

Victims' Group Uses Spotlight to Seek Changes in Law

By LAURIE GOODSTEIN

For more than 10 years, the Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests was little more than a loose support group of men and women who gathered in one another's homes to share tears, traumatic memories and legal advice.

Their stories rarely made it beyond their living rooms, and members say they grew used to being ignored or rebuffed by the Roman Catholic Church, the news media and in many cases even their friends and families.

All that changed when the sexual abuse scandal engulfed the church, giving the organization, known as SNAP, a news media platform it had never known. Now SNAP is trying to channel the attention and outrage into a lobbying effort to change the nation's laws on child sexual abuse.

In 21 cities in the United States and Canada yesterday, members of SNAP stood at the chancery doors of 21 Roman Catholic dioceses and urged bishops to push for legislation to make it harder for abusers to escape prosecution.

For years SNAP has looked to the bishops to stop abusive priests. Group members picketed churches and the hotels where the bishops held meetings. They petitioned for face-to-face sessions.

Now they are no longer looking to the church for the change, said Phil Saviano, director of SNAP's New England chapter. "We are putting our faith in the legislators and the prosecutors," Mr. Saviano said.

The group wants the bishops to join in lobbying for legislation to make it mandatory for clergy members to report suspected abuse. It also wants the bishops to help eliminate or extend statutes of limitations that in many states have protected the church and its priests from prosecution for abuses of years ago.

"It's time for action, not words," said Daniel Dugo, outside the chancery of the Archdiocese of Brooklyn. Mr. Dugo said he had been victimized by a priest at a church in Greenpoint. "If they are serious about protecting children then they should join us in this effort."

Standing in a light rain outside the gates of the Archdiocese of Washington, Lee White of Arlington, Va., said he had been sexually abused at 14 by his parish priest in Newport, R.I.

"The psychology of the abuse is such that the damage is not realized until later in life," he said. "In Rhode Island, the church lobbied against extending the statute of limitations for these cases. If they can lobby against it, they can lobby for it."

The nation's Catholic bishops are to meet in June in Dallas and are expected to try to hammer out a policy on child sexual abuse that they would be required to follow. Yesterday, SNAP said that until the laws could be changed, bishops should agree to "stop hiding behind" statutes of limitations and other laws that protect abusers, open files on abusive priests to prosecutors and lift confidentiality agreements with victims who have reached settlements.

But some SNAP members said they had stopped expecting any significant progress from the bishops.

"A national policy would be helpful, but I don't have a lot of confidence that they're going to be able to reach a national policy any time soon, and who knows what the provisions will be and how effective they'll be," said Mr. Saviano, the SNAP organizer in New England.

Last week, after meeting with SNAP members, Cardinal Francis E. George of Chicago said he would agree to support extending the statute of limitations on child sexual abuse cases if the change applied to all abusers, not just priests.

Yesterday, SNAP members tried to deliver letters at the 21 chancery offices asking the bishops to join Cardinal George in pushing for legal remedies. David Clohessy, SNAP's national director, said St. Louis members handed their letter to Archbishop Justin F. Rigali, who said he would consider the demands.

In Washington, SNAP members gave their letter to a receptionist because Cardinal Theodore E. McCarrick was out of town. In Worcester, Mass., the group presented its letter to the vicar who heads the pastoral care committee.

In Brooklyn, the chancery doors were locked in observance of Ascension Day, which commemorates Jesus' return to heaven 40 days after his resurrection.

Until now, few priests accused of child abuse have been charged with crimes, often because the cases fell outside the statutes of limitations. Sylvia Demarest, a Dallas lawyer, said that among the 1,200 priests she says have been accused of sexual abuse against minors, only 120 have faced criminal charges, and fewer than 80 served time in prison.

The abuse scandal has already prompted some legislatures to close the legal loopholes that allow offenders to avoid prosecution.

The Connecticut Legislature passed a bill this week extending the statute of limitations on sexual abuse crimes against children. The bill would also outlaw confidential out-of-court settlements that forbid victims to speak to the police. But the State Senate struck down a provision that would have required clergy members to report accusations, because some Catholic lawmakers said it would have obligated priests to violate the secrecy of the confessional.

In Massachusetts, however, the governor signed just such a mandatory reporting provision into law last week. Nassau County in New York voted last week to require religious groups to report accusations of abuse to the authorities. In Albany, state legislators are considering doing the same.

Meanwhile, SNAP organizers, all volunteers, say their phone lines are jammed with calls from victims. The group has no office and no paid staff.

Mr. Saviano said he first contacted SNAP for help five years ago. Now he says he has no time for his job as a technical writer because he spends 10 hours a day on the phone with victims and the news media.

Last week's meeting of the New England chapter, at a library in Natick, Mass., drew 25 people, Mr. Saviano said. He said they were considering splitting the group. It has too many people, he said, to really serve as a support group for victims.