

# What are survivors and Springfield doing about accused priests?

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SPRINGFIELD – During a Friday, Dec. 21, 2018, announcement, the Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests (SNAP) called a press conference to detail five priests with “substantiated” claims of abuse not previously named from the Springfield Diocese – one of whom served in Alton.

## The Priests

SNAP named Thomas G. Meyer, who formerly served at the pastor for Sts. Peter and Paul Parish in Alton from 1990-1998, as one of the priests with what SNAP describes as “substantiated” abuse allegations stemming from his previous work at the Minneapolis-St. Paul Archdiocese. SNAP noted no such allegations arose from Meyer's time as a priest in Illinois, but added the organization “fears he may have hurt Central Illinois children.”

Outside of Alton and Minnesota, Meyer also worked in the Belleville Diocese at St. Henry's Seminary (1971-1977 with a small gap between 1972-72), King's House of Retreats (1982-1983) and St. Henry's Oblate Residence (2007-2012). Meyer died in 2012.

In a release from the Minneapolis-St. Paul Archdiocese, Meyer was in fact named as one of 19 priests acknowledged to have “substantial abuse claims.” He was on the list from the Oblates and Diocese of Duluth as early as 2015 after the diocese was sued under the Child Victims Act in May and June of 2013 – just after Meyer's death. The diocese filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protections in 2015.

Also named in the Dec. 21 announcement from SNAP was Father Henry Willenborg who was accused of abuse stemming from his time at Our Lady of Angels Franciscan Seminary in Quincy. He is formerly accused of sexually abusing a high school girl and

even impregnating an adult parishioner who allegedly came to him for counseling. He moved from Quincy to a treatment center for troubled priests.

Unlike Meyer, Willenborg is still alive, and SNAP believes him to still be a priest somewhere.

### **SNAP's Pursuit of Accountability**

“Both clerics, along with Fr. Downey, who is also missing from the list, belong to Catholic religious orders who were given permission to work in the Springfield Diocese by Springfield's bishops,” the announcement stated. “For that reason, SNAP maintains that the current head of the diocese, Bishop Thomas Paprocki, can and must include religious order clerics on his list of accused wrongdoers, as several other bishops have done. These men may have hurt Central Illinois kids and may still work, visit or live in Central Illinois.”

As of now, SNAP describes itself as “extremely disappointed” in Bishop Paprocki, stating that he has “taken so little action on abuse in his own diocese.” The group calls on Paprocki to “reveal more about the names on his list and aggressively reach out to victims, witnesses and whistle blowers” so “kids can be protected and wrongdoers can be exposed, prosecuted, fired, demoted or disciplined.”

On Dec. 19, 2018, Bishop Paprocki did release a response to Illinois Attorney General Lisa Madigan who has been working on a list of problematic priests for months. According to that release, the Springfield Diocese has been working with Madigan, collecting paper filings regarding these priests dating as early as the diocese's establishment in 1923.

### **Springfield's Response**



“The Attorney General's Inquiry has prompted us to comb through decades-old paper files, reviewing cases that involve clergy and lay people most of us have never met, and many of whom are deceased,” Paprocki said in the release. “Revisiting the pain caused to victims of abuse has motivated us to redouble our commitments to the reforms undertaken many years ago and to sustain our vigilance.”

In 2002, the diocese was one of many in the United States to implement a “zero-tolerance policy,” which the release said promoted an “environment of awareness and safety.” During that time, two priests and even a former bishop were removed for allegations dating before 2002, and only one priest for an allegation since.

Part of the program involves all allegations being taken to a review board, which is filled by lay people (not clergy), including at least one member who was a victim of abuse. Anyone bringing such an allegation is then offered counseling through a Victim

Assistance Ministry. Since the zero-tolerance policy was implemented, the release said as many as 57,000 individuals have been trained in safe environment awareness.

Even with these positive changes, however, many people who were abused by priests in the past may never have their stories come to light, nor the justice they seek.

“Reviewing these past cases has also reminded us that many years ago, people didn't publicly discuss the kind of salacious allegations documented in these files,” Paprocki said in the release. “A virtuous intent to protect the faithful from scandal unfortunately prevented the transparency and awareness that has helped us confront this problem more directly over the past 15 years. We are continuing to learn and strive to improve our assistance with those who are victims and survivors of childhood sexual abuse.”

SNAP, however, did not appreciate the word “virtuous” being used by the bishop to describe the alleged cover-ups of past abuse within the diocese..

“Cover-ups are selfish, not 'virtuous,’” the release states. “Continuing to hide abusive priests at this juncture remains both self-serving and irresponsible.”

## **What to Do If You Suspect Abuse**

In its release, SNAP called upon people to search their diocese on [www.bishop-accountability.org](http://www.bishop-accountability.org) to find more problematic priests. A quick scan of that site reveals another local priest, Frank O'Hara Jr., who was sued in 2008 by two women who claimed O'Hara abused them while they were students in the now-defunct St. Kevin's Catholic School in Rosewood Heights from 1971-1978. O'Hara died in 2006 at the age of 90.

At the end of Bishop Paprocki's statement, the diocese asks anyone with concerns about possible abuse of a minor within the diocese contact the Springfield Diocese Child Abuse Reporting and Investigation line at (217) 321-1155 or the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services Child Abuse Hotline at 1(800)-25-ABUSE.