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Judge rules priest sex abuse documents should be public

BRIDGEPORT, Conn. -- A Superior Court judge has ruled that sealed documents from priest sex abuse cases in the Bridgeport Roman Catholic Diocese should be open to the public.

Judge Jon Alander's ruling Wednesday is the latest in a long running legal battle pitting the diocese against several newspapers.

Alander ruled that the public has the right to view sealed court documents from nearly two dozen sex abuse lawsuits against the Bridgeport diocese that were settled in 2001, saying that keeping the documents secret to ensure a fair trial is no longer relevant.

The Hartford Courant, The New York Times, The Boston Globe and The Washington Post, sought to have the documents unsealed in 2002.

"The public's right of access to those documents is particularly strong in these cases due to the extraordinary public interest in knowing whether minors in Connecticut were sexually abused by priests employed by the Diocese and whether the Diocese was responsible for perpetuating that abuse," Alander wrote.

However, Alander's ruling does not mean the newspapers will get to review the documents anytime soon. Alander placed a 20-day stay on release of the documents.

The diocese said Wednesday it is "considering what we believe to be significant grounds for appeal in this matter."

Alander exempted some documents from public release, including those subject to a health care privilege and the names of two priests who have never been publicly identified.

Joseph McAleer, spokesman for the diocese, said it is disappointed in the decision.

"Judge Alander acknowledges that these sensitive materials are protected by recognized legal privileges, but he has decided to release them to the public anyway," McAleer said in a prepared statement released Wednesday evening.

Alander's ruling comes about a year after the state Supreme Court cleared the way for the documents' release by asserting that court records are open to the public. The Supreme Court then sent the case back to the lower court.

The Supreme Court's decision endorsed a 2002 lower court ruling, which the diocese appealed, that granted the newspapers the right to intervene and seek access to the documents.

The abuse cases in question, which involved more than 23 victims, were settled in March 2001.