

USCCB MEDIA BLOG

THURSDAY, JULY 15, 2010

Can Child Protection Efforts Go Too Far?

I got that question last week from a reporter in Las Vegas who was writing about a new church policy in the Diocese of Las Vegas that requires anyone volunteering in a parish to be fingerprinted. The policy applied not just to Scout leaders and religious education teachers, who work closely with children, but also to bazaar volunteers, ushers and even the people who read the Scriptures at Mass.

The policy might be overbroad, I opined to the reporter, but in today's world I'd rather go too far to guarantee safety than not far enough. Indeed, I've since heard of other dioceses that require all staff and volunteers to go through background checks. Child sexual molestation exists – there's plenty of evidence of that on the evening news, recently the account (this time, with a happy ending for the child) of a four-year-old girl snatched by a registered sex offender from her front yard in Missouri.

Polling by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) suggests most Catholics think the church should do more to protect youth from abuse. Asked if they believe the church's policies to deal with allegations and prevent abuse "do enough" to protect children, only three in ten Catholics nationally say the church is doing enough. Seventy percent say the policies should go further.

Part of the problem is that most Catholics have no idea how much the Church has done. For example, CARA notes that "less than three in ten Catholics are aware of" all the Church is doing to prevent child sexual abuse.

More than 1.8 million adult employees and volunteers in the church have had training in how to identify and report suspicious activity by an adult with a child, but only 29 percent of adult Catholics know that.

Dioceses report annually on their adherence to the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People, but only 18 percent know that.

The Church has an independent organization that conducts audits to determine whether each diocese and its bishop are enforcing the new sexual abuse policies yet only 16 percent of adult Catholics know it.

The Church has commissioned the John Jay College of Criminal Justice to conduct a scientific study of the causes and context of abuse, yet a mere 11 percent of adult Catholics know that.

Yet even when people have such information, I imagine many people will want the church to do even more to guarantee that children are safe from sexual predators.

Sexual abuse of children is a problem well beyond the Catholic Church. There's data galore on that.

Safe environment programs have much more to offer than many realize. People who participate in them not only are cleared to be with children through fingerprinting and background checks, they also learn how to recognize steps leading to child sexual abuse and how to protect children from it.

It's unfortunate that we need such education, but we do. We drive slowly around schools and parks and hit the brakes when a ball rolls into the road because children need more than the usual protection. Going through fingerprinting may be just one more thing we do as part of a commitment to keep youngsters safe. The church in Las Vegas wisely bets that it is.

POSTED BY SR. MARY ANN WALSH AT ABELS: CHARTER FOR THE PROTECTION OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE, SEXUAL ABUSE, U.S. BISHOPS



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