

**Testimony before Michigan House Law and Justice Committee**

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Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, thank you for taking considered legislative action to enhance the protection of children and youth. My name is Larry LaCross. I am a clinical social worker and clinical supervisor at Catholic Human Services. We provide a wide range of services in the northern lower peninsula and have a close relationship with the Diocese of Gaylord. I serve as the Victim Assistance Coordinator for the Diocese. In these roles I have seen both the acute and long term impact of abuse and trauma, particularly sexual trauma, and the importance of effective reporting, response and prevention.

**1. Focus of mandatory reporting is to protect children and prevent harm.**

Mandatory reporting of any actual or suspected child abuse or neglect is the established legal and ethical standard of care for those of us working with children and families. Reporting of any actual or suspected child abuse or neglect goes well beyond simply complying with the law. Making appropriate disclosures allows us to take action to prevent further harm to a child and creates an opportunity for intervention and healing. It is consistent with our most closely held values to stand up, speak out and take action to protect children.

**2. Victim assistance process in Diocese and role of mandatory reporting.**

The Diocese of Gaylord Policy for the Protection of Children maintains standards and best practices consistent with the Michigan Child Protection Law, other applicable state and federal laws, church canon law and the Charter for the Protection of Children and Youth instituted by the US Conference of Catholic Bishops in 2002.

The Diocese distributes and publicizes information encouraging the reporting to authorities of any suspected abuse or neglect, especially child sexual abuse, and reinforces mandatory reporting. The Diocese maintains a dedicated contact number for the Victim Assistance Coordinator "to receive reports of sexual abuse concerning any cleric, religious, employee, or other person acting with the authority of the Church or the Diocese." After receiving a report in this role I follow the law for immediately reporting any actual or suspected child abuse or neglect. If another Diocesan employee, priest or other minister who falls under the mandatory reporting law receives such information they are expected to follow the law and make a report. The Diocese is committed to transparency and cooperation with law enforcement with regard to victims of sexual abuse, including minors as well as adults who do not fall under the child welfare mandatory reporting law.

Following the reporting process we seek to provide assistance, advocacy and pastoral care to support the victim toward healing and thriving. This assistance may take the form of providing support for treatment, pastoral care including a meeting with the Bishop if requested and close accompaniment along a journey of healing.

Recognizing the harm done is critical to assisting victims of sexual abuse. Reporting incidents of child abuse or neglect reinforces to victims the truth that harm occurred and that we as a church family and society are hurt and seeking justice for them as well. In the response to victims we seek to create opportunities for healing and empowerment where they have experienced wounding and powerlessness.

Reporting also affirms the right of the community to appropriately know and respond to sexual or physical abuse or child neglect through those duly elected or appointed to law enforcement roles. Religious, community or public institutions do not have the right to withhold information from civil authorities.

### **3. Importance of a culture of transparency and truth**

Catholic teaching affirms that each human being has inherent worth and dignity and seeks to advocate for the rights and welfare of every human person. This can only happen in an environment of transparency, truth and compassion centered on victims of abuse. We also affirm the responsibility of each individual to take action when they have the ability to respond to abuse or other harm. This includes the affirmative duty to report. Laws should promote increased education and training on mandatory reporting as well as compliance. At the same time I encourage you to consider any potential for unintended negative consequences of policy changes.

Our Catholic Church and Bishops have been called in recent decades to take meaningful measures to promote increased responsiveness and transparency directed toward truth , justice and healing. The policies and practices in place seek to go beyond just legal compliance toward bringing light and hope to dark situations. This light focuses on advocating for physical, psychological and spiritual support for victims of abuse and healing for their families and communities.

All community and social institutions that affect the lives of children and families should seek to uphold the highest standards possible for child protection and providing hope and healing to victims of abuse.

Thank you.