



R.I. House Judiciary Committee  
Testimony for H5171  
February 26, 2019

Dear Chairman Craven and Members of the Committee:

The history of child sex abuse within the Catholic Church and the reminders of our past failures to protect young people are occasions for pain that call for justice and healing.

As a priest and a Catholic, I wish I could turn back the clock on the terrible things that have happened in the past, but I can't.

I am somewhat heartened, however, by the knowledge that over the last 25 years the Diocese of Providence has established a commitment to safety, justice and healing that seeks to atone for the past and protect our young people in the future.

For more than a quarter century, the Diocese has been a leader in the United States in implementing programs and policies to prevent childhood sex abuse. Meanwhile, it continues to work vigilantly to ensure our Church is safe for everyone, especially for children and youth, while efforts continue to reach out to victims and their families and provide the resources they need.

Addressing this issue has been solely motivated by the fact that it is the right thing to do. The Rhode Island Catholic Conference, however, expresses serious concern regarding the proposed legislation because it complicates and impedes the administration of justice and does little to protect victims. In fact, this bill as written could make the pursuit of justice and healing more difficult, not less.

Statutes of limitations are meant to promote justice by preventing surprises through the revival of claims that have been allowed to lie dormant. Furthermore, statutes of limitations promote fairness in other ways, too. They prevent the raising of old claims in which evidence is lost, memories change and witnesses disappear and guard against false or misrepresented claims. This bill would be unprecedented in Rhode Island in that there are no other civil claims in our laws without a statute of limitations. The only acts which do not carry a statute of limitations are criminal acts which carry life imprisonment. Further, this proposed legislation could negate efforts to address the issue justly and fairly by raising serious constitutional issues that make the bill vulnerable to a court challenge. This serious flaw is addressed in more detail in the addendum to my testimony.

The Diocese of Providence has in place one of the strongest sexual abuse prevention and protection programs in the country. Over 25 years ago, the diocese created its Office of Education and Compliance to investigate claims and oversee safe environment policies in all its many parishes, schools and agencies. This office is currently headed by a retired veteran of the Rhode Island State Police with 23 years' experience on the force.

Establishing protocols for protections have been continually strengthened over the years. These steps include the voluntarily establishment of protocols with the Rhode Island Attorney General's Office. This protocol establishes the reporting of all claims of sexual abuse of a minor to the Office of the R.I. Attorney General. This is in addition to the long-standing protocol of reporting all allegations of abuse, regardless of how credible, to law enforcement agencies. This commitment to the protection of children and enhanced transparency continue to be a priority for the Catholic Church in Rhode Island.

The Church is deeply and wholeheartedly committed to protecting children from the crime of sexual abuse, providing justice and healing for innocent and suffering victims, and ensuring measures to prevent sexual abuse. The Rhode Island Catholic Conference must express its serious reservations regarding this piece of legislation, however, as it fails to serve the interests of justice and ensure the protection of all victims in a way that is legally sound.

We would respectfully ask that the General Assembly address the serious flaws in this legislation and then pass a bill.