

SNAP

Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests

New England Chapter

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE . . .

CATHOLIC CHURCH DEMANDS CONFIDENTIAL RECORDS FROM LEADING VICTIM SUPPORT GROUP

SNAP Calls Press Conference for Monday 3:00 p.m.

Boston, Mass. – September 23, 2002 – The Roman Catholic Diocese of Worcester, MA has launched a legal attack against the leading support group for victims of clergy abuse, Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests (SNAP). The diocese has issued a subpoena for the confidential records to SNAP Regional Director Phil Saviano and commanded him to testify on behalf of the Bishop of Worcester in a civil suit filed against the Diocese by five women who allege sexual abuse by Worcester priest, Fr. Robert E. Kelley.

Among the records that the lawyers for the Diocese are seeking, are any correspondence between the plaintiffs and SNAP, and information regarding membership and attendance of SNAP meetings by any of the plaintiffs. The diocese demands go well beyond the bounds of this particular case, however. The subpoena also compels disclosure of "All documents reflecting the names of all persons who have stated that they were sexually abused by any priest associated with the Diocese of Worcester, Massachusetts."

"This is a stunning move which attacks the core element of SNAP's services," says Phil Saviano. "From the very first phone call, victims who turn to SNAP for emotional support want to know that what they say is kept in strict confidence. Without that assurance, few victims will have sufficient trust in us to reach out for help. By attacking SNAP, Bishop Daniel Reilly of Worcester is also hurting the victims, potentially destroying a victim-run organization that has been their key pathway to hope and healing."

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David Clohessy, executive director of SNAP, called the Bishop's move "the lowest of the low." He said, "There are very few, free services available to clergy abuse victims. It is immoral for this powerful institution to attempt to steal this crumb from the hands of people who are so hungry for healing and support. Is the ultimate goal here to silence victims?"

Attorney Wendy Murphy of Boston will handle the legal challenge to the subpoena. A former assistant district attorney in Middlesex County, where she worked in the Child Abuse Prosecution Unit, she focuses her private practice on advocacy for women victims of violence. Currently a visiting scholar at Harvard Law School, she has generated several test cases on the confidentiality of victim counseling records and has argued cases that have helped shape state law and protect victim's rights.

"Victims have been suffering for so long, trapped in secrecy and shame, and it was all because of the church cover-up, the lies and despicable effort to sweep this serious problem under the rug," Attorney Murphy said. "It is unfathomable to me that now, when victims finally have the opportunity to seek justice, the church is using the same dirty tactics against them. Only this time, it is in the name of the law, rather than God. We'll do whatever it takes to fight this subpoena, and we are willing to go to the Supreme Court if necessary."

Clergy abuse victims, their supporters, Attorney Murphy, members of Voice of the Faithful, and student activists from Harvard's Coalition Against Sexual Violence will gather for a press conference at Harvard University on Monday afternoon, September 23 at 3:00 p.m. The conference will be set-up at the entrance gate to Harvard Yard, at the intersection of Massachusetts Avenue and Church Street.

Phil Saviano is a survivor of child sexual abuse by former Worcester Diocese priest David A. Holley, who is currently serving a 275-year prison term for sexual abuse in New Mexico. In 1996, Saviano settled a lawsuit against the Diocese, but refused to sign a confidentiality agreement. The next year, taking advantage of what he learned about the issue and his ability to speak freely, he founded the New England Chapter of SNAP.

The Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, commonly known as SNAP, is a non-profit support and advocacy group composed of and providing services to victims of clergy sexual abuse. Founded in Chicago in 1990, SNAP has been run on the dedication of volunteers who wanted to stop sexual abuse of children and help adult victims heal. We hold local support groups, hold regional gatherings (conference style weekend meetings), and our members have appeared on local, national and international media outlets. People of all faiths are welcome to seek strength and guidance from SNAP and attend our support group meetings.