

# Most dioceses comply with sex abuse rules: Audit results in

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Exactly two years after the sexual abuse scandal erupted in the Catholic Church, 82 percent of local dioceses have implemented reforms intended to protect children from predatory priests, U.S. church leaders said this month.

A \$1.8 million audit of 191 U.S. dioceses found that 157 had “fully complied” with new abuse policies, while 34 dioceses have outstanding obligations under reforms adopted by American bishops 18 months ago.

The six-month audit by investigators from the Boston-based Gavin Group is the first national measure of the church’s attempts to deal with the scandal that has overshadowed the church since January 2002.

“I believe that these findings show that we bishops are keeping our word,” said Bishop Wilton Gregory of Belleville, Illinois, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Investigators graded dioceses on the appointment of lay review boards to assess abuse allegations, criminal background checks on church personnel, outreach programs to victims and guidelines for handling their claims, whether accused priests had been transferred to another diocese, and other measures.

During the audit, investigators issued instructions to 57 dioceses that had not implemented all or part of the reforms adopted in Dallas in June 2002; in addition, 125 dioceses were given “recommendations” to bring themselves into full compliance.

“Commendations” were also issued to dioceses that have established model programs, such as Chicago’s program for counseling victims, Boston’s “aggressive” plan to train 200,000 people in preventing abuse and Washington’s employee-fingerprint system.

Victims groups, meanwhile, remained skeptical of the report, citing the progress made as “long-overdue baby steps” on a “bar that has been set exceedingly low.”

Kathleen McChesney, who heads the bishops’ office of youth protection, urged the bishops to repeat the audit in 2004 to gain a better sense of long-term compliance.

Attention now will turn to a separate report, to be released February 27, that will tally for the first time the total number of accused priests and victims and how much the church has paid to settle abuse-related lawsuits over the past 50 years.

Cooperating with that study, conducted by researchers at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York, was a key factor in certifying compliance with the Gavin Group audit. *-Religion News Service*