

## **Group calls for nuns to address sex abuse**

By Stephen Manning  
Associated Press Writer  
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SILVER SPRING, Md. -- Religious orders of nuns need to do more to root out sexual abuse by their members, help victims and set up safeguards to prevent future sexual misconduct, according to an advocacy group for victims of clergy abuse.

Members of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, or SNAP, delivered a letter Tuesday to a national nun organization calling for more attention on abuse by women in the Roman Catholic Church. Most of the recent abuse scandals have focused on male clergy members.

Outside the headquarters of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, also known as LCWR, several people said they were abused by nuns who taught at Catholic schools. They want the organization to let victims speak at its August conference in Fort Worth, Texas.

"We would like them to hear our stories from our mouths," said Landa Mauriello-Vernon, head of the Connecticut branch of SNAP who said she was abused by a nun at school when she was 17.

SNAP national director David Clohessy said the group did not have accurate figures on the number of people who may have been abused by nuns, but he estimated it was in the "hundreds." He asked for anyone who may have been victimized to contact SNAP.

A spokeswoman for the LCWR said it had not yet had time to review the letter or respond to the request that victims be allowed to speak at the conference that begins Aug. 19.

The organization represents the leaders of about 450 religious orders and 75,000 nuns nationwide. Its membership includes orders such as the Sisters of Mercy, the Sisters of St. Joseph and the Sisters of St. Francis.

LCWR's national board issued a statement in August 2002 saying it was "outraged" by the reports of abuse and calling on its members to "do all within their power to assure that such harm will never recur."

But LCWR has not tried to assess the extent of abuse among nuns, according to spokeswoman Annmarie Sanders.

It is "not extensive as far as we know, but we don't have any statistics," she said.

In its letter, also delivered Tuesday to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in Washington, SNAP asked LCWR to develop a plan to deal with sexual abuse.

That includes releasing the names of nuns who have had had "credible" claims made against them on LCWR's Web site and prohibit secrecy in those cases. SNAP also called on religious orders to offer victims compensation for abuses.

"None of us feel reassured that the leadership of the nuns and sisterhood organizations have been terribly proactive on this front," Clohessy said.

Nuns have been named in several sexual abuse lawsuits, including one filed in May by nine people who said they were raped and beaten by nuns at the Boston School for the Deaf. Mauriello-Vernon filed a lawsuit last year against her Hamden, Conn. school and the nun who allegedly abused her.

Victims who spoke Tuesday said they felt guilt and shame because of their abuse. Many said they had difficulty carrying on relationships. Jerry Hammell of Baltimore said his niece committed suicide in 1989 because she never recovered from being abused at a New Jersey school.

"There are people who have been suffering for years," he said.

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