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Diocese Paid Abuse Claimant

By Jay Jochnowitz
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The Roman Catholic Diocese of Albany paid \$ 70,000 to a Watervliet man who claimed he was abused by a priest more than 20 years ago, the diocese confirmed Friday.

The priest, the Rev. David Bentley, 55, has been suspended in the aftermath of the settlement, which was paid in late 1997 after Thomas Oathout brought his complaint to the diocese. Bentley has never been a parish priest but did serve as a hospital chaplain, diocese spokesman the Rev. Geoffrey Burke said.

With Oathout going public in violation of a confidentiality agreement, it remains unclear what action, if any, the diocese may take. While Burke said there is no legal action under discussion, he did not rule it out. He said the entire policy of handling such complaints is likely to be reviewed.

While the diocese will not discuss Oathout's claims in detail or say to what degree it admitted if any abuse occurred, Burke acknowledged: "There were some boundary issues that had been crossed."

Oathout, who has an unlisted phone number, could not be reached for comment Friday. On Thursday, however, he went public with his accusations in a WRGB (Ch. 6) television interview, claiming Bentley abused him in the late 1970s when he was living at the Albany Home for Children, now the Parsons Child and Family Center.

Under diocesan policy, Oathout's claim was reviewed by a panel that investigates sex abuse complaints, Burke said.

Burke said the confidentiality agreement was a standard part of legal settlements, and called the size of the award appropriate.

Settlements, he said, are "designed to assist a person with restoration, to help with psychological healing." Normally, the diocese attempts to set up a person in long-term counseling and agrees to pay the cost. Oathout, however, wanted the money in a lump sum, and the diocese agreed, Burke said.

On television, Oathout acknowledged he spent the money on a house and cars, and Burke said the man found himself no longer eligible for public assistance. Oathout approached the diocese again and asked for help, and Burke said he had been helping him obtain food. He said Oathout made no mention of going to the media.

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