

August 26, 2005
Statement of the Catholic Diocese of Jackson
Concerning Mr. William Heller and the recent SNAP mailing

SNAP is a national organization funded in part by plaintiffs and trial lawyers who have sued the Catholic Church after being allegedly abused by priests. Members of the local SNAP chapter have sued the Diocese of Jackson, Bishops Joseph Latino and William Houck, and local parishes seeking millions of dollars in damages. The two leaders of SNAP in Mississippi are plaintiffs in these lawsuits. SNAP and its members have a history of sending unsolicited mailings containing false and misleading statements to parents of school children at St. Joseph High School in Madison and St. Richard Elementary School in Jackson. In addition, SNAP has run newspaper advertisements that have distorted the truth.

Most recently, SNAP has sent an unsigned statement to the parents of children attending St. Joseph High School claiming that their current principal, Mr. William Heller, may have committed improper acts while employed at a Fort Lauderdale, Florida Catholic school. What the SNAP statement failed to provide was the follow up Miami Herald newspaper article reporting that Mr. Heller had been cleared after a police investigation into the charges. In the December 1999 Miami Herald article, the investigating officer, who is mentioned prominently in the SNAP statement confirmed, **“My guide is the State of Florida statutes, and Mr. Heller did not violate any statutes.”**

In 2000, the Diocese of Jackson and school officials knew of the Fort Lauderdale Police Department’s criminal investigation of Mr. Heller because he volunteered this information during his job interview. As a part of the application process the Diocese confirmed with the Archbishop of the Archdiocese of Miami and the Superintendent of Education for the Archdiocese that the unfounded allegations of sexual misconduct were made by a former student who had been expelled from the school where Mr. Heller was principal. The Archbishop and Superintendent of Schools both confirmed that the charges against Mr. Heller were unsubstantiated and the Superintendent of Schools gave a positive recommendation for the employment of Mr. Heller.

Over the past twenty years, the Diocese has developed and implemented a safe environment program. The Diocese has publicized standards of conduct for priests and deacons, as well as diocesan employees, volunteers, and any other church personnel in positions of trust who have regular contact with children and young people. The Diocese is conducting background evaluations and extensive training for all diocesan and parish personnel who have regular contact with minors.

Anyone who has been a victim of abuse by church personnel and has not yet reported the abuse is encouraged to come forward and do so. Our victim assistance coordinator, Linda Raff, a licensed social worker, is available to assist in making a report. Please contact her at 601-355-8634, ext. 728. For more information about diocesan policies and procedures and to learn what the Diocese is doing to create a safe environment for children, please visit the diocesan website at www.jacksondiocese.org and click on “Protecting God’s Children”.

###