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This courtroom illustration photo shows the jury box, judge's chair and the witness stand. Two federal lawsuits, each seeking \$75 million, accuse Missouri dioceses of Springfield-Cape Girardeau and Jefferson City of covering up clergy sexual abuse in the 1980s and 1990s. (OSV News/Chip East, Reuters)

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Two federal civil lawsuits, each seeking \$75 million, accuse the Missouri dioceses of Springfield-Cape Girardeau and Jefferson City of covering up clergy sexual abuse in the 1980s and 1990s and also of enabling the priests who allegedly committed the abuse.

"We are treating this matter with the utmost seriousness and investigating the allegations," Jefferson City Bishop W. Shawn McKnight said in a statement about the suit against his diocese that, he noted, concern "five allegations of misconduct that reportedly occurred decades ago."

"None of the five priests named in the lawsuit are currently active in ministry in the Diocese of Jefferson City," he said. "As always, our goals are to support healing and peace for any survivor of abuse, to bring abusers to justice and to implement safeguards to prevent harm."

"These are all new allegations to us, including two that are leveraged against a former priest who is already on our list of clergy with allegations of abuse of a minor," Leslie Anne Eidson, chief communications officer of the Diocese of Springfield-Cape Girardeau, told OSV News.

Leonard Chambers, that former priest, was assigned to around 20 Missouri parishes before being forced into retirement in 1998.

"These new claims will be examined and the Diocese will continue to attend to those who have been harmed by abuse as outlined in the U.S. Bishops' 'Charter for the Protection of Children and Youth People' and our own safe environment policies and procedures," said a statement from the diocese headed by Bishop Edward M. Rice.

"As a precaution, all clergy, employees, and volunteers who are accused of abuse or misconduct involving minors or vulnerable adults may be placed on temporary administrative leave by the Diocese," the statement added. "The presumption of innocence, which is also set out in the Charter, should be accorded to those who are presently accused."

"The Diocese seeks truth and justice. It holds accountable those who have abused children and the vulnerable," the statement said. "We continue to pray for all those who have been injured by abuse or maltreatment."

The two civil lawsuits, filed mid-September in U.S. District Court for the Western District of Missouri, join five filed in July in which 60 people, seeking unspecified damages, alleged sexual abuse by priests and women religious in Missouri.

The suits against Springfield-Cape Girardeau and Jefferson City identify the complainants only by their initials. The accused, in addition to Chambers, are Fathers John Harth, Val Reeker, Thomas McCarthy, Thomas Reidy and Michael McDevitt as well as Msgr. John Westheus. The suit also accuses two unnamed priests, an unnamed youth pastor and an unnamed deacon.

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It alleges abuse of all of the complainants as children, including a woman who was 5 years old at the time, at Our Lady of the Cove Parish, Kimberling City; Sacred Heart, Poplar Bluff; St. Ann, Malden; St. Canera, Neosho; St. Joseph, Advance; St. Joseph, Joplin; and St. Ann, Carthage.

The Jefferson City lawsuit names three deceased priests: Fathers Thomas Duggan, Francis Gillgannon and Gerald Howard (formerly Carmin Sita); Duggan and Howard are on the diocese's list of credibly accused/and or removed clergy. The suit also names Father David Darr and "Father Dave." McKnight's statement said there was no record of a David Darr ever having served in the diocese, and his office was working to identify "Father Dave," although "this allegation does not refer to any priest named 'David' currently serving in our diocese."

"In September 2018," the Jefferson City lawsuit states, "the Bishop and Diocese promised to publish the names of clergy who had substantiated claims of sexual abuse of minors against them." The list was released that Nov. 8, and named 33 men, "including 25 Diocesan Priests, three Religious Brothers and four other clergy whose sexual deviance and/or abuse was substantiated."

The Jefferson City lawsuit alleges that four of the five complainants were molested as children, and the fifth, a woman in her 30s, is described as "a vulnerable adult" who sought out pastoral counseling she alleges was sexualized by Duggan.

The suit claims that the now-deceased Howard (Sita) "was placed at Peter and Paul Parish in Jefferson City" after "after pleading guilty to charges of sexual contact with a male juvenile."

Other locations identified in the suit are St. Joseph Cathedral School in Jefferson City and Immaculate Conception Parish in Brookfield.

In 2019, then-Missouri Attorney General Eric Schmitt released a report based on a review of personnel records for every priest serving in Missouri dating to 1945.

Out of more than 2,000 priests and 300 deacons, seminarians and religious women in ministry over more than seven decades, investigators found that 163 priests or clergy members had been accused of sexual abuse or misconduct against minors. Schmitt, a Catholic, said at the time he would refer 12 of the cases for potential criminal prosecution.

As for the rest, The Associated Press reported that 83 of the accused had died; the statute of limitations had run out on 46 of the cases; 16 were "previously referred for local prosecution"; five cases "have been or are being investigated by prosecutors" and "one was still under open investigation by the Catholic Church."

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