



Roman Catholic Diocese of  
**Fall River**  
Southeastern MA • Cape Cod • The Islands

# FOSTERING A CULTURE OF PROTECTION

## *An Update on Safe Environment Initiatives in the Diocese of Fall River*

November 15, 2024

Dear Friends in Christ,

In declaring November 18, 2024, as *World Day for the Prevention of and Healing from Child Sexual Exploitation, Abuse, and Violence*, the United Nations aims to increase global awareness of the horrific prevalence of sexual violence against children, mobilize action to prevent violence, and support healing and justice for survivors.

Now having served ten years as Bishop of Fall River, I have spent time contemplating what we as a Diocese have learned about protecting children and vulnerable adults in our care. Over the decade we have made great strides in implementing best practices and centering on accountability and transparency. I am grateful to our clergy, staff persons, and lay faithful who assisted in these efforts. While I am filled with sorrow for what was historically an inadequate response from Church officials, I want to assure you that the Diocese of Fall River of today is focused on the safety of our community and instilling a culture of protection.

When I look back, it pains and saddens me to think about the tragic failure to protect the innocent who suffered and continue to suffer in so many ways. To all survivors of child sexual abuse, I am deeply sorry. We as a Church failed you when you were most vulnerable. As a Diocese we are firmly resolved to do all we can to help you heal, make certain we are accountable, and protect our children so that no other child suffers as you have.

*In the last ten years, the Diocese has conducted criminal background checks on and provided safe environment training to 35,000+ clergy, employees, and volunteers.*

In this report, I want to share with you what the Diocese has in place to foster a culture of protection throughout our entities and programs, with a goal of preventing any occurrence of abuse, and to respond effectively to allegations of abuse brought to our attention. I hope that you find this report informative and helpful.

I reaffirm to you that it is our collective diocesan priority to remain vigilant to protect children and vulnerable adults in our parishes, schools, programs, and ministries. May the Lord shower His grace and blessings upon all who have been affected by child abuse.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

Most Reverend Edgar M. da Cunha, S.D.V.  
Bishop of Fall River



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# Building a Culture of Child Protection

**Over the past decade, the Diocese of Fall River has instituted a number of reforms and additional steps in efforts to prevent and respond to abuse.**

- Established an Office of Safe Environment and hired personnel with the necessary experience to staff it: a licensed social worker to serve as Director of Safe Environment and Victim Assistance, along with a Coordinator of Compliance and Data; a Coordinator of CORI and Safe Environment Training; and a Catholic Schools Background Screening Specialist.
- Strengthened protocols for handling allegations and responding to those impacted by abuse.
- Published a list of clergy against whom a credible allegation of abuse of a minor has been made, going back 70 years.
- Require all personnel to undergo a background check, agree to a code of conduct, and complete a Safe Environment Training Program. This includes a criminal background check (CORI) for everyone who works, ministers and volunteers in the Diocese and, in the case of schools, fingerprint checks.
- Created a policy with detailed instructions for diocesan personnel who receive allegations of abuse and misconduct.
- Mandated training for all teachers, employees, clergy and volunteers on how to recognize the signs of abuse and what to do when there is reason to believe there is abuse.
- Teaching and encouraging children to understand their right to be safe and to report abuse to a trusted adult through a program called "Circle of Grace."
- Stronger collaboration with law enforcement investigations.
- Created a new Ministerial Review Board with an expanded mandate that includes independence and authority and regularly receives additional training.
- Began offering an annual diocesan Healing Service- usually during April, Abuse Prevention Month - to pray for and remember victims/survivors of sexual abuse.

*"I spent many years in shame and embarrassment wondering how did I let this happen? Why wasn't I strong enough to fight back? And, more importantly, how did others let it happen? Speaking to you now, I own the story. It doesn't control me. ... I think we're doing it right now. We've put the things in place now to prevent these things and not to pass them along."*

**Clergy Abuse Survivor Speaking at a Prayer Service for Healing**

## Steps Taken When an Allegation is Made

### Law Enforcement Notification

When notified of an allegation involving a victim who is CURRENTLY a minor, the Diocese immediately contacts the Massachusetts Department of Children and Families. When notified of an allegation involving abuse of a minor where the victim is now an adult, the Diocese contacts the appropriate District Attorney's Office.

### Restriction from Ministry

A clergy member who has been accused of sexual abuse of a minor, after a determination that the allegation is not manifestly false, is placed on administrative leave and is not permitted to exercise public ministry during the investigation by law enforcement or the Church.

### Victim Assistance

The Diocesan Victim Assistance Coordinator offers support and accompaniment during and after the investigation, assists with access to therapy needs and arranges a meeting with the Bishop if needed.

### External Investigation

Law enforcement investigates the matter first and

determines if any criminal charges are appropriate. If there is a criminal conviction, the Diocese deems the allegation to be credible, the priest remains out of ministry and their name is placed on a published list of credibly accused clergy.

### Internal Investigation

After the Diocese is notified that the law enforcement investigation is complete, and assuming there is no criminal conviction, the Bishop initiates an internal investigation. When the investigation is complete, the Ministerial Review Board- a consultative body of mostly lay people not employed by the Church- reviews the complete investigation and provides recommendations to the Bishop.

### Determination

After reviewing the investigation and recommendations of the Ministerial Review Board, the Bishop determines whether the allegation is credible. Clergy with a credible allegation of abuse of a minor remain on leave from ministry and names are placed on the published list of credibly accused clergy.

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*The Safe Environment Enterprise is organized around two primary pillars: Prevention and Response*

## Prevention

### Policy for Protecting the Faithful

The Diocese of Fall River has had policies in place to prevent and respond to allegations of abuse since 1993. They have been reviewed and updated many times over the last two decades to keep pace with best practices in the field of child protection. The current policy, *Diocesan Policy for Protecting the Faithful*, was promulgated by Bishop da Cunha in 2020, covering all clergy, religious, employees, and volunteers involved in every Diocesan entity. The policy addresses sexual misconduct and ministerial misconduct by clergy or personnel, whether the person harmed is a minor or an adult.

### The Essential Three

The Essential Three refers to three components required of all who minister, work or volunteer in the Diocese, regardless if their position is directly connected to children and youth: criminal background check, Safe Environment training and signing of the Code of Conduct. As more people are screened, trained, and agree to a Code of Conduct, the more assurance we have that ALL the faithful are in a safe environment in every parish, school, and diocesan facility.

### Audits

U.S. dioceses are assessed annually by a third-party consultant to ensure their adherence to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People. Our Diocese has always been found in compliance with the Charter, most recently in a 2022 audit.

### Parish Visits

The Office of Safe Environment staff regularly visits parishes to assess compliance with diocesan safe environment policies and procedures, and partners with pastors and parish staff to address any areas of need. Such visits provide an important view into the “boots on ground” reality of how policy and parish life intersect.

## Response

### Victim Assistance

The Diocese has a licensed clinical social worker who brings many years of clinical work and training in trauma to coordinate assistance for those who report having been sexually abused as minors. In this role, Carolyn Shipp ensures the availability of pastoral care, the arrangement of professional therapy, and accompanies victim-survivors through the investigation and beyond, if requested.

### Prayer Service for Healing

This is held each year in April-Child Abuse Prevention Month- to atone for the abuses that have occurred and to pray for healing. When possible, a victim-survivor speaks at the service.

### Outreach to Affected Parishes/Schools

Together with the diocesan Ministerial Care Team, a group which assists with crisis response, the Victim Assistance Coordinator provides support to parishes and schools that have been affected by allegations of clergy sexual abuse. This can include meetings with parish/school staff, presence at Masses, and ongoing consultation with pastor/administrator.

*“I have come to know survivors of clergy abuse in my parishes. They are my ‘heroes of faith.’ If they can persevere in faith despite what they suffered, then so can I. I get angry, sad and frustrated when I know that anyone has been harmed by a brother priest, so I must pray deeply, walk with people in their pain and work to build a culture of healing and protection in the Church.”*

**Father John Murray**  
Pastor, St. Mary-Our Lady of the Isle Parish,  
Nantucket

*Voice of the Faithful, an independent lay Catholic group focused on ensuring transparency in the Church, ranked the Diocese of Fall River #3 among 177 dioceses nationwide in its 2023 report, *Measuring Abuse Prevention and Safe Environment Programs as Reported Online in Diocesan Policies and Practices*. The Diocese scored 95 points out of a possible 100 in a review of 10 categories.*

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## How to Report Abuse:

The Diocese of Fall River encourages anyone who has been abused by someone representing the Church to come forward to law enforcement and the Diocese.

- To report abuse of someone who is CURRENTLY a minor call the Massachusetts Child At-Risk Hotline: 800-792-5200 or your local police department.
- To report abuse of someone who is now over 18, call your local police department or the District Attorney's Office.

To report to the Diocese, contact Victim Assistance Coordinator Carolyn Shipp: 508-985-6508 or go online: <https://www.fallriverdiocese.org/safe-environment/report-an-incident-of-abuse/>



Carolyn Shipp is the Director of Safe Environment and Victim Assistance for the Diocese of Fall River. She took leadership of the Office of Safe Environment in 2021, following several years as Victim Assistance Coordinator for the Diocese.

A licensed clinical social worker, Carolyn began her career providing case management, advocacy, and support to victims of

domestic violence for a non-profit organization. Her collaboration with police, the district attorney's office and other agencies led to a position with a children's advocacy center where she provided support to families involved in child sexual abuse investigations; she also provided training to the community on abuse prevention and best practices.

After obtaining her master's in social work, she served the San Diego Unified School District providing assessment and therapy to a diverse population of children and families. Her postgraduate training has centered on trauma-informed care.

*In the last ten years, an average of 15,000 youth per year have received training through an age-appropriate safe environment curriculum called Circle of Grace, which teaches children and youth important safety skills such as appropriate physical and emotional boundaries and taking action if boundary violations occur. All diocesan schools and parish Faith Formation programs are required to utilize the Circle of Grace curriculum.*

## You Can Learn More Here

Scan the QR code for links to resources for further information



or visit

[www.fallriverdiocese.org/fostering-a-culture-of-protection/](http://www.fallriverdiocese.org/fostering-a-culture-of-protection/)

*"As a principal, I've seen first-hand the importance and impact of Circle of Grace. Students not only learn about the importance of boundaries, but they also gain skills to keep themselves safe. Having these skills empowers students to come forward and seek help if they find themselves in unsafe situations."*

Megan dos Santos  
Principal, Holy Name School, Fall River



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