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Bill Would Eliminate Time Limit For Filing Child Sex-Abuse Suits

February 26, 2010 | By ARIELLE LEVIN BECKER, The Hartford Courant

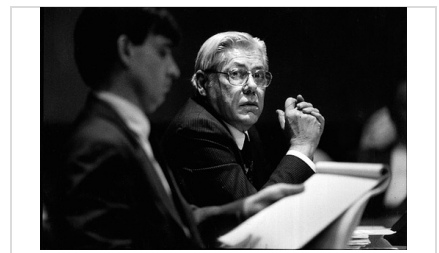
HARTFORD — State lawmakers have introduced legislation to eliminate the statute of limitations on civil cases stemming from child sexual abuse, exploitation or assault.

State Sen. Mary Ann Handley, D-Manchester, and state Rep. Beth Bye, D- West Hartford, detailed their support for the proposal at a press conference Friday morning, joined by state Victim Advocate Michelle Cruz. Also in attendance was Timothy O'Keefe, a Hartford attorney whose firm represents more than 60 victims in a decades-old sexual abuse case involving the late Dr. George Reardon.

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"Children don't always recognize that what's happening to them is abuse," Handley said. "At times, it takes a very long time to acknowledge that."

Handley and Bye spoke of hearing from victims who had been significantly harmed by the abuse and wanted to have their day in court, but could not because they were too old to do so under the statute of limitations. Bye called the statute of limitations an arbitrary line that creates injustices for victims.

The state's existing statute of limitations requires that a victim of child sexual abuse file a civil suit by age 48 -- 30 years after turning 18.

That has been a barrier for many people who say they were abused by Reardon, an endocrinologist who is accused of sexually abusing hundreds of children over several decades, beginning in the 1950s. He died in 1998, but in 2007, a homeowner renovating Reardon's former West Hartford home found a hidden cache of more than 50,000 slides and 100 movie reels of child pornography.

Since then, about 140 people have filed lawsuits against St. Francis Hospital and Medical Center, where Reardon worked, arguing that the hospital was negligent in failing to stop the abuse. The hospital has said it did not know of the specific allegations until 1993, when state health officials moved to revoke Reardon's license.

More than 50 of the plaintiffs in the Reardon case were older than 48 when they filed their claims. Others have not filed lawsuits because they are older than 48.

Last year, state lawmakers considered a proposal, inspired by the Reardon case, that would have extended the statute of limitations for civil suits in cases where evidence is discovered that could not have reasonably been found before.

St. Francis opposed the proposal last year, arguing that old cases are difficult to defend and that the financial impact of

the proposal "could seriously undermine our mission of providing quality care to those in need."

Ultimately, the legislature's judiciary committee did not vote on the proposal, effectively killing it.

Bye said Delaware, Alaska and Maine have all eliminated their statutes of limitations in child sexual abuse cases in recent years.

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