



ASHLAR GOVERNMENT RELATIONS

March 28, 2023

SB686 -Civil Actions – Child Sexual Abuse – Definition, Damages, and Statute of Limitations (The Child Victims Act of 2023)

House Judiciary Committee

POSITION: SUPPORT

Dear Chairman Clippinger, and members of the House Judiciary Committee,

My name is Therese Hessler and I am writing today to ask for your *support* in the passage of Senate Bill 686 – Child Sexual Abuse – Definition, Damages, and Statute of Limitations. If passed, this legislation will give survivors of childhood sexual abuse justice and will help to protect today's children from predators.

It has been my honor to work alongside the numerous advocates (many of whom are survivors) on this legislation for the past several years. During this time, other individuals in my life have chosen to share their personal stories of childhood sexual abuse with me, many of whom had never shared their personal story with another individual prior; and whom under our current law would not be able to file a civil claim based on their age. These survivors are some of my best friends, family members, neighbors and colleagues, and other times just an individual who I had recently met somewhere whom asked what I was working on.

Childhood sexual abuse is sadly more prevalent than most people care to imagine, and I am still shocked at how many people I know personally that have been through something this horrific and carried the weight of this alone their entire lives. Unfortunately, chances are that by some degree or another childhood sexual abuse has affected everyone in this committee room today. Although estimates vary across studies, the research shows about 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 13 boys in the United States experience child sexual abuse.¹

There are many reasons that individuals who have been sexually abused do not come forward or have an average age of disclosure of 52 years old.² Victims will frequently cite shame, fear of social stigmatization or ridicule, and fear of not being believed. Perpetrators of sexual abuse may threaten the child or family with physical harm or may threaten the child that she will be taken away from her family. Perpetrators often blame the child for the abuse, and the child internalizes this self-blame. Abused infants, toddlers, and other very young children may not understand that what is going on is abuse. And finally, a child may attempt disclosure to an adult who is distracted, disbelieving, or in denial, and no further action is taken. For all these reasons, children may tell no one for decades.

¹ <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/childsexualabuse/fastfact.html>

² Munzer A, Fegert JM, Ganser HG, Loos S, Witt A, Goldbeck L. Please Tell! Barriers to disclosing sexual victimization and subsequent social support perceived by children and adolescents. J Interpersonal Violence 2016;3:355-377.

It is up to all of us – members of this committee, the Senate and the House as well as the citizens of Maryland to do what is right and to not only give a voice to survivors that may have never been heard by passing this lifesaving legislation but also to protect today’s children from sexual predators that have never been exposed due to current law.

It is for these reasons, I politely urge a favorable report on Senate Bill 686.

Thank you,

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