



## Federal judge confirms plan that settles hundreds of Montana clergy sex abuse claims.

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BILLINGS, Mont. – Hundreds of victims of clergy sex abuse that spanned decades in Montana stand to receive payments totaling about \$20 million, after a federal judge on Wednesday confirmed the bankruptcy reorganization plan for the Roman Catholic Diocese of Helena.

U.S. Bankruptcy Judge Terry Myers approved the plan during an hour-long court hearing in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, in which representatives of both victims and the diocese voiced their support.

More than 360 abuse claims will now go through an adjudication process to determine final payment amounts. Each allowed claim will receive a minimum of \$2,500, and attorneys involved in the case said only a handful of the claims are considered dubious.

A \$920,000 trust will be established for victims who come forward in the future.

The diocese filed for bankruptcy last year to resolve abuse claims that prompted lawsuits in state court from two groups of victims in 2011.

The majority of abuse occurred at the hands of Jesuit priests at the Ursuline Academy and the St. Ignatius Mission, both in St. Ignatius, Montana. The abuse ranged from rape and fondling, to perpetrators taking sexual photographs of children. It began in the 1930s and continued through the 1970s, according to court documents.

The average age of the victims at the time of abuse was 10 years old.

"Nothing will take away what happened," said Molly Howard, an attorney for the victims. "For our clients, it's recognition that the church has accepted what occurred, and they've been validated in terms of (the church) believing what happened."

About half the claimants are women, and most are now between 50 and 69 years old, according to court documents.

The vast majority of victims supported the diocese's bankruptcy reorganization proposal in a vote on the plan that ended last week, according to court documents and attorneys. Most payments to victims are expected to be distributed by mid-April, according to attorneys in the case.

Bishop George Leo Thomas said during Wednesday's hearing that it took courage for the victims to come forward. He added that the diocese has suffered "profound sorrow" over the revelations of abuse.

"The victims and survivors in our Diocese of Helena are believed and deeply respected," Thomas said.

As part of the settlements of victims' claims and to guard against future abuse, the diocese also agreed to training and background checks for clergy, lay leaders and church volunteers and to conduct psychological screening of seminarians.

The diocese will post on its website the names of all known past and present perpetrators who are identified in sexual abuse claims or in the lawsuits. A disclosure statement filed in the case listed 22 perpetrators by their full names and another 20 whose first or last names aren't known.

Some of those steps had been taken voluntarily by the diocese before Wednesday. But because they were included in the bankruptcy, confirmation of the plan means they are now enforceable by court order, said attorney Jim Stang, who represented the victims and other creditors in the case.



In approving the settlement and confirming the diocese's reorganization plan, the bankruptcy judge commended both sides for negotiating a deal that allowed them to avoid years of costly and acrimonious litigation, as seen in other clergy sex abuse cases across the U.S.

"That's a singular achievement," Myers said.

Insurers for the diocese will contribute \$14.4 million to a trust set up for payments to victims. The diocese also has asked for court approval to take out a \$3.5 million loan. Of that amount, \$2 million would go to the trust and to cover administrative and operating expenses.

As part of a second settlement, \$4.45 million will be contributed by the Ursuline Sisters of the Western Province to settle claims over abuse at its boarding school in St. Ignatius.

Only one church property with operations on it — the Legendary Lodge south of Seeley Lake — was sold as part of the bankruptcy, Helena Diocese spokesman Dan Bartleson said. He added that the church was able to lease the lodge from its new owner, The Foundation for the Diocese of Helena, and will continue to run a summer camp program on the site.

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