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Testimony in Support of SB 218: Requiring a duly ordained minister of religion to report certain abuse and neglect of children

Senate Committee on Federal and State Affairs

Chuck Weber, Executive Director, Kansas Catholic Conference

March 13, 2019

Chairman Estes and members of the committee:

Thank you for having this hearing and thank Senator Tom Holland, especially, for his efforts on this profoundly important issue.

Sexual abuse, particularly when it happens as an act of the most intimate betrayal in the context of one's religious faith, is nothing short of disgusting and horrific. There are no words to describe the sheer agony resulting from these despicable acts. Innocence is lost. As a practicing Catholic, I hang my head in shame at this scandal, which some members of my own Church have been complicit.

As the Executive Director of the Kansas Catholic Conference, I would like to offer each of you, and particularly the victims and family members--those known and those perhaps still suffering in silence, the personal and deeply authentic apology of our four Kansas Catholic Bishops. We are blessed with Shepherds of Faith and heart and they, like so many of our true and devoted clergy, while not sharing in the crime of abuse, feel deeply their duty to bring this plea for forgiveness and expression of sorrow to you. So on their behalf, I ask you for this forgiveness and covey their prayers for your comfort and healing.

When I told people, over the past weeks, that we were working with Senator Holland towards our shared goal of creating safer environments for Kansas children, more than a few were surprised that we're not only proponents of SB 218, we look forward to this discussion in the public square. We welcome every opportunity to partner with the State of Kansas or any other entity public or private to help create a safer environment for our children. We want to share our story.

MOST REVEREND JOHN B. BRUNGARDT, D.D.
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Board Chairman
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DIOCESE OF SALINA

CHUCK WEBER
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Every Catholic you know, with a few sordid exceptions, feels to the core of their being, a sense of betrayal and burning anger and deep disgust and painful shame.

Every Catholic legislator you have dinner with, every Catholic neighbor whose kids play with your kids, every Catholic doctor who operates on your grandparents or Catholic Charities volunteer who brings the homeless in to our shelters for some warm food and a hot shower...and every good Catholic priest and bishop who dedicates his life to be there with you when you are crying or when you're dying...every one of these Catholics feels to the core of their being, a sense of betrayal and burning anger and deep disgust and painful shame.

Every one of them...of us...wants our holy Church back, wants our Mother Church back...done and finished and rid of the exceptions, of the predators.

What is the Catholic Church doing to get our church back? Allow me to share some of our action items.

In your packets we've submitted details about a model for safe environments for children that I stand here and submit to you is the foundation of a gold standard of safe environments for our children. There is far too much depth to go into it all here, but allow me to give you an idea of what the Catholic Church is doing.

Every member of the clergy, Consecrated Religious (sisters/nuns), employees and volunteers who have regular contact with a minor are required to attend, in person, an awareness and training session called Protecting God's Children for Adults. This training comes under an umbrella program called VIRTUS, which is a program and service of the National Catholic Risk Retention Group. It was put together by national experts in many disciplines focused on detecting, reporting and preventing child sexual abuse.

The word **virtus** is Latin, and means valor, moral strength, excellence, and worth. In ancient times, **virtus** denoted a way of life and manner of behavior that always aspired to the highest, most positive attributes of people and aspects of human interaction.

That's what we seek with the VIRTUS programs.

They are conducted in person by certified facilitators, then the program continues as a condition of your employment—clergy, teachers, other ministers—with regular monthly online training bulletins.

Just in the Diocese of Wichita—Southeast Kansas—more than 2,600 VIRTUS sessions have been held since 2002. More than 260 sessions last year alone. There are currently 34,000 active VIRTUS accounts.

In the Archdiocese of Kansas City in Kansas—northeast Kansas—more than 47,930 adults have been VIRTUS trained.

The Archdiocese has also conducted more than 41,000 background checks for adults who regularly work with minors. In fact, across the state of Kansas in Catholic communities, Wichita, Kansas City, Dodge City and Salina dioceses, tens of thousands of adults have cleared state and national background checks, and which are regularly renewed and checked against the Kansas Sex Offender Registry.

There's more.

Independent Review Boards have been established, made up of experts in their fields-- psychiatry, law enforcement, healthcare, parenting. It's not just the Bishops watching the store—they can't—it's the parishioner in the pew. This is OUR church! There are audits conducted and we screen young men wishing to enter the priesthood like never before to make sure they are psychologically and well as spiritually suited to the remarkable vocation of the priesthood.

You have testimony in front of you as well as data, from each of our diocesan Safe Environment Specialists. These are former FBI agents and psychologists and experts who work every day to implement the directives set in place since 2002.

The reporting policy when it comes to suspected child abuse can be boiled down to three words: Nine. One. One. Call the police. Call DCF. Report it. If it involves someone in the Church, then report it to the Church—use our toll free confidential reporting line works. We will also conduct our own investigation, in addition to and working with law enforcement.

No human endeavor is ever perfect or, often, even ever good enough. But we Catholics have learned, in this crucible of shared pain and anger, some of the measures that do help, as far as any human space can be free from abuse, to work toward restoring trust in our Church. We hope that you find some comfort in what we have been doing and how far the Catholic Church has come. Please feel free to read these at your convenience.

On behalf of the Kansas Bishops, we fully support this bill. Again, we welcome every tool available, like full participation and cooperation with the Attorney General of KS, and every partnership available to rid our Church of the evil and bad shepherds who betrayed our trust and our children and set us all on a road to healing.

We ask that you report this bill favorably for passage. I will be happy to answer your questions as best I can.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Chuck Weber". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Chuck" and last name "Weber" clearly distinguishable.

Chuck Weber

Executive Director, Kansas Catholic Conference