

Safe Environment—An Introduction

Working to Ensure Safe Environments for All—*The Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*



"Since 2002, the Church in the United States has experienced a crisis without precedent in our times. The sexual abuse of children and young people by some deacons, priests, and bishops, and the ways in which the crimes and sins were addressed, have caused enormous pain, anger and confusion. ... [W]e re-affirm our deep commitment to creating a safe environment within the Church for children and youth."

- Preamble, USCCB *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) drafted a landmark document in Dallas, Texas at its 2002 summer assembly in response to the crisis of the sexual abuse of children by clergy in the Catholic Church. This document, setting forth their agreed upon responsibilities in combating sexual misconduct issues, was entitled the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*. The *Charter* has since been appropriately revised.

The most recent update of the full text of the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People* and the associated *Essential Norms for Diocesan/ Eparchial Policies Dealing with Allegations of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Priests or Deacons* (the Essential Norms constitute particular law for all the dioceses/eparchies of the United States of America) are available on the USCCB Web site or through a USCCB link found on the Diocese of New Ulm Web site. A copy is also available in a separate section of the diocesan Safe Environment Manual.

The *Charter* directs action in the following matters:

- Creation of a safe environment for children and young people
- Healing and reconciliation for victims and survivors
- Prompt and effective response to allegations of abuse
- Cooperation with civil authorities
- Disciplining of offenders
- Providing for future accountability by establishing a national Office of Child and Youth Protection

The *Charter* specifically created the USCCB Office of Child and Youth Protection and assigned to it three central tasks:

- To assist each diocese in implementing "Safe Environment" programs designed to ensure necessary safety and security for all children as they participate in church and religious activities
- To develop an appropriate compliance audit mechanism to assist the Bishops in adhering to the responsibilities set forth in the *Charter*
- To prepare a public, annual report describing the compliance of each diocese to the *Charter's* provisions

The Diocese of New Ulm completes an annual diocesan report and submits the report to the USCCB contracted auditing agency annually. An onsite audit review is conducted periodically as well.

Promise To Protect. Pledge to Heal.

In the revised *Charter*, the bishops recommit themselves to victims, survivors and their families, and to each other, in order to ensure --to the best of their abilities -- that sexual abuse of minors within the Church will never happen again.

A comprehensive set of procedures to address allegations of sexual abuse of minors by Catholic clergy, the *Charter* includes guidelines for reconciliation, healing, accountability, and prevention of future acts of abuse.

Safe Environment Programs

The whole Church, especially the laity, at both the diocesan and national levels, needs to be engaged in maintaining safe environments in the Church for children and young people.

Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People
Article 10

Dioceses/eparchies are to maintain “safe environment” programs which the diocesan/eparchial bishop deems to be in accord with Catholic moral principles. They are to be conducted cooperatively with parents, civil authorities, educators, and community organizations to provide education and training for children, youth, parents, ministers, educators, volunteers, and others about ways to make and maintain a safe environment for children and young people. Dioceses/eparchies are to make clear to clergy and all members of the community the standards of conduct for clergy and other persons in positions of trust with regard to children.

Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People
Article 12

Specifically, What Are Safe Environment Programs?

In 2003, the USCCB Office of Child and Youth Protection (OCYP) called for the full implementation of safe environment programs in all dioceses as mandated by the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*.

Programs must include the following components:

- **A code of conduct** for employees and volunteers who work with young people.
- **Adult education** for anyone whose duties include ongoing, unsupervised contact with minors (such as parents, ministers, educators, church personnel, and volunteers in children's programs). Adult education should reinforce prevention, identification, and skills for responding to and reporting abuse.
- **Criminal record and background screening** of all personnel and volunteers who have regular contact with minors.
- **A Child and Young People Training Component:** Personal safety programs for children and young people.

Safe environment programs in the Diocese of New Ulm also include the following:

- Methods for outreach to parents, including formal training sessions, independent reading material, videos, and/or information on the diocesan Web site.
- A commitment to incorporate the safe environment program into the long-term, ongoing mission of the diocese.

Diocese of New Ulm

Overview of the Essential Three Day-One Requirements for All Employees and All Volunteers (Volunteers Unsupervised With Minors)

There are essentially three required areas of compliance prior to an employee or an adult volunteer beginning their service.

Adult Requirements

All clergy and parish, school and diocesan employees, as well as all adult volunteers who have either regular or unsupervised interaction with minors must complete the **Essential 3** requirements:

1. ***Acknowledgement of Receipt of Policy and Appropriate Code of Conduct*** – A person must acknowledge that he or she understands and agrees to the principles and standards outlined in the Sexual Misconduct Policy of the Diocese of New Ulm as well as the Code of Conduct appropriate to his or her ministry. Required individuals are to read, sign and receive training on the Policy and the appropriate *Code of Conduct*.
2. **Background Check** –The background check is run by a diocesan-approved agency and provides a criminal history. This is an important step to screen out individuals who might present a danger to children and youth.
 - Individuals are to complete the required background check consent form(s). Depending upon the area of employment or the position in which volunteering, there may be more than one check required.
3. **VIRTUS: Protecting God’s Children for Adults Awareness Session Attendance** – VIRTUS live training is a three hour awareness session which better equips adults to protect children and youth in the world around them. VIRTUS sessions are offered throughout year and at various locations across the diocese.

The diocese allows a grace period, in some situations, of 60 days for meeting the requirement if the person is involved with a longer-term, ongoing ministry.

In addition to the Day-One Essential Three requirements, ongoing VIRTUS online training is also required.

Details for all of these requirements are available to the Local Safe Environment Coordinator (LSEC) and individuals should confer with the LSEC for detailed information and clearance notification.

For information regarding requirements for minor youth who are employed or volunteer with children or other youth please see the Minor Guidelines. Two items of note regarding minors: 1) the background check requirement is different and, 2) no minor is allowed to supervise other minors without being under the direct supervision of a VIRTUS trained, compliant adult.

Essential Children and Youth Instruction Requirements

Faith Formation, Youth Ministry, and Catholic Schools

Two (2) onsite lessons are required to be taught for each grade for every program year from K - Grade 12, or through the highest grade the parish offers formation programs. The lessons are VIRTUS lessons assigned by diocesan safe environment coordinator. The lessons are available on the “Educator Tab” of the VIRTUS user account Web page. The “Educator Tab” access is assigned by the diocesan Safe Environment database manager and is typically accessible to Priests, Catholic school principals, Catholic school teachers of religion curriculum, and Directors of Religious Education. Typically, the lessons rotate each year with 8 total lessons available at each of the five age ranges: K-2, 3-5, 6– 8, and 9 –12.

QUICK FORMS REFERENCE LIST—NEEDED ON A REGULAR BASIS

For all potential employees and potential volunteers

[Bolded Items are returned to Parish/School/Entity]:

Policies:

1. Policy 13.3: This policy may be used to show to new potential employee and potential volunteer to inform them of diocesan policy for completing background check. The individual can be given a copy if requested.
2. Policy 13: Potential employees or potential volunteers are given the policy, and **complete Policy 13 Forms A & B**, either in the presence of the parish staff or returned by a set date/time. It is important to note this policy includes two appendixes that should be given to the individual as a part of the policy.

Codes of Conduct:

1. By signing Form A of Policy 13 the individual is acknowledging receipt of the appropriate Code of Conduct:
 - a) Professional Code given to those being offered employment
 - b) Volunteer Code given to potential volunteers
 - c) Volunteer Code [Spanish Translation]

Background Checks:

1. All individuals are to receive the Fair Credit Rights Information
2. Investigative Consumer Report, Disclosure and Consent:

This is the **“National Background Check Consent” form**

All individuals, except minors that are employees, receive this form to complete.

Depending on the responsibilities, this form is also used for the credit check and motor vehicle check consent
3. Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension (MN BCA) **Consent form**
 - * Reference pages 7 & 8 of the Background Check Manual if information is needed regarding the use of this form.
 - * This is the **ONLY** background check required of employed minors (until their 18th birthday).
 - * The employed individual is to write check to MN BCA for \$8.00 per MN State statute; the entity may pay for volunteers if the entity so chooses.

VIRTUS Registration:

Give the individual the VIRTUS registration instructions sheet. The individual should immediately register at www.virtusonline.org prior to processing any paperwork. Regardless if the individual registers for a session at this time, the individual should still register to be in the VIRTUS system. In the near future, most paper work will be integrated into the VIRTUS registration process. Local Safe Environment Coordinators will need to verify the correct procedures were followed for the individual's position held.

By having the individual register with VIRTUS: 1) Accurate information is more likely to be entered into the system; 2) The User ID and password can be determined by the user and is more likely to be recorded for future use; 3) The individual will be more likely to register for a session online so accurate registration counts will be known. Also, if a session is changed, the VIRTUS communication system can directly contact these individuals with the change.

In the near future, most of the requirements will be completed through a VIRTUS integrated registration system.