

Support group forms for victims of clergy sex abuse

By DIANE SCARPONI
Associated Press Writer

February 11, 2004, 5:57 PM EST

HAMDEN, Conn. -- Connecticut victims of sexual abuse by clergy are forming a state chapter of a national support group to help victims cope and to advocate for ways to end future abuse.

The state chapter of Survivors Network for those Abused by Priests, known as SNAP, is led by Landa Mauriello-Vernon, a 30-year-old Hamden resident who alleges a nun sexually assaulted her when she was a student at a Roman Catholic school.

"I believe we can all heal by sharing our experiences and working to promote change," Mauriello-Vernon said at a news conference Wednesday to announce the group's formation.

The Connecticut SNAP chapter plans to hold its first meeting Feb. 23. Abuse victims who are interested in attending the meetings may contact Mauriello-Vernon through the national group's Web site, www.snapnetwork.org.

The group is open to victims of abuse by any clergy. The location of its meetings is disclosed only to members.

Since the formation of the Connecticut group was posted on SNAP's Web site three weeks ago, 15 people have called to express interest in joining, Mauriello-Vernon said. She could not estimate how many people might seek to join.

Once the group is formed, its members will decide whether to act simply as a support group for victims, or whether to take a more activist role.

Mauriello-Vernon said she wished there was such a group when she was abused.

In a lawsuit filed in New Haven Superior Court, Mauriello-Vernon alleged her religion teacher, Sister Linda Cusano, repeatedly sexually assaulted her and pressured her into becoming a nun when she attended Sacred Heart Academy in Hamden.

She said her parents, who wanted her to go to college, saved her by refusing to sign papers that would have allowed her to join a convent.

Mauriello-Vernon said she kept the abuse secret for more than 10 years, while her life and education suffered. She said she only found the courage to speak out after hearing other abuse victims tell their stories.

"Because of the courage of those who have gone before me, I am able to call myself a survivor," she said, choking back tears.

The lawsuit seeks unspecified damages against Cusano and the school.

Sacred Heart Academy's lawyer, Stephen Fogerty, said the allegations are "shocking and upsetting," but he said the school did not know about the alleged abuse at the time.

School leaders want to meet with Mauriello-Vernon to discuss settling the complaint and getting her any services the religious community can provide, Fogerty said.

"To the extent people seek help and healing, we're here for them, and we wish her the best with her work with SNAP and on her own," he said.

Mauriello-Vernon sent letters to leaders of Connecticut's three Roman Catholic dioceses, asking them to print brief notices about SNAP in church bulletins. She said one church leader responded to acknowledge receipt of her letter, but none have agreed.

David Cerulli, a member of SNAP's national board of directors and the leader of a New York chapter, said church leaders around the country have rebuffed the group's efforts to get notices printed in church bulletins. Only a few sympathetic priests around the country have followed the request.

Spokespeople for Connecticut's dioceses could not confirm whether SNAP's letter was received, but they noted that each diocese has a victim assistance coordinator, a social worker who responds to abuse claims and helps victims get help.

The Diocese of Norwich is in the process of setting up its own support group, organized by the victim assistance coordinator, said Jacqueline Keller, spokeswoman for the diocese.

The Diocese of Bridgeport also has a staff member who leads the "safe environment program," who conducts background checks of diocese employees and volunteers and implements abuse awareness programs.

"A hallmark of our response to allegations of abuse has been outreach to victims, including meeting with victims and the offer of counseling, and responding to every single allegation that comes forward swiftly, decisively and fairly," said diocese spokesman Joseph McAleer.

Voice of the Faithful, a Roman Catholic group that advocated reforms following the sexual abuse scandal, is ready to aid SNAP, said Bob Marrion, a member of the group who attended SNAP's news conference.

"We have worked closely with SNAP members and support them in their mission," Marrion said. "They are wonderful people, very courageous people."