

## **RHODE ISLAND IS NOT PENNSYLVANIA**

Let's acknowledge the irrefutable: Child abuse is insidious and arises from circumstances that repel the sympathy and understanding of all. The recent grand jury report from Pennsylvania has reopened the wound and the history of the Catholic church's role in this crisis. However, in examining any situation, it's important to be fair and accurate. The recent and justifiable anger has clouded the civil discourse and distorted the local history. Any reasonable factual examination will yield a conclusion that while Rhode Island experienced its own well-documented abuse crisis, in the decades since that period our diocese has implemented strong and effective methods to confront the problem. In sum, Rhode Island is not Pennsylvania.

As the Director of the Diocesan Office of Compliance, and a former twenty-three year veteran of the Rhode Island State Police, I have as good a view as any of our diocese's response to this crisis.

Nearly ten years prior to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' adoption in 2002 of a formalized Charter for the Protection of Children, the Diocese of Providence was already taking steps to get its arms around the crisis. In 1993, it took the unprecedented step of establishing my office, and hired a trained law enforcement investigator and former Lieutenant of the Massachusetts State Police to run it. For the past quarter century, this office has vigorously, tenaciously and transparently conducted investigations, background checks and training to protect all within our care. Moreover, we are always improving our procedures. These efforts are not widely understood by the public because they receive scant attention.

For two decades, every allegation received by my office, regardless of credibility, is promptly and fully reported to law enforcement. This cooperative approach allows the police complete freedom and

independence to conduct an objective investigation, and to convict and punish criminals. Independently, our Advisory Board, which has included a former Rhode Island Attorney General, a former Major of the State Police, the former Rhode Island Child Advocate and the former Director of the DCYF, assesses cases and makes recommendations to the Bishop regarding an accused's suitability for ministry. Any allegation credibly established – regardless of when it occurred – results in permanent removal from ministry.

There is also much activity to prevent occurrences of abuse. More stringent procedures have been implemented for seminarian selection. My office annually conducts over 4,000 Bureau of Criminal Investigation Checks, as well as Safe Environment Training Programs for all having regular contact with children. These elements require renewal every three years. Finally, we are always looking to improve and implement best practices. In 2016, following the events at a private, non-Catholic school, we worked voluntarily with the Department of Attorney General to establish formalized reporting protocols and more supplemental transparency which exceeds requirements set forth in the Rhode Island General Laws.

These policies and procedures have produced significant and positive results. This is not to say that we are complacent with our effort, or that bad people still can't do bad things. However, significant and measurable progress has been made as evidenced by the systematic statistical decrease showing that the overwhelming majority of claims are from behavior many decades ago.

I spent over twenty years serving the public as a proud member of the Rhode Island State Police. When I signed on as the Director of the Diocesan Office of Compliance, I knew the history of the abuse crisis and because of my work as a detective commander I was cognizant of the dependable and trustworthy reputation established by the Office of

Compliance since 1993. In large measure, sustaining, advancing and improving its tradition was the most attractive feature of this job. Now, and in the future, we all need to strengthen our resolve to protect children. Yet, we also need to push back on any narrative or notion that Rhode Island is Pennsylvania – for it overlooks and ignores the tremendous efforts of many to address the ills of the past.

Kevin O’Brien is the Director of Compliance for the Diocese of Providence and a former Major of the Rhode Island State Police.