



Advocates protest slow pace of Bergen Catholic talks over sex-abuse settlement

JULY 17, 2015 LAST UPDATED: FRIDAY, JULY 17, 2015, 8:04 AM

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Kevin Waldrip and Robert Hoatson, background, distributing leaflets outside Bergen Catholic High School in Oradell on Thursday.

ORADELL – Men who say they were victims as children of clergy sexual abuse are protesting Bergen Catholic High School's response to their claims against two Christian Brothers who they allege molested them in the 1960s and 1970s.

The men say the school has dragged its feet through settlement talks, now going on four months, and that officials never offered them an apology or counseling, a widely adopted practice in Catholic dioceses since the nationwide sexual abuse crisis exploded in 2002.

On Thursday, Road to Recovery, a victim's advocacy group, raised those issues in a protest outside the high school, and one of the 19 claimants spoke publicly about how he felt newly victimized by school officials.

"I've been routinely brushed off by the powers that be at Bergen Catholic," said Kobutsu Malone, 65, who started a website called bergencatholicabuse.com. "I've been ridiculed, my claims have been declared not viable, and all together I think these people are trying to sweep something under the rug."

Malone said that when he attended the school at age 14, he was repeatedly molested by Brother Charles B. Irwin, who died in 1997. He and 18 men who say they were sexually abused as children by members of the Christian Brothers received part of a \$16.5 million settlement against the religious order last year. Now they are pursuing legal remedies against the school. The claims concern Irwin and Brother John B. Chaney, who is living in the New York Archdiocese.

Mitchell Garabedian, a Boston lawyer representing Malone and four others, said the school offered an extremely low settlement and has ignored his clients' requests.

"My clients are trying to move on with their lives, and Bergen Catholic is preventing that," he said.

Thomas Herten, a lawyer representing Bergen Catholic, said in a statement that the school has been involved in a "good faith mediation" of the claims and that by doing so admitted to no liability or wrongdoing. He declined to comment further about any aspect of the case, including the decision not to offer therapy, citing confidentiality rules of the settlement process.

Bergen Catholic and the Christian Brothers are not bound by the policies set by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in the wake of the clergy sexual abuse crisis. Under those policies, the Archdiocese of Newark offers counseling to anyone who files an abuse claim involving its clergy, even if the claim turns out to lack merit.

But Robert Hoatson, founder of Road to Recovery, said the school should set its own policies that mirror that same level of concern.

"The first thing they have to have is therapy," he said. "If these men preyed on young boys in this school for so many years, they have to do something to help these men recover. Their healing and recovery is crucial."

He also decried the school's lengthy deliberation of the claims. Some cases are settled as quickly as one day, he said.

"They're dragging it out for some reason. We don't know why," Hoatson said.

Malone, who lives in Maine, said he was particularly concerned over the school's defensive posture considering that 17 of the alleged victims have come forward with similar accounts of abuse by Irwin. He cited a February 2012 letter by the school's president, Brother Brian M. Walsh, that said there were "no credible claims of sexual abuse."

But Malone said that by that time, he and several others had come forward.

"They need to really recognize the amount of pain and damage they have done," he said, "and they haven't done that yet."

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