

**Victims' Intervention
Program**
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Written Testimony Re: Statute of Limitations Reform in Pennsylvania

Senate Judiciary Committee

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Good Morning Chairwoman Baker, Chairman Farnese and members of the Senate Judiciary Committee. I am honored to be here today to participate in the public hearing of the statute of limitations. I thank you for taking the time to hold this hearing and to listen to the important voices here today.

My name is Michele Minor Wolf. I am the Executive Director of Victims' Intervention Program of Wayne and Pike Counties. I have been with this program for 22 years, and in the field for 29. Our mission is to educate the community on the issues of domestic and sexual violence; to empower victims and survivors to make the best choices for their individual situations and to invite the community to envision a world free from violence. Our agency provides a wide range of crisis and post-crisis services to victims of sexual harassment, sexual assault, sexual abuse, human trafficking, domestic violence and more.

Victims' Intervention Program provides services in rural counties. Given the challenges of a rural community, we provide more services off-site than we do in our office. We work hard to reduce barriers to accessing services. For instance, neither county has public transportation. By this I mean, no bus, no taxi and no Uber. We have created programs that allow us to provide most of our services off-site at places that folks can get to.

Even though I am in an administrative role, I have had the honor and privilege of working directly with victims and survivors. This is what brings me here today.

Victims' Intervention Program has been a member of the Pennsylvania Coalition against Rape (PCAR) since our inception in 1988. We have been active participants in coalition meetings while also serving on various committees. PCAR consistently reaches out to programs to inquire about our experiences with victims and survivors, as well as our experiences in the community. PCAR has been wonderful in really paying attention to what is happening at the

local and state levels. They partner with the local programs in working endlessly on finding the best ways to help victims and survivors.

Similarly, PCAR member programs have a strong network with one another. We meet a few times a year as a whole group and in between those meetings we meet as regions. We discuss trends and issues that survivors are facing. We work together to problem solve to find a solution to best help victims and survivors overall.

Today, my words offered to you are from my own professional stance as well as the voice of victims and survivors that have come through our doors.

Part of our work includes presentations in the community and community awareness events. It never fails that someone will ask if our increase in clients served is due to more sexual violence occurring. On the local level, this is hard to track because the majority of victims that present with sexual abuse, assault or harassment experiences come to us years after their abuse. The only victims we see immediately after an assault are those who go to the emergency room. As part of the Sexual Assault Response Team, we meet them in the hospital to provide support, educate them on their rights, and advocate on their behalf if necessary. Even in these situations, victims do not always seek services right away. Similarly, they may not want to move forward with law enforcement or prosecution.

It is very normal for a victim of sexual abuse, assault or harassment to not come forward right away. In fact, it takes many victims several years or decades to disclose their abuse. Sadly, we still live in a victim-blaming culture that will ask questions such as “Why didn’t she report it?” or “Why didn’t he tell anyone” or “Why are they coming forward after all this time?” We could spend hours answering this with a trauma-informed response. However, what we need to be asking ourselves is “What can we do to make it easier for victims to come forward,” and “How can we best support them when they do?”

Often it will take a high-profile case for changes to occur. For instance, the Child Abuse Mandated Reporting laws changed after the Jerry Sandusky case. As a result of abuse within the Catholic Church, there was a fund developed to help victims of abuse by Catholic priests. While this sounds good on paper, this fund is very limiting. This ties the hands of victims to seek justice. Additionally, it only helps those abused within the Catholic Church. We provide services to victims of clergy abuse from many different religions.

We recently worked with a woman who was abused by a priest as a child. She is developmentally disabled and does not always understand paperwork. Before we met her, she agreed to a settlement. She said she did not understand that this meant she could not move forward for justice. She said she was told to sign and she did that as she trusted them. Now she is dealing with the disappointment that she cannot move forward. She said that she feels silenced all over again. She told us she would give all the money back in exchange for even just the opportunity for justice.

It must be noted that we at the local programs see many victims that are not involved in high profile cases that make the news. Yet they hurt and suffer just as much as any other victim.

Years ago we had an awareness event in our local town park. An older gentleman, who was not familiar to us, attended. He seemed to be in his late 70s or early 80s. He was small and stood on a stool to speak. With tears in his eyes and his hands shaking on his cane, he shared that he was sexually abused by a scout leader when he was 10. He followed that with "I never told anyone until now". I wanted to cry with him as I thought of all those years he carried that pain alone. He did not even tell his wife. He said he felt too ashamed. He said he needed to tell someone now because he did not want to take it to the grave with him.

I worked with a woman whose sexual abuse started when she was five years old. She did not tell anyone. However, she just recently found evidence that her mother knew of this all those years ago. This has been crippling to her. Later, as a young adult, she was the victim of sexual harassment and assault by her pastor. This brought up her childhood sexual abuse trauma and she spiraled downward. She told someone at the church about the pastor and he was moved to another church. There were no consequences. She is approaching 40 years old and is now starting to talk about her childhood abuse and the pastor. This is extremely difficult for her.

I could go on with case after case of victims who take years before they are ready to talk about it. In fact, it is common that a victim of sexual abuse, assault or harassment does not show for the first appointment. They take that step to call and schedule an appointment but sometimes the fear or shame gets to them and they don't show. It might take two or three cancelations before they make it in for an appointment, and this is just for counseling. So you can see how they might not be ready for the judicial system.

Through trauma-informed counseling with advocates specially trained in sexual violence, victims can heal and build their strength back up. We have witnessed beautiful transformations of the people we serve. However, this takes time and you can see how the statute of limitations in PA does not help these victims.

Many victims who seek services are not even initially aware of the statute of limitations. It can be devastating for a victim who decides he/she is ready but has missed the deadline, so to speak. Victims express that their lives have been changed forever. They don't get to go back to the "before the abuse" self. The abuse will be with them forever. For many, they cannot even seek justice and have closure because their time ran out. This can further traumatize a victim.

Healing from sexual abuse is a very individual process. Every victim's journey is unique. Similar to grief, we cannot put a time frame on it. That being said, eliminating the statute of limitations would provide a better opportunity for victims to heal and seek justice. The more victims who have the opportunity to seek justice will make for a safer community.

In conclusion, it would be a better place for victims of sexual abuse, assault and harassment if the statute of limitations was eliminated. For victims to come forward earlier, more education

and prevention is needed. Funding for prevention education is limited and does not allow enough access for all counties to provide ample programs in their school districts. As a society, the silence, the shame and the fear will continue until we can prosecute offenders more consistently and more regularly. When the message becomes more about holding offenders accountable and keeping people safe, victims and survivors will find it easier to speak out.

Thank you again for the time to discuss this and for your work to help victims.