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## Survivors of sex abuse by clergy unite

By Christine Walsh  
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Phil Saviano said his phone has not stopped ringing since he began publicizing the first upcoming meeting of the New England chapter of Survivors' Network of those Abused by Priests.

Saviano, a Jamaica Plain resident and the regional coordinator for the Chicago-based SNAP, said a broad range of people have called from all over Massachusetts. Young and old, men and women, all from a variety of denominations, they tell Saviano they are thrilled to finally find local support.

"What's interesting is the group is going to be non-denominational," Saviano said. "Although the name of the organization says priests, we want it to be anyone who's been sexually abused by any clergy member."

SNAP's purpose is not only to provide support to the victims, but also to enable them to organize for political action. His aim is to challenge churches to deal more effectively with the problem of abusive clergy.

"I think of this group as not only a support group, but also as a networking opportunity," Saviano said.

For example, one piece of state legislation coming up in late May would require clergy members who become aware of abuse by another clergy member to report it to civil authorities. Failure to do so would result in fines of up to \$5,000.

The clergy member's employer would have to pay fines of up to \$50,000 for failing to report the alleged abuse to the state Department of Social Services.

Saviano thinks that once organized, SNAP would be in a position to support such legislation.

More than 3,000 men and women who were molested by Catholic clergy nationwide belong to regional chapters of SNAP.

From the people he has talked to, Saviano says there's a definite need for a New England chapter.

Several years ago, more than 100 people in Massachusetts and Rhode Island accused former Catholic priest James Porter of sexual abuse that occurred in the 1960s when Porter served parishes in North Attleboro, Fall River and New Bedford. In 1993 he pleaded guilty to 41 charges of sexual assault. Shortly after, two men accused the Rev. John Hanlon, pastor of St. Paul's Church in Hingham, of sexually molesting them when they were young boys.

Porter and the Rev. Hanlon are both serving prison terms. A case is also pending against the Rev. John Geoghan, a retired priest who faces molestation charges stemming from 1972 and 1973 when he served St. Paul's in Hingham.

Saviano said he received a call recently from one of Porter's victims.

"She says there were several people in her family who had this experience and she's never really spoken about this publicly," he said. "But she says, 'I can tell you there's nothing like getting a hug from another survivor.'"

Saviano knows the truth in that. In his childhood at St. Denis Parish in East Douglas, he said he was abused by the Rev. David Holley, who had served several parishes in the Diocese of Worcester between 1962 and 1969.

While the first meeting of SNAP will be open to the public and the press, Saviano plans to keep future meetings "underground."

"Only members will know where and when subsequent meetings will be," he said. "I want to create an environment where people can feel safe to come in and speak about what happened to them, and know that what they say will not go beyond the four walls."

The first meeting will be held at 10 a.m. May 10, at the Needham Public Library, 1139 Highland Ave..

For more information, call SNAP at (617) 983-5075 or write to SNAP, c/o Phil Saviano, 37 Oakview Terrace, Jamaica Plain 02130. Victims and parents are encouraged to call before attending the meeting.