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Testimony for Bill H 7409

March 24, 2022

Thank you Chairman Craven and other members of the Committee, and especially Vice Chair McEntee, for your attention tonight.

As most of you have heard personal testimony from me many times, I will spare you my repeating it. I am a psychologist in private practice in MA and RI, specializing in trauma survivors of childhood sexual abuse. I am also a survivor of 8 years of sexual abuse by our parish priest when I was in Catholic elementary school in West Warwick. Today I am testifying as an advocate for survivors, since my work with SNAP (Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests) and legislative activism spark many survivors to contact me.

RI passed a law in 2019 that moved the needle forward for civil cases against perpetrators of child sexual abuse to age 53 for the victim. Although we hoped the law could also be applied to organizations who aided or protected those perpetrators, it has thus far been thwarted in the courts. The amendments in H 7409 will close that loophole, and remove the arbitrary time limit of age 53 from the law.

You might ask "why do we need this change?" In answer, I will present the case of how the Diocese of Providence has responded to reports of the sexual abuse of children by Fr. Francis Santilli, most recently pastor of St. Philip's Parish in Greenville. Here is a timeline of the diocese response.

2012 - Victims #1 & #2

A man reports to the diocese that he and his brother were abused by Fr Santilli. The man reported being abused approximately 30 times in

the early 1980s. No action taken to remove Santilli. "Deemed to lack any credibility." (3/24/14 statement)

2013 - Highly redacted letters from the Diocese to the State Police obtained by Channel 10. Included is a 2012 letter accusing the current pastor of St Phillips in Greenville (Fr.Santilli).

March 24, 2014 SNAP holds a press conference accusing Santilli.

March 24, 2014 Diocese responds on their website "Fr. Santilli is an exemplary pastor and continues to enjoy the total confidence of the Diocese of Providence." The statement was removed within 24 hours.

March 28, 2014 Victim #3

Dennis Laprade contacts the Diocese and reports similar abuse by Santilli in 1980. Deemed not credible due to being uncooperative - Dennis refused to take a polygraph test administered by the Diocese.

December 29, 2021 Victim #4

Michelle Scott calls the Diocese regarding her brother's abuse by Santilli. He committed suicide.

February 1, 2022 Victim #5

A man reports abuse by Santilli to the State Police and AG.

February 2, 2022 Diocese removes Santilli from active ministry.

The Providence Diocese left Fr. Santilli in ministry for 10 years, (2012-2022). after receiving a report regarding the abuse of two brothers. This was completely against what the National Conference of Bishops decided in their Dallas Charter in 2002. They chose to protect their priest, and their reputation, despite the devastation it left on the victims of Fr. Santilli. They chose to put the children of St Philip's parish at risk for 10

additional years! This is long past the Boston Globe's Spotlight report, long past common knowledge and outrage about priests abusing children. This is last month!

Why? Because they could. The laws in R.I. have thus far been ineffective in curtailing this immoral and criminal aid and protection of sexual predators. Our current laws have not been able to civilly hold the Diocese of Providence, or any other organization accountable for their total disregard for the welfare of children.

If you will bear with me a little longer, let me paint a picture of the devastation experienced by victims, and the Diocese' response.

Michelle Scott who called the Diocese this past December asked me to present her testimony, regarding her brother David. (See her full testimony). Here are some excerpts.

"Our mother raised us as Catholics even though she herself could not participate..... David was the fourth child, 1 year, 5 months older than me. (See picture)..... David served as an altar boy at Our Lady of Lourdes Church in Providence. I believe David felt a spiritual calling."

"During David's time serving as an alter boy, he was sexually abused by priest Francis C. Santilli, who served at Our Lady of Lourdes from 1979-1980. David never told anyone about the abuse while it was happening. Many years later he told my mother and a sister about it."

"For nine years (David) put himself through college part time.....May 17, 1997 at URI, my whole family...had come to see David's graduation. However we could not find him...my sister Karen volunteered to drive back to his apartment in Providence. (The rest of the family followed). Upon driving up and seeing the coroner's van outside, my heart sunk and I knew David was dead. He had a self inflicted gunshot wound to the head."

"I know there are so many reasons one chooses suicide but I also believe the main contributing factor was the sexual abuse he suffered, never recovered from, and not being able to go forward with lawful and legal actions" (SOL constraints)

There is one more vignette I'd like to relate to you. Victim #5 of Fr Santilli gave a statement to the Diocese Office of Compliance several weeks after he first reported it to the State Police. (February 22, 2022) He was met with victim shaming "Did you call out for help, or say Stop or Don't do that?", and minimizing "Fr Santilli is 69 now, and no longer capable of hurting children." And victim #5 was asked to take a lie detector test, administered by the diocese. He refused. Victim #5 is not quite ready to make his name public, but he encouraged me to relate to you his experience with reporting to the diocese.

I repeat: They continue to aid and protect predator priests because they can under current RI law. This has to change!