

Help for victims of abuse

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After decades of hiding its clergy sex-abuse problems, the Archdiocese of Philadelphia says it is aggressively encouraging abuse survivors to seek its assistance. "We've gone from [simply] making a report to asking: 'Who are you? What are your needs? How can we help?' " said Mary Achilles, victims' advocate for the archdiocese. The changes, a strictly local effort, are outlined in a new brochure sent to every registered Catholic household in the five counties covered by the archdiocese, she said. The three-page foldout, "Enhanced Efforts to Assist Victims of Clergy Sexual Abuse," includes a letter from Cardinal Justin Rigali and describes the archdiocese's efforts to reach out to victims and meet their psychological and financial needs. Victims of clergy sex abuse, their families, and public-policy advocates contacted for this article said they thought the archdiocese had improved its outreach, but complained that it was working to bar them from winning a right to sue their assailants. Achilles said the archdiocese was working with 95 victims, and predicted it would spend more than \$1 million on their care in 2007. The improved outreach springs in part, she said, from a 2005 Philadelphia grand-jury investigation that revealed extensive sexual assaults by priests in the archdiocese - mostly in the 1970s and 1980s - and a broad pattern of concealment by the local hierarchy. "Our response to victims in the past was wrong," Achilles said in an interview. "We are in a new phase of 'bishops forward, lawyers back.'" John Salveson, president of a locally based lobbying group advocating for changes in sex-abuse laws, said he did not challenge the archdiocese's assertion that it had improved its outreach. "I suppose they have," he said. But Salveson, who was abused in the Diocese of Rockville Centre, N.Y., said he was skeptical of the archdiocese's motives and the timing of the brochure. He noted that the Philadelphia District Attorney's Office and his Foundation to Abolish Child Sex Abuse Inc. were lobbying the state legislature for a change in the civil statute of limitations that would allow adult victims of child sex abuse to sue their assailants, even for abuse long ago. Of the brochure, Salveson said: "I think this is a document they are hoping can stop us - something to show lawmakers so they can say, 'Look how great we're doing.'" Civil suits can "expose perpetrators who have escaped detection because of the statute of limitation," he wrote in a subsequent e-mail. In past decades, victims of sexual assault in Pennsylvania had as little as two years to file criminal or civil charges, regardless of their age. Now sexually assaulted minors have until age 30 to bring charges, but victims of past assaults may bring charges only within the time frame in effect at the time. Four bills seeking to expand the time in which abuse victims may sue are in House and Senate committees. One would extend the age for filing civil suits to age 50. Three bills call for suspending the civil statute of limitations in sex-abuse cases for one or two years, during which adults who were assaulted as children could sue their assailants. In 2003, California allowed adult victims such a one-year "window." In July, the Archdiocese of Los Angeles agreed to pay \$660 million to settle 508 claims of abuse by clergy, some dating from the 1940s. Last month, the Diocese of San Diego agreed to pay \$198 million to settle 144 abuse claims. In July, Delaware granted adult victims of sexual abuse a two-year window to sue. It's no secret that the Philadelphia Archdiocese opposes efforts to allow lawsuits in old abuse cases, said Donna Farrell, archdiocese spokeswoman. "People

die. It's very difficult to remember situations clearly. Files don't exist," she said. "Those are all the reasons there are statutes of limitations." She also said the archdiocese was studying the feasibility of a capital campaign, but had not decided whether to proceed. Achilles denied the brochure was timed to woo donors or sway lawmakers. Rather, she said, it was a progress report to the Catholic laity. "I think the church was really wrong in the past" in how it handled victims and perpetrators, she said. "I just say to them, 'Let's do these things because they're the right thing to do.'" Rigali hired Achilles as a consultant in January 2006. A former victims' advocate for the Philadelphia District Attorney's Office and the state, she came on board four months after the grand jury reported an "immoral cover-up" by archdiocesan leaders. That report concluded that at least 63 priests, and as many as 100 more, abused hundreds of youngsters over five decades. Rigali, who became archbishop here four years ago, was not implicated in the cover-up. Achilles said she had spent the last 22 months helping Rigali change the culture of the archdiocese's approach to known abuse victims, all now adults. "The changes reflect the recognition that victims are not at fault, and that we are committed to assisting them in any way for as long as they have need," Rigali wrote in the brochure. Achilles said the archdiocese's Office of Child and Youth Protection had received "more than a few" phone calls in response to the brochure from victims previously unknown to the archdiocese. She declined to say how many. Among the recent policy changes, Achilles noted, are that victims' therapists no longer have to file periodic "progress reports" to the archdiocese for reimbursement, and the archdiocese reimburses for previous counseling paid out of pocket. The archdiocese does not require abuse victims to sign any agreements stating they will not sue it in exchange for services, Achilles said. The archdiocese has also sent letters advising all alumni of two of its high schools of abuse allegations there, and offering assistance to victims who have not yet come forward. Relatives of abuse victims who have recently availed themselves of the archdiocese's outreach services gave mixed reviews. Several, who asked that their names or their children's names not be used, described the program as "helpful" and the staff sympathetic. But they complained that most of the services had become available only after they demanded them, and said they did not feel the office was "proactive" enough in guiding victims' recovery. "The people in the victims' office were very nice," said David Eyes, 31, who was abused by a priest while in his early teens, but added that he still found it painful to "beg from the people who hurt you the most." For Information A copy of the brochure is available on the archdiocesan Web site at www.archphila.org. The phone number for the Office of Child and Youth Protection is 1-888-800-8780. Its e-mail address is philavac@adphila.org. Contact staff writer David O'Reilly at 215-854-5723 or doreilly@phillynews.com.

Illustration/Photo: Mary Achilles, victim advocate for the archdiocese, said, "Our response to victims in the past was wrong."
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