

Volunteer screening underway

BY PAULA ANTONELLO MOORE

The Catholic Register

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More will be demanded of volunteers in the archdiocese of Toronto in coming months as the Ontario Screening Initiative (OSI) is fully implemented.

Backed by churches in the province, including the Catholic and Anglican bishops, the United Church Presbyters and the Unitarian Churches of Ontario, the three-year project will ensure that all who wish to volunteer for church-run and other public organizations in Ontario undergo the screening process.

The OSI is "an ongoing 10-step process designed to identify any person who may harm another person who is vulnerable. Screening continues once a volunteer is selected through supervision, evaluation and follow-up," states Volunteer Canada.

Cardinal Aloysius Ambrozic, archbishop of Toronto, mandated last year that the archdiocese implement the program within all parishes through the Office of Lay Ministry and Chaplaincy.

Almost half of Toronto's parishes have put together a four-person committee responsible for screening volunteers in their parish organizations, said Fr. James Hannah, director of the archdiocese's Office of Lay Ministry and Chaplaincy.

Three initial training sessions have taken place with another session coming up this fall. The initial training has been divided into three phases, Hannah explained, to execute a structured

process that all parishes can participate in.

"The first phase is to prepare the committee to go back to their parishes to introduce the screening to the parishioners. A job description must then be created (for the volunteer position) and assessed of potential risk," he said. "The second is that for medium- and high-risk ministries (as determined by such criteria as



as Fr. James Hannah who the person is, what the setting is, what the activity is and the level of supervision), application forms must be completed, followed by interviews and background checks with references."

'Anyone who wants to work in any of our parishes will have to go through this'

High-risk ministries are defined as those where an individual is alone with a child or a vulnerable adult such as a one-on-one counselling session or visiting a senior in their home, Hannah said. "It's dependent on the vulnerability of the relationship."

The third phase of the initial training involves clear and concise rules for each organization.

"The screening committees

must work with all heads of the organizations (on how) they will take responsibility for the training of their people, how they will supervise, evaluate and follow-up with the participant," Hannah pointed out. "The very fact that you put the process in place screens out people who may want to come in to do harm. It's very good for the volunteer ministry."

Individuals currently in volunteer positions will have to undergo the formal screening which begins in late winter/early spring, Hannah said.

"There will be follow-up because this is an ongoing thing. Anyone who wants to work in any of our parishes will have to go through this," said Hannah. "I'm sure there will be the odd person who feels (insulted by this) but not. Nothing can be done about that. For all public organizations and groups, you're screened."

Hannah is hopeful people will respond positively and understand the benefits of such a process.

"I would have two hopes. That the process put in place would be adequate enough to discourage anyone who would want to access vulnerable people, keep them away," he said. "The second is that this will help to put in place a process that will really affirm our volunteers in making their roles more manageable."

For more information about the Ontario Screening Initiative call the Office of Lay Ministry and Chaplaincy at (416) 934-3430, visit the web site www.to-lmc.org, or contact Volunteer Canada at (613) 231-4371 or visit the web site at www.volunteer.ca.

Volunteers to undergo screening process

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The safety of children and the vulnerable in our society will be further assured with the launch of a new province-wide screening program for volunteers.

Backed by churches including the Catholic, Anglican, United Church Presbyters and the Unitarian Churches of Ontario, the government-funded Ontario Screening Initiative is "An ongoing 10-step process designed to identify any person who may harm another person who is vulnerable," according to an information package released by Volunteer Canada.

What this means for the archdiocese of Toronto is that anyone wishing to volunteer within a parish, Catholic organization or the like will have to be validated as a volunteer.

Cardinal Aloysius Ambrozic, archbishop of Toronto, mandated that the archdiocese implement the program through the Office of Lay Ministry and Chaplaincy in a letter addressed to all parish priests. Cindy Sisico has been hired as project co-ordinator for the lay ministry office to organize the program within the archdiocese.

Four information sessions were held at the end of October and the beginning of November to provide clergy, pastoral teams, chaplains and representatives from Catholic organizations with details about the program. Approximately 450-500 people attended, Sisico said.

"By this initiative we, as a church, have committed ourselves

to begin the process of screening all of the staff whether paid or volunteer who assist us in all of our parishes, institutions and organizations," said Fr. James Hannah, director of the office of Lay Ministry and Chaplaincy, in the reference package prepared by his office for the sessions.

"Our bishops want to assume that those who would work in their dioceses wish only to help and serve with love and not harm. Experience has shown that this is true of most individuals... However, we now realize that the help we offer can sometimes be misplaced. Discreditable people often seek out the vulnerable to exploit or abuse."

There are 10 steps in the screening process, including determining risk, reference checks, a check of police records (when appropriate) and orientation and training.

"We are developing the process. We've asked for parishes to submit the parish information and then we will get them together," said Sisico. "Then it will be more hands on."

It is important to emphasize the significance of the process, said Sisico. If a parish refuses to participate in the mandated screening process, they will be putting those in their parish at risk.

For information about the screening initiative call the lay ministry office at (416) 934-3430 or Volunteer Canada at (613) 231-4371; or visit the web site at www.volunteer.ca.



Fr. Hannah

10 steps