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April 29, 2025
Testimony for the House Judiciary Committee
Bill H5909

Chairman Craven, Vice Chair McEntee, Vice Chair Knight and members of the Committee

I stand before you for the 8th time to plead for the rights and safety of children. The sexual abuse of a child is a heinous crime shrouded in secrecy and shame. I know because it happened to me for 8 years from age 5 through 12. Perpetrators are usually expert at keeping their victims quiet through intimidation and threats, or even more subtly through shame. I knew I had to be bad if this was happening to me. Often organizations are complicit in this intimidation by protecting the perpetrators, not the victims. It usually takes a certain level of maturity for victims to finally come forward, the average age being 54.

RI law however, with its short SOL for institutions, still protects these complicit criminal entities. Short SOLs keep child abuse in the shadows, and encourage perpetrators to reoffend, knowing they'll be protected. We are here tonight to change that. Institutional complicity will only change when they can be made financially responsible for the damages done to our most innocent citizens, our children.

In 2019 Annie's Law was passed and signed by Governor Raimondo. But it was a compromise agreed on to move the issue forward. Individual perpetrators could be sued for 35 years past the age of majority (18). But the organizations that protected those perpetrators were given a free pass. {The rationale was that the RI constitution could not allow retroactivity. The rationale was basically flawed in that the law allowed for retroactivity for individual perpetrators.}. A case taken to the RI Supreme Court tried to consider complicit institutions as perpetrators. They ruled against this, and basically said go back to the legislature and fix the law to include institutions. That's what we are here to do.

There are lawyers here tonight that can explain the intricacies of these issues far better than I. I can tell you of my own experience. My own childhood sexual abuse happened many decades ago, and most of you have already heard what it was like then. What is harder to understand I'm sure, is the lasting or intrusive pain it brings to an abuse survivor, even decades later. My understanding comes from years of specializing in

childhood sexual abuse in my psychology practice and years of advocacy work with abuse survivors through SNAP and Bishop Accountability.

I have had years of personal therapy, yet the effects of my abuse raises its ugly head more often than I'd like to admit. Soon the AGs report about sexual abuse in the Diocese of Providence will be released. It's been 6 years in the making. I first reported to the diocese in 1994. A few weeks ago a member of the AG's team read the quotes about me that they included in the report, and I became filled with dread. Once again, my story would be out there in black and white, for all the world to see and criticize. You would think I'd be immune by now after being in the news around the world hundreds of times.

Tomorrow I head to Rome to speak truth to power while the papal conclave convenes to elect a new pope. While I'm excited for the chance to tell the gathered global press about the church's treatment of survivors, I dread being surrounded by the clergy flocking to Vatican City, and the hundreds of crucifixes everywhere, which always a trigger me.

Even in an incredibly happy time, my son's wedding last week, I was brought back to memories of his childhood when I was battling my abuse demons in earnest. I wasn't always able to keep my struggles from my 3 small children. They remember thinking of me as fragile, despite my efforts to hide my depression. I tried to be a good mom, but often fell short, and the next generation in my family pays the price.

These are my personal struggles. But I need to emphasize that mine are minor compared to so many survivors, who may not have had so much therapy available, or lacked a flexible job, and a loving and supportive family like I have.

I am here and I will be in Rome next week speaking for myself and for those who cannot. Sooner or later the public needs to understand the lasting effects of childhood sexual abuse, and the complicity of those who protect perpetrators. Those who keep it secret are also criminals. We can't put an institution in jail, but the civil courts can punish them monetarily. It is the only way to make them protect children, not themselves. Until this happens they will continue to hide what they know leaving predators with free reign to abuse more children. Make no mistake! It is still happening! You have the power to fix it.