



RE: HB 1382 and 1384

Dear members of the House Judiciary Committee,

My name is Zach Hiner, and I am the Executive Director of SNAP, the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests. Thank you for allowing me to submit testimony today on behalf of HB 1382, a critical piece of reform that we at SNAP believe will help protect children and support survivors of childhood sexual abuse.

For the past thirty years, our organization has provided support and advocacy services for victims of institutional sexual violence. We have more than 30,000 survivors in our network nationwide. While our organization was born out of the Catholic sex abuse crisis, we count among our network survivors from every faith tradition.

I am honored to serve as the Executive Director of SNAP and work with survivors as an advocate. I have heard their stories and I know that one of the typical things that victims of childhood sexual abuse have in common is a negative history with the judicial process. Limited and restrictive statutes of limitations laws exclude many from justice.

HB 1832 would help eliminate those barriers and create an opportunity for justice and prevention by opening a two-year “window to justice,” allowing previously time-barred claims to be heard.

What are the facts about abuse and SOL?

The facts about sexual violence are clear: sexual violence is a tremendously under reported crime, and when survivors do come forward, it is typically much later in the life. Estimates vary, but [data from the CDC shows that 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 13 boys will experience child sexual abuse at some point during their childhood.](#) Studies show that, of those victims, [fewer than 40% will ever come forward to report their abuse and, when they do, nearly half of victims only tell a friend or family member as opposed to someone in law enforcement.](#) Thanks to CHILD USA we know that the [average age of disclosure for a survivor of child sexual abuse is 52 years old.](#)

These statistics combine to illustrate the fact that childhood sexual abuse is a common, yet often hidden crime. It is rare as it is often difficult for survivors to disclose while the abuse is occurring or shortly thereafter, whether due to feelings of embarrassment, guilt, a belief that the abuser cares for them, or fear due to the abuser’s position of trust and authority.

We also know that the effects of childhood sexual abuse are long-term and severe. [Studies have shown](#) that childhood sexual abuse has been correlated with higher levels of mental health problems, such as depression, anxiety, dissociative patterns, eating disorders and suicidal ideation, and physical health problems. In fact, adults with a history of child abuse are 30% more likely to have a serious medical condition like cancer or heart problems. Additionally, survivors of childhood sexual abuse also face personal issues as well such as joblessness, poverty, addiction issues, and difficulty forming close relationships.



These problems often come at a high cost, both to society and communities, but especially to the victims of sexual abuse. Through no fault of their own, many survivors have lived lives with pain, illnesses, and other adverse experiences that have resulted from being victimized as children. Survivors often are forced to spend money on therapy, medication, or medical care, treatments that are expensive and cost money that survivors too often do not have to spend.

By reforming the civil statute of limitations, we can begin to transfer some of the costs associated with abuse from the victim to the perpetrator and to those institutions which have shielded abusers.

We should open, not limit, opportunities for justice. Statute of limitation laws are, in my view, an arbitrary period. Rather than limit access to the courts based on when someone was able to confront their trauma, we believe that the courts should be open to all and any legal questions be handled within the court system on a case-by-case basis.

Why should we eliminate civil statutes?

At SNAP we believe that informed communities are safer communities, and for those in our network, the first goal of allowing claims to be brought forward is the public identification of perpetrators. When those violent sexual predators hurt children can remain hidden within the community due to statute of limitations barriers, it leaves other children at risk of abuse and the lifelong costs and adverse effects that come with that abuse.

By opening civil windows, not only are survivors provided with an opportunity to experience justice and closure, but their experiences can better inform communities and institutions about how abuse occurs and how it is hidden.

Additionally, when civil claims are filed, they often lead to other victims coming forward and filing their own cases. Sometimes, this even leads to the identification of cases that are still within the criminal statute of limitations as happened in Pennsylvania following the release of the 2018 Grand Jury report. In this way, reforming the civil statute of limitations can lead to the criminal prosecutions that in turn lead to safer communities.

As our nation has learned more about trauma and sexual violence, reforming the statute of limitations is confirmed by the survivors' reporting trends that happened in over thirty states around the country. Some states, such as Delaware and Hawaii, have even opened civil windows multiple times to give more survivors access to justice. More recently, New York, New Jersey, and Vermont have passed their own reform to statute of limitations laws, joining the 38 other states that have made reforms since 2002.

In sum, reforming the statute of limitations is a move that has strong precedent and can lead to information that can protect children and prevent future cases of abuse while giving existing survivors of abuse the support they need to heal. When survivors are empowered to seek redress through the court system, justice can be achieved.