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In our words

Lawmakers: Reform statute of limitations in childhood sexual abuse cases

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Posted: Monday, April 20, 2015 6:00 am
The LNP Editorial Board

THE ISSUE

State legislators and advocates for sexual assault victims lobbied last week for reforms to Pennsylvania's statute of limitations law. Adult victims of childhood sexual abuse only have until they're 30 to bring civil action against their abusers. Bills in the state House and Senate would raise that to age 50. That would bring the civil statute in line with the criminal statute of limitations. The Pennsylvania Catholic Conference, the public affairs arm of the state's Catholic bishops, and the Insurance Federation of Pennsylvania have lobbied against statute of limitation reform.

Pennsylvania should be on the side of making sure the perpetrators of sexual abuse are held accountable. Pennsylvania should be on the side of making sure victims of sexual abuse who want their day in court get it.

Anything that doesn't meet that standard is not good enough, no matter how the counterargument is cloaked or framed.

State Rep. Mark Rozzi is among those leading the charge to do what is right. He tells of being raped by his parish priest when he was 13. He tells the story of two of his childhood friends — sexually abused by the same priest — committing suicide.

It often takes years, even decades, for victims to report childhood sexual abuse. Rozzi says he was in his late 30s when he decided he "couldn't take it anymore. I was done suffering in silence."

His rapist had died by then; he died after being charged in Texas with the sexual assault of another child.

Rozzi, a Democrat from Berks County, decided to make helping other victims his mission.

These days, no one would describe him as silent. He's blunt and zealous, fueled by anger. But it's a righteous anger.

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It's an anger we all should share, about the toll exacted on our fellow Pennsylvanians by perpetrators of childhood sexual abuse.

There is something we can do to make things, if not right, then better: Insist lawmakers support [House Bill 661](#), introduced by Rozzi, and Senate [Bill 582](#), introduced by Democratic Sen. Rob Teplitz from Dauphin County.

State Rep. Mike Sturla, a Democrat who represents Lancaster city and its suburbs, is a co-sponsor of Rozzi's bill.

[Matt Sandusky](#), who settled a claim in 2013 with Penn State over allegations that his adoptive father, Jerry Sandusky, sexually abused him as a child, also supports the legislation.

The primary obstacle in the General Assembly to getting such legislation passed has been state Rep. Ron Marsico, a Dauphin County Republican who chairs the House Judiciary Committee.

Marsico stands on the wrong side of this moral divide.

Rozzi says his bill represents a compromise — his preference would be to eliminate the statutes of limitations on childhood sexual abuse completely, as proposed in a bill introduced by Rep. Louise Williams Bishop, a Democrat from Philadelphia. (Another bill would establish a two-year window for past victims to press civil claims.)

Rozzi's bill merely seeks to align the civil statute to the criminal one. Victims barred from pursuing civil action under the old statute would have until they're 50 to do so.

Catholic bishops have complained in the past that the church would be punished unequally should the civil statute of limitation law be changed.

Rozzi's bill addresses this complaint: It removes immunity from public employers — such as school districts — so they face the same rules as private employers. And employers would be liable only in cases of gross negligence.

"We as victims have done everything they've asked," Rozzi says. "It's time for them to take that step toward us."

We agree. His bill is more than reasonable, and important, and it deserves broad-based support.

In an interview with LNP last year, Harrisburg [Bishop Ronald Gainer](#) said there was no statute of limitations in church law.

If an accusation were to be made about a priest abusing a child decades ago, "that would be examined as though it happened yesterday," he said.

That standard should be applied to Pennsylvania law, too. All victims of childhood sexual abuse deserve such consideration — and nothing less.

24-hour sexual assault hotline: 392-7273

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Pennsylvania,charles chaput and 'ron marsico' et al are protecting pedophiles and ignoring VICTIMS !~

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Larry Berardi · Top Commenter · Owner at Building Systems Testing & Evaluation, LLC

What delegitimizes legislation of child sexual abuse is that republicans target teachers only for their legislation.

The intent of republican legislation is to discredit teachers, and does not fully protect those of sexual abuse.

While statistics indicate most child sexual abuse occurs by a family member, civic leader, or religious leader.

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I met with lobbyists for the catholic conference of bishops whose arguensts against chaging the SOL / Survivor window were specious,rehearsed and choreographed. The rcc/chaput are fighting these bills to avoid responsibility and accounatability they will do everything they can to keep VICTIMS from JUSTICE. Time to level the playing field and hold the enablers and abusers accountable !

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