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Experts: If in doubt, report it anyway Law clarifies what clergy, teachers and others must do about possible child abuse

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No one pretends reporting suspected child abuse or neglect is easy. Doing so brings worries about retaliation, loss of trust and ruined reputations over what could merely be a rumor.

But nearly 300,000 times last year, people made the decision to report suspected abuse or neglect to the state's hotline. Some made the call armed with a full accounting of abuse directly from the victim, others heard a story through the grapevine and still others had just a license plate or physical description.

About 65 percent of those calls came from mandated reporters - including clergy, teachers, police, doctors and firefighters - who are required by state law to report suspected child abuse or neglect to authorities.

Much has been said and many questions have been asked about the actions of those who knew, or might have known, about the sexual abuse of two teenage girls by former Geneva priest Mark **Campobello**, who is serving eight years in prison after pleading guilty. Most of those involved in the case fall under the scope of the mandated reporting law, and one teacher recently lost her job because the Rockford Diocese said she didn't follow it.

Though those who don't report face the possibility of criminal prosecution, it happens rarely. Law enforcement officials have suggested they won't in the **Campobello** case.

More often, people are left to toil in the moral straits of their situation, wondering if they should have reported even if it risked negative consequences.

The message from experts is that they should have.

"Once you know of a situation, even if you have the information third- or fourth-hand, you have an obligation to report, legally and morally," said Sharon Doty, a legal expert and consultant with Virtus, which created the Protecting God's Children program in use by more than 80 Catholic dioceses across the country.

Certain professions like teaching are included in the mandated reporting act because those who work in them often come in close contact with children, and children turn to them in times of need. But that same closeness can cause hesitation when it comes to reporting child abuse, for fear of hurting the child even more. Those fears, Doty said, are unwarranted.

"Young people will say, 'I need to talk to you, and you can't say anything,'" Doty said. "I know to say to them, 'I can't promise that.' Young people will tell anyway because they want to tell, and they want to be supported."

The publicity that comes with cases of child abuse or neglect also can cause people to pause before carrying out their mandate.

"We think that making a report causes irreparable harm to someone's reputation," Doty said. "We think that if we report what we saw, it's going to end up on the front page of the paper."

But in reality, reports to the state Department of Children and Family Services remain largely

With the law firmly in place, the emphasis from many of those involved is now on educating those affected by it.

The law itself requires only that reporters sign a statement acknowledging they know their responsibilities, but it doesn't outline the training they should receive. That training has changed with the recent church sex abuse scandal. Virtus' Protecting God's Children program, started in

2001, is now used at the Rockford and Joliet dioceses, as well as the Chicago Archdiocese.

"For the past 15 or 20 years we as a society have dealt with child sexual abuse by saying, 'Say no, run away and tell somebody,'" Doty said. "The piece that was missing was that we now identify steps to take to prevent abuse."

But those steps don't always work, Doty said, and when a reporter gets an inkling abuse has taken place, they must act.

"When in doubt, report," Doty said.

GRAPHIC: The Abused and Neglected Child Reporting Act

- The act requires a number of professions designated as "mandated reporters" to call authorities when they have reasonable cause to believe a child has been abused or neglected. Reports are assumed to be in good faith and remain confidential. Mandated reporters can face a misdemeanor charge for not reporting suspected cases of abuse or neglect, although anyone can call the hotline.

- The Child Abuse Hotline is (800) 25-ABUSE or (217) 524-2606 from out of state.

- The Illinois Department of Children and Family Services Manual for Mandated Reporters can be found at www.state.il.us/dcfs/docs/MANDATED2002.pdf

Source: Illinois Department of Children and Family Services

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