

NEW CASTLE NEWS

Attorney warns of low, inadequate diocese payments

By Brent Addleman
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A program designed to compensate victims of sexual abuse by clergy in the Catholic Diocese of Pittsburgh began operations on Jan. 22.

However, New York City attorney **Jordan Merson** of Merson Law says any victims, or survivors, should first consult with a lawyer experienced in sexual abuse cases before entering information to the Independent Reconciliation and Compensation Program.

Merson said his law firm has been working with victims in Pennsylvania and New York state, and his offices have received many calls from victims.

“I think it is fair to say, and this has gone on over the last three years, most of the calls (from people) who have gone about it themselves were offered a very low amount of money,” Merson said of the compensation program. “The program is voluntary as so far as they can go through the program and not accept it and not bar their ability to pursue a case in court.

“If they accept money, they cannot participate in a lawsuit that comes thereafter.”

The reconciliation program is administered by Kenneth Feinberg and Camille Biros and was put into place by Bishop David Zubik.

“In turning to the features of this new reconciliation and compensation program, I will first note that any such program designed to compensate survivors of abuse must be about the survivors than about the payment of money,” Bishop Zubik said in a press release announcing the program.

In order to be part of the program, Merson said, victims are required to furnish the diocese with documentation and fill out a form.

“I would say, generally, the diocese has been reaching out mainly to victims and the survivors,” Merson said. “The victims and survivors get a form and it is somewhere between three and six pages. It looks simple, self-explanatory enough to be completed by the victims and survivors themselves.

"There are nuances in the paperwork. My recommendation for anyone who calls me they consult with a lawyer experienced in this area (of law) before submitting any document whether with my firm or not."

Merson said once the paperwork is submitted, "it is very difficult to turn back."

"People who have gone out themselves, and I can't say this for everyone across the board, people call us for the amount they have been awarded, with or without a lawyer who doesn't handle these claims, and the claims have been rejected or there have been low or no payments," Merson said.

Merson said his experience with the Catholic church in two states has seen mixed results.

"I have experience in New York and experience with (the diocese compensation plans) in Pennsylvania as well," Merson said. "We have gotten a lot of phone calls from individuals who have gone about this themselves or with lawyers who do not have experience dealing with these programs.

"Those experiences have been different than what we have been able to accomplish here."

Merson said the programs are looking for a certain details.

"Despite that, it is my belief and recommendation, these individuals are best served consulting with a lawyer whose experience is in dealing with these claims because there are a lot of nuances in there," Merson said.

"The programs are looking for specific types of corroboration and information," Merson said. "If that is not given, claims tends to be rejected or award an amount of money that is insufficient or inadequate."