

Criminal background checks, training to be online

written by Special to Arkansas Catholic |



Changes to improve and simplify the Diocese of Little Rock's safe environment program will be made starting March 1.

Bishop Anthony B. Taylor issued a Decree of Changes to Diocesan Safe Environment Policies and Procedures Feb. 5 for all diocesan, school and parish employees and volunteers.

"Our children and youth are our most precious gifts, for they truly are the future of our families, our communities and our Church," the decree stated.

Under the direction of Matt Glover, chancellor for canonical affairs, the policies that were put in place following the adoption of the U.S. bishops' 2002 Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People were re-evaluated.

Four changes will be made:

- **Initial training:** Training will now be available online in English and Spanish. Classes have been taught around the diocese with materials from Virtus: Protecting God's Children for Adults. Live, in-person training will continue to be an option based on need.
- **Background checks:** In the current system, parishes and schools had to send screening release forms in the mail and background check information was handled and stored by the diocese. After the initial background check, the employee or volunteer was rechecked every five years.

With the new system, adults will enter their information into a new background check system through the Virtus site and "certain key databases" will be rechecked automatically four times a year. The diocese will then be notified if there are any changes in the databases. The decree

noted that this will be more secure since the diocese won't have to store personal information on employees and volunteers.

For anyone currently with a Virtus account, there is no need to resubmit background check information now, Bishop Taylor said. Melissa Jackson, safe environment coordinator, is going to determine when the five-year background check is due and contact the employees and volunteers to input their information online through their Virtus account.

- **Virtus bulletins:** Reading monthly Virtus bulletins will no longer be required as part of continuing education. Instead the Safe Environment Office will create and distribute quarterly newsletters in English and Spanish that parishes and schools can use for bulletin inserts, handouts or website postings. The first newsletter will be published in June. Because the newsletters will be coming directly from the Safe Environment Office rather than through Virtus, there will be no "tracking" of the newsletters like there was with the Virtus bulletins.

Jackson will also be offering in-service training to the clergy, youth ministers and religious educators about safe environment topics.

- **Virtus accounts:** All employees and volunteers should already have a Virtus account, but those who do not will be required to do so by March 1. The background checks and other communications, such as changes to the Laity Code of Conduct and Policy on Sexual Abuse of Minors and the quarterly newsletters, will be handled through the Virtus account.

"I do believe these changes are for the best — not only for our diocese and our safe environment program but also (and most importantly) for our children and youth whom we aim to protect and keep safe," the decree said.

For more information, contact Jackson at (501) 664-0340.