

OUR PROMISE TO PROTECT

SAFE ENVIRONMENT POLICY



Diocese of
Green Bay

Revised: August 2026

Most Reverend David Laurin Ricken, D.D., J.C.L.



By the Grace of God and the Authority of the Apostolic See
Bishop of Green Bay

DECREE

In June of 2002, an important meeting with the Bishops of the United States implemented the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*, which pledged the Catholic Church in the United States to protect children and youth from sexual abuse and to establish effective policies that respond to actions that occurred in the past.

"*Our Promise to Protect ... Safe Environment Policy*" is the response of the Diocese of Green Bay. Our policy includes individuals at risk as well as children and youth. This policy has been recently reviewed and updated. It is our pledge and commitment to create an environment that protects our children and individuals at risk from harm. We will comply with all laws regarding the reporting of allegations of sexual abuse against children and individuals at risk to the proper civil authorities for investigation. I am committed to continuously reviewing and refining necessary policies and procedures. I hope, and pray, for the healing of all those who have been harmed.

Together, we are called to minister to all of God's people and show special care for our children and those who are at risk. We, as the Church, strive to create environments where all people treat each other with dignity, charity, and respect, and where the faithful are served by men and women who fully reflect the love and protection of Jesus Christ.

I hereby promulgate this revised version of "*Our Promise to Protect ... Safe Environment Policy*" as particular law for the Diocese of Green Bay effective August 1, 2026. This revised version replaces the previous policy.

Given at the Chancery on August 1, 2026.

Tammy C. Basten
Chancellor

Most Reverend David L. Ricken, D.D., J.C.L.
Bishop of Green Bay

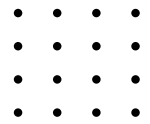


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INTRODUCTION AND CORE COMMITMENT



The Diocese of Green Bay is committed to creating and providing safe and sacred places in our parishes, schools, and other institutions so that minors and individuals at risk will be protected from any harm, especially sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, and grooming behavior. Guided by the USCCB's *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*, diocesan leadership commits to preventing abuse, responding promptly to allegations, and supporting all who are harmed.



This policy applies to:

- Priests, deacons, and other ministers
- Seminarians and candidates for ordination
- Religious working in diocesan ministries
- Employees of parishes, schools, and diocesan offices
- Volunteers who interact with minors or individuals at risk
- Other persons or entities to the extent this policy is incorporated into their appointment, assignment, contract, affiliation agreement, or conditions of participation

The diocese maintains **zero tolerance** for sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, grooming, or other abuse. Every allegation or concern will be taken seriously, reported as required, promptly assessed, and addressed through protective measures and fair procedures consistent with civil law, canon law, and applicable employment policies.

*Nothing in this policy is intended to alter the canonical status, organization, governance, or legal responsibility of any parish, school, religious institute, or separately organized entity.

FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLES



1

Human dignity is sacred.

Every person deserves to be safe, protected, and respected.

2

Prevention is essential.

Screening, training, supervision, and clear policies reduce the risk of harm.

3

Compliance with civil and Church law is mandatory.

All personnel must adhere to state reporting laws, diocesan policies, and canonical norms.

4

Transparency and accountability are expected.

Allegations will be handled promptly, compassionately, and with openness, while respecting privacy and due process. The diocese will respond promptly to every complaint of sexual misconduct.

KEY DEFINITIONS

Sexual Abuse

Any sexual act, sexual contact, sexual exploitation, sexual assault, or other sexualized conduct involving a minor that is prohibited by civil or canon law or diocesan policy. A violation of this policy may exist even if the conduct is not charged or prosecuted as a crime.

Sexual Exploitation

Includes:

- Using one's position/role for sexualized intent, sexual contact, or advances
- Sexual harassment
- Accessing images of sexual acts involving children (child pornography) via any format, i.e. print and electronic. Wisconsin Statute 948.12(1m) states: Whoever possesses any undeveloped film, photographic negative, photograph, motion picture, videotape, or other recording of a child engaged in sexually explicit conduct under all of the following circumstances is guilty of a Class I felony:
 - (a) The person knows that he or she possesses the material.
 - (b) The person knows the character and content of the sexually explicit conduct in the material.
 - (c) The person knows or reasonably should know that the child engaged in sexually explicit conduct has not attained the age of 18 years.

Grooming and Grooming-Related Conduct

For purposes of this policy, "grooming-related conduct" means conduct that is intended, or reasonably appears designed, to gain inappropriate access to, trust from, control over, secrecy with, or emotional dependency from a minor in order to facilitate sexual misconduct, exploitation, or other abuse. Warning signs may include, depending on context:

- Secretive or unauthorized communications;
- Repeated boundary violations;
- Inappropriate gifts, favors, flattery, or preferential treatment;
- Attempts to isolate a minor from parents, guardians, peers, or other adults;
- Sexualized comments, discussions, images, or conduct;
- Efforts to normalize inappropriate touching or sexual material; or
- Creating secrecy, indebtedness, fear, or emotional dependency.

Certain grooming conduct may constitute the felony offense of grooming a child for sexual activity under Wis. Stat. § 948.072. Whether conduct satisfies the elements of a criminal offense is determined by civil authorities and the courts. Conduct need not constitute a crime to violate diocesan policy or warrant protective or disciplinary action.

Minor

Anyone under age 18.

Adult Individual at Risk

Adults with impairments limiting self-care, or elder adults vulnerable to exploitation.

WISCONSIN MANDATORY REPORTING REQUIREMENTS

Wisconsin law designates specified professionals and other persons as mandated reporters under Wis. Stat. § 48.981. The precise legal obligation depends on the reporter's role, the information received, and the statutory reporting standard.

As a separate and broader diocesan requirement, all clergy, employees, educators, ministers, and volunteers must promptly report suspected child abuse, neglect, grooming, sexual exploitation, or threatened abuse in accordance with this policy, whether or not the individual would independently qualify as a mandated reporter under state law. A person who is uncertain whether a legal reporting duty applies should make the civil report or immediately seek guidance from law enforcement or the appropriate child-protective agency. Consultation with a supervisor or the diocese does not replace or delay a required civil report.

Mandated Reporter Steps

- **Report immediately to civil authorities (Child Protective Services or law enforcement):**
 - Child abuse (sexual, physical, emotional abuse)
 - Neglect
 - Suspected creation, possession, receipt, distribution, transmission, or intentional access of child pornography
 - Grooming
 - Threats of harm
- **If danger is immediate → Call 911.**
- Notify supervisors after making the civil report. "Reasonable cause to suspect" is enough; proof is **not** required.
- Complete a documentation report in the Awareity Incident Reporting System (diocesan reporting system) online at: gbdioc.org/protect-and-report/awareity-incident-reporting-system/



DIOCESAN REPORTING PROCEDURES

Schools, Parishes, and Faith Formation

- **Call civil authorities immediately**
- Notify the principal/faith formation administrator
- Administrator confirms civil reporting, then contacts:
 - Office of Catholic Schools OR Office of Children & Youth Faith Formation
- Notify the Office of Safe Environment at 920-272-8174

Reporting Sexual Abuse or Sexual Exploitation of a Minor by an Employee or Educator

- Employees and educators are required to follow civil law and all applicable diocesan policies. Anyone with personal knowledge of the sexual abuse or sexual exploitation of a minor by a person serving the Church must report the concern to the diocesan Office of Safe Environment.
- Individuals making a report will be advised to notify civil authorities and, when required, informed of their legal duty to do so. The diocese will ensure that the rights of both the complainant and the accused are fully protected, recognizing the presumption of innocence until proven otherwise. Reports may be made in person, by phone, or through the Awareness Incident Reporting System (link on page 11).
- **If the individual currently being abused is under age 18:** Contact civil authorities immediately, then notify the diocese.
- **If the person was abused as a minor and is now an adult:** Contact the diocese; notifying civil authorities is also encouraged.

Call the Diocese of Green Bay's Office of Safe Environment at 920-272-8174.

Adult Individuals at Risk

- **If danger is immediate → Call 911.**
- Otherwise → Contact Adult Protective Services (county where individual resides).

Clergy Reporting

- Clergy must report suspected abuse or grooming except when information is received solely in:
 - Sacramental confession Wisconsin Statute §48.981
- Clergy who hear such information, in a confessional, should encourage those with knowledge of physical or sexual abuse of minors to bring it to the attention of civil and Church authorities so that appropriate action can be taken.
- Anything learned outside confession **must** be reported.
- Clergy must also report any reasonable cause to believe, based on observation or information received, that a member of the clergy has abused or threatened to abuse a minor.

Legal Protections

- Good-faith reporters are protected from liability.
- Failure to report may result in civil or criminal penalties.

Reporting Sexual Abuse or Sexual Exploitation of Minors or Abuse of Individuals at Risk by a Priest or Deacon

Any person who becomes aware of or suspects sexual abuse, sexual exploitation or grooming by a priest or deacon should contact the Diocese of Green Bay's Office of Safe Environment immediately at 920-272-8174.

Response to Allegations of Sexual Abuse or Exploitation of Minors or Individuals at Risk by Clergy

The Diocese of Green Bay recognizes that the sexual abuse or sexual exploitation of a minor, or the abuse of an individual at risk, by a priest or deacon causes profound harm. In keeping with the Church's commitment to justice, compassion, and transparency, the diocese will respond to all allegations promptly, respectfully, and in full cooperation with civil and canonical requirements.

1. Commitment to Serious and Timely Response

The diocese shall take every complaint of sexual abuse or sexual exploitation of a minor, or abuse of an individual at risk, with the utmost seriousness. The diocese will respond promptly to all allegations involving a priest, deacon, or other cleric.

2. Initiation of Investigation

Upon receipt of an allegation of sexual abuse or sexual exploitation of a minor, or abuse of an individual at risk by a cleric, the diocese shall immediately initiate an investigation and follow all applicable procedures of Church law. Pastoral assistance and/or counseling will be offered to the alleged victim.

3. Protection of Rights

During the investigation, the diocese will ensure the protection of the rights of all parties involved, including both the individual making the allegation and the accused cleric.

4. Cooperation with Civil Authorities

The diocese reaffirms its commitment to fully cooperate with appropriate civil authorities in all matters involving criminal sexual misconduct. In addition to mandatory reporting laws, all diocesan personnel—regardless of mandated reporter status—are required to report any knowledge or reasonable belief regarding sexual abuse or sexual exploitation of a minor, or abuse of an individual at risk, to their supervisor or director as well as civil authorities (Child Protective Services or law enforcement).

5. Coordination with Civil Investigations

When civil authorities initiate a criminal investigation, the diocese shall defer to their investigative process. However, the diocese retains the responsibility to pursue its own internal investigation using all reasonable means. Internal disciplinary action may be taken even when civil authorities do not establish that a crime occurred.

6. Independent Review Board

An essential component of the diocesan investigatory process is the assessment of whether a priest or deacon accused of sexual misconduct of a minor and/or an individual at risk may continue or return to ministry. The bishop, in accordance with the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People* and the *Essential Norms*, receives consultation and recommendations from the Independent Review Board.

Duties of the Board

The board shall:

1. Review allegations of sexual abuse or exploitation of minors and provide recommendations regarding the continuation of ministry for accused clergy.
2. Review cases involving priests or deacons removed from ministry due to allegations and provide recommendations regarding return to ministry when allegations are unsubstantiated.
3. Review and recommend revisions to existing policies or the adoption of new policies related to sexual misconduct.

SAFE ENVIRONMENT STANDARDS

for Clergy, Employees, and Volunteers

4

REQUIREMENTS BEFORE SERVICE



1. **Criminal Background Check**
with satisfactory results



2. **VIRTUS® "Protecting God's Children" Training**

- Must occur **before** service when interacting with minors/individuals at risk
- Yearly training to include proper boundaries and communication



3. **Reference Checks**



4. **Acknowledgment of the Code of Conduct**

Failure to comply results in **removal from employment, ministry or volunteer service.**

CONDUCT WITH MINORS/ INDIVIDUALS AT RISK

Each individual is responsible for following *Our Promise to Protect* and ensuring its observance is a shared responsibility. Those who disregard this code will be subject to remedial action by the bishop, his representative or that person's supervisor. Corrective action may take various forms depending on the specific nature and circumstances of the offense and the extent of the harm done. For clerics, this action may range from a verbal warning to removal from ministry. For lay employees, this action may range from a verbal warning to discharge from employment, depending on the specific nature and circumstances of the offense and the extent of the harm.

When working with minors/individuals at risk, the following rules apply:

- Be aware of your own and others' vulnerability when working with minors and individuals at risk
- Avoid being alone with minors in isolated settings
- Touch must be **appropriate, nonsexual, and public**
- Never provide alcohol, drugs, or inappropriate materials
- Never use alcohol or drugs when working with minors
- No overnight stays with minors (*see trips and travel policy for overnight stay guidelines)
- Taking photos of minors while they are unclothed or undressing is prohibited by law
- If inappropriate personal or physical attraction develops between an adult and a minor, the adult is responsible for maintaining clear professional boundaries

General Standards for Digital and In-Person Communications

All communication must:

- Be **professional, transparent, and observable** by others
- Occur **only within the scope of assigned duties**
- Be **appropriate in tone, content, and timing**, reflecting the educational and professional nature of the adult–minor relationship.

Appropriate methods of communication:

Staff must:

- Use **only school/parish-approved communication platforms** (e.g., official email, PowerSchool, school-approved messaging tools)
- Schedule any necessary one-on-one virtual meetings through the **school's calendaring system** and conduct them only on **school-sponsored video platforms**
- Use school/parish-approved messaging tools when necessary for **minors' safety during off-campus activities** (two safe environment compliant adults must be included in the communication)

Prohibited communication:

Staff may not engage in any communication with minors that is—or could reasonably be perceived as:

- **Secretive or hidden** from parents, guardians, or supervisors
- Having **sexual, romantic, or suggestive undertones**
- Offering or promising **gifts, favors, attention, invitations, or anything of value** not related to the school/parish
- Using electronic devices, social media platforms, or online services to **contact a minor for non-school/non-parish purposes**
- Using **personal email, personal phone numbers, or personal social media messaging apps** for communication with minors
- **Grooming behavior**, including conduct intended to condition, entice, or manipulate a student for sexual contact or exploitation



In-Person Meetings

When meeting in-person with minors:

- Staff shall **avoid being alone with a minor** in a non-public space or a room with a closed door unless the room has a **window allowing visibility and privacy, when confidentiality is required**.
- One-on-one meetings should occur with the **door open** or in a **public or visible location** whenever possible.
- If privacy is required and no appropriate location is available, the staff member shall **delay the meeting** or ensure **another adult is present**.

Confidentiality

- Confidential information must be safeguarded.
- The **seal of confession is absolute in accord with Canons 983 and 984** of the *Code of Canon Law*. Outside of confession, disclosures of abuse must be reported.

Conflicts of Interest

- Avoid all situations that might present a conflict of interest. Even the appearance of a conflict of interest can call integrity and professional conduct into question.
- Refer individuals to other professionals/priests/deacons when necessary.

Pastoral Counseling Standards

Priests, deacons and others who provide pastoral counseling and spiritual direction must maintain appropriate boundaries and adhere to the following rules:

- Never step beyond your competence in pastoral counseling situations; limit the number of pastoral counseling sessions to three or less. Refer clients to other professionals when appropriate.
- Assume the full burden of responsibility for establishing and maintaining clear, appropriate boundaries in all situations involving pastoral counseling and spiritual direction. Sexual intimacies with persons being counseled or directed, including forced physical contact and inappropriate sexual comments, are absolutely forbidden and may result in the immediate loss of ministry or employment.
- Avoid physical contact of any kind that could be misconstrued. Sessions must be conducted in appropriate settings at appropriate times, not in private living quarters and not in places or at times that would tend to cause confusion about the nature of the relationship to the person(s) being counseled or directed.

Witness to Chastity

Clergy, employees, and volunteers must live chastely in accordance with their vocation (celibacy, married life, and single life) and must not exploit another person sexually in any way. This includes the possession or use of pornography.

PREVENTION

To prevent sexual abuse, sexual exploitation of minors, and abuse of individuals at risk, the diocese implements the following screening and formation measures for candidates for ordination and for priests and deacons serving within the diocese.

1 Screening of Candidates for Ordination

All candidates for the priesthood or permanent diaconate shall undergo:

- A criminal background check
- A psychological evaluation
- Interviews and reference checks

These measures are intended to identify any history of sexual abuse or sexual exploitation of a minor or an individual at risk, whether as a victim or perpetrator.

2 Priests and Deacons New to the Diocese

When a priest or deacon from another diocese or religious community seeks to transfer within the Diocese of Green Bay:

- A criminal background check shall be conducted to identify any history of sexual abuse or sexual exploitation.
- A letter of suitability or reference must be obtained from the cleric's bishop or religious superior. This letter must fully disclose any known allegations or history of sexual misconduct, particularly involving minors.

3 Continuing Education

Priests and deacons shall participate in mandatory ongoing training in sexual abuse prevention.

The diocese will provide ongoing training designed to:

- Strengthen understanding of appropriate boundaries
- Prevent all forms of sexual misconduct and grooming
- Reinforce reporting requirements and diocesan procedures

This ongoing formation supports safe, ethical, and accountable ministry.

RESPONSE TO PARISHES AFFECTED BY CLERGY ABUSE

When a priest or deacon engages in the sexual abuse or sexual exploitation of a minor, or the abuse of an individual at risk, the harm extends beyond those directly affected to the entire parish community. The diocese shall respond according to the following principles:

1

Transparent Communication

The diocese will provide clear and accurate information to the parish to reduce rumors, address confusion, and support healing. Disclosure will be balanced with the need to protect the privacy of the victim-survivor and the family, as well as the rights of the accused.

2

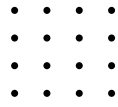
Multi-Disciplinary Support

Recognizing that parish healing requires varied expertise, the diocese will deploy a team of qualified professionals to assist the parish in addressing pastoral, emotional, and practical needs.

3

Awareness of the Grieving Process

The diocese acknowledges that parishes experience complex grief when a respected cleric is accused. Reactions may include disbelief, denial, anger, and sadness—directed toward the accused, the accuser(s), or the Church. With time and appropriate support, the parish can move forward in its mission.



TOGETHER, WE CAN KEEP OUR COMMUNITIES SAFE.

Sexual abuse, sexual exploitation and grooming of minors, and abuse of individuals at risk are deeply harmful and complex, requiring thoughtful and adaptive responses. While healing can be a challenging process, individuals and communities can recover with appropriate support such as counseling, support groups, and spiritual care.

The Diocese of Green Bay is committed to:

- Fostering safe and healthy faith communities
- Responding promptly and effectively to all allegations of abuse
- Providing fair and compassionate care to those who have been harmed

Guided by our faith in Jesus Christ, we will continue to learn from experience and ongoing education so that our response remains strong, just, and continually improving.

CONTACT US

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 gbdioc.org