

February 20, 2020
House Bill 974
Position: Support
Civil Actions - Child Sexual Abuse - Definition and Statute of Limitations
(Hidden Predator Act of 2020)
Patti Stallings Mills

My name is Patti Stallings Mills and I have a unique perspective on this issue. I was raised in the Catholic Church- going 12 years to Catholic Schools and being a very active participant in my current Howard County Church, teaching 8th graders for 11 years to prepare for the sacrament of Confirmation. I was raised in a middle-class Montgomery County home at the end of the street from our local church and school. My Dad, Rev Mr. Dan P. Stallings became a Permanent Deacon in the Church in the mid 80's. In 2008 he was convicted as a pedophile and sexual abuser.

When I was a child, I witnessed a horrifying and confusing sight while I shared a bedroom with my older sister. I saw my father raping her. Totally confused at the age of 7, I was sure I was wrong and must be a horrible child. And then it happened to me. I was not raped but abused sexually and beaten repeatedly for seeing what my dad did to my sister. He admitted to raping my sister over 60 times from the time she was 8 to age 18. And then there were cousins who came forward as well. And finally, he abused girls throughout the 80's and 90's as he ministered to them as a Deacon. How is a young child supposed to process all of this?

Unsure where to turn to when this came out after my mother's death in 2006, my sister turned to the Montgomery County Police Department. They provided a phone sting where my father admitted to raping her over 60 times. Donna Fenton from the States Attorney's office realized that this was precedent setting. No victim had ever been able to face her abuser in court like this after 30 plus years. She walked us through the path to truth, no matter how frightening. Donna Fenton was amazing.

We received calls from cousins and from girls that my dad had ministered to in the church over the next few weeks. Sadness doesn't begin to cover what we felt. If we had been able to put a voice to what my dad did, maybe others would have been spared. But what can you ask of an 8-year-old? They don't understand. Is this normal? Is this my fault? Who can I tell that won't be angry?

So how do we put a statute of limitations on this? The 8-year-old, the 12year old? We have to process what happened to us. I trusted this person. So, did my mom. Did I do anything wrong? I was in my 40's before I realized what I saw that night and that it was not OK. Thankfully, I spoke up to a friend and my younger sister eventually about what happened- I must have been crazy. Because that's what you think when a person with power does this to you.

How can a statute of limitations provide for the child who has been abused? Not as it is now. Not even close. As Christians, we believe God sets our feet on a path at birth. But these predators change that path. And these children are set to fend for themselves. No support or resources for counseling. No civil suits for treatment. If the Church were to provide this, that would be "an admission of guilt." That is the real sin. They deserve the right to civil action. Whenever they need it. When they are ready.

Please recognize that abuse can bear no limitations. I was in my 40's, my sister in her 50's and some of my father's victims were in their 20's. And we know there are more out there. They need our help. Removing the statute of limitations will provide opportunities to get the care and counseling they need. Allow them time to give closure to the abuse that has gone on way too long without any accountability for our state's youngest victims.

For all these reasons, I urge the committee to do right by victims and give HB974 a favorable report.