to those impacted by the abuse to help them find therapy and set up a meeting with Cardinal Sean O’Malley. A staff person from the office accompanies the survivors and their families when they meet with the Cardinal.

According to Thorp, most survivors and their families welcome the opportunity to speak with the cardinal and tell him what happened and to articulate the impact the abuse has had on their lives. They find it particularly important to express the spiritual suffering and alienation they've experienced from this betrayal by clergy entrusted to nourish faith.

Not only does the victim assistance coordinator's office help find therapists for survivors, the archdiocese pays for survivors' therapy. In 2006, the Boston office supported 285 survivors in therapy, spending over \$1.1 million. Since the office opened it has served over 700 people.

In his four and one-half years at the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Archbishop Timothy Dolan has met with 40 victims. Victim Assistance Coordinator Amy Peterson offers to set up a meeting once a victim enters the diocese's mediation program. According to Archbishop Dolan, some victims choose not to participate themselves but instead request a meeting with him for their parents or spouses, who also suffer "terrible pain and grief."

In the Los Angeles archdiocesan office of Victim Assistance Ministry, Sister Sheila McNiff, a Sister of the Holy Child Jesus and the victim assistance coordinator, works full-time focusing on reports of current and past abuse by clergy, paid and volunteer personnel at parishes and schools in the diocese. She also works with families and individuals abused outside the parish or school. Her office makes referrals for spiritual direction, pastoral counseling, individual and couples therapy, drug and alcohol rehabilitation and trauma recovery groups.

As in Boston, each survivor is offered the opportunity to receive an apology from the head of the diocese. One of her duties is to help arrange a meeting between Cardinal Roger Mahony of Los Angeles and every victim in litigation. Currently, over 580 people are in litigation in the Los Angeles archdiocese, so, she says, "it will take some time, but the firm commitment has been made to see each survivor."

Both Thorp and Sister McNiff work full-time to meet the needs of the many victims in their dioceses. In smaller dioceses, the victim assistance coordinator may work part-time or take on the tasks of victim assistance coordinator in addition to other duties. In the Diocese of Springfield, Illinois, Victim Assistance Coordinator Pat Kornfeld has been employed part-time for over four years. She says she has found it "rewarding to be able to help those who are hurting or have been hurting for a very long time." She describes her job as a "calling" and says her diocese has been



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Diocese of Springfield



“blessed not to have had the multitude of victims other dioceses have had.”

While each victim is unique, their needs are often the same.

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