



## Advocates for child sexual abuse victims push for longer window to seek justice

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Pennsylvania lawmakers spent a lot of time and effort in the last legislative session working to prevent future cases like **the Jerry Sandusky child sex abuse scandal** at Penn State.

In many ways, **the state is still adjusting to those changes.**

But advocates rallied at the Capitol Monday for one more change they say is needed to deliver justice to those who've already been abused: extending the time frames that former victims have to seek civil damages against their abusers.

Current state law bars a victim of childhood sexual abuse from bringing a civil case against a perpetrator after the victim turns 30.

It's not long enough, advocates say, for many childhood victims to come to terms with what happened to them. As a result, it has the effect of sheltering too many perpetrators from accountability for their actions.

"It's high time that we accept that delayed reporting (of sexual abuse by victims) is the norm," said Kristen Houser, vice president of the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape.

"We have recently seen glaring examples of this in the Boy Scouts, in religious institutions, in schools and most recently with the allegations against Bill Cosby. It's time for us to stop asking why... and finally change our laws so they are based in reality."

Bills offered by Rep. Mark Rozzi,, D-Berks County, and Sen. Rob Teplitz, D-Dauphin County, would raise the statute of limitations on civil action to age 50 for cases arising from incidents of childhood sexual abuse.

They would also remove immunity from the state, local government or private employers in the event of a finding of gross negligence by supervisors in a case of child sexual abuse by one of their employees or agents.

The age 50 benchmark would place potential civil cases on the same deadline as criminal cases.

That's especially, important, some supporters said, since victims don't get to make the final call as to whether criminal cases are pursued.

"We all have to be able to work through this on our own time," noted Matt Sandusky, who **went public in 2012 with allegations that he'd been abused for years by the man who would eventually become his adoptive father, Jerry Sandusky.**

The statute of limitations would ordinarily have barred him from seeking damages, because Matt was 33 years old at the time.

He benefitted from the contrition of Penn State, which has bent over backwards to try to treat Jerry Sandusky's victims fairly, and **received a monetary settlement in late 2013.**

Others, Matt Sandusky noted, aren't as fortunate as he was.

"If the statute of limitations laws stay as they are... some people are no longer allowed to seek justice, just because they've reached that arbitrary number," he said.

Matt Sandusky was scheduled to appear in person at Monday's rally, but missed it due to a minor illness. He later spoke by telephone with PennLive.com.

State Rep. Louis Williams Bishop, D-Philadelphia, touted an alternative measure on the same subject Monday. Bishop's bill would eliminate all statute of limitations restrictions, civil or criminal, on childhood sexual abuse.

Taking that step, said Bishop, will send a strong message to perpetrators that in Pennsylvania, "You can run but you can't hide... You will have to face your day in court."

The statute of limitations changes have been opposed in the past by the Pennsylvania Catholic Conference - the public advocacy arm of the Roman Catholic Church - and liability insurers.

Both groups would presumably be placed at greater economic risk if the changes were passed, but they also contend that the justice issue applies to them, too.

Catholic Conference spokesman Amy Hill noted that as evidence gets lost, memories fade and witnesses move away or die, it becomes "impossible for any organization that cares for children to defend themselves in court years later."

Hill also pointed to **the 2012 report by a special legislative task force on child protection issues** that found Pennsylvania is already "one of the most generous states in terms of the length" of the tail for

childhood sexual abuse.

None of the statute of limitations bills were considered in the 2013-14 legislative session - even as nearly two dozen other child protections bill were enacted - but Rossi, Teplitz and Bishop said they don't intend to let the issue rest.

"Pedophiles don't retire and our law should not protect their heinous acts," Rossi said.

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