



DIOCESE OF ST. AUGUSTINE

Office of the Bishop

Diocese of St. Augustine Safe Environment Program

The Diocese of St. Augustine has had a safe environment program in place since 1998 and has continually improved the program over time. I take this opportunity to re-promulgate and reiterate as official diocesan policy our current safe environment program. This letter supersedes my previous letter dated June 30, 2020.

The safe environment program contains all of the elements that are required by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People and the essential norms deriving from the Charter's last revision in 2018. The essential norms, having received the *recognition* of the Holy See, are particular law in the dioceses of the United States. In addition to children and youth, all dioceses in the Province of Miami also apply the protections of the Charter and Norms to vulnerable adults as defined in Florida Law.

More specifically, the diocesan safe environment program consists of the following components:

- For the background screening requirements for clergy, religious, lay employees, educators, and covered volunteers: here, I want to emphasize that background screening must be cleared ***before*** the person assumes his or her position or begins volunteer service; **there can be no compromises or exceptions regarding this aspect of the Safe Environment Program.**
- *The Teaching Safety-Empowering God's Children Program*, trademarked by Virtus, is designed to help children and youth in grades K - 12 to cooperate in maintaining their own personal safety. It is of vital importance that every child and every youth in our Catholic schools, religious education programs, and parish youth programs be given the opportunity to take part in this critical element of our Safe Environment Program. ***Here again, there can be no compromises or short-cuts taken.***
- *Healthy Relationships for Teens 2.0* program was established using the Virtus online platform to introduce children to 7 safety concerns related to areas including boundaries, saying "no," reporting, inappropriate adult behavior, intervention, types of abuse, dating concerns, etc. This has been implemented in high school youth groups, parish schools of religious education, and for every student at our diocesan high schools in their second semester of freshman year.
- The *Protecting God's Children* program is designated to educate clergy, religious, employees, educators, and volunteers in ways and means to establish and maintain a safe environment for children and youth. A 30-day compliance window is allowed from the background screening clearance date.

All the components listed above ensure that our diocesan program is in full compliance with the requirements of the USCCB's Office for the Protection of Children and Young People, and I direct that they continue to be fully implemented in each parish, school, and agency of this diocese.

Finally, my staff will continue to evaluate all the components of the safe environment program annually, and whenever necessary, make appropriate adjustments or improvements to remain always in alignment with societal changes.

Thank you for your cooperation in this most important area of concern for our entire diocese.

In Christ,

+ r. r. Estevez

Most Reverend Felipe J. Estevez, STD
Bishop of St. Augustine
June 30, 2021