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Va. may extend statute of limitations for abuse

by Zoe Ryan



The Virginia Senate in session

Updated 2/3/11 -- The Virginia Senate passed a bill today that would extend the statute of limitations for sexual abuse civil lawsuits from two years to 20. Victims groups and the Virginia Catholic bishops find themselves on different sides of the bill.

Currently in Virginia, the statute of limitations for sexual abuse is two years from when the person is 18 years old or from the time of discovery. The legislature is deciding whether to raise it to eight years or to 20 years.

After hearing stories from victims of sexual abuse, members of the Senate Courts of Justice subcommittee voted 2-1 Jan. 27 to recommend a 20-year limit instead of the eight-year limit they had been favoring.

The subcommittee extended the limit after it heard testimony from abuse survivors, including a story from a 67-year-old man that made some in the room cry, the Associated Press reported.

The full committee then passed the bill Monday (Jan. 31).

The Virginia House of Delegates passed its version of the bill Jan. 27, increasing the current two-year limit to eight years. The House and the Senate will look at the bills and come to a conclusion at a later

time.

The original bills, sponsored by David B. Albo, R-Fairfax, in the House of Delegates and Frederick M. Quayle, R-Chesapeake, in the Senate each proposed a 25-year cap.

Lobbying by the Virginia Catholic Conference, the public policy arm of the bishops of Arlington and Richmond dioceses, helped persuade the House of Delegates to approve an eight-year limit.

The Virginia Catholic Conference thought eight years was reasonable. Twenty years could possibly bring about problems, such as memories fading or witnesses becoming unreachable, Catholic conference executive director Jeff Caruso told *NCR* in a telephone interview Feb. 1.

"First and foremost, Virginia public policy must ensure protection and compassion for victims," Caruso said. "The issue is we must be fair to victims and provide justice and look at what's a reasonable extension."

Forty states and Washington D.C. have a limit of eight years or less, according to Caruso.

The bill addresses sexual abuse in general and does not mention any religious organization.

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Victims groups are pressing for longer limits.

"It's not an issue that you just compromise over like you're horse trading," said Grier Weeks, executive director of the National Association to Protect Children. "Eight years means for most victims that they're 26 years old. For many, many victims, that is not enough time."

The average victim doesn't come forward until their 40s, said Becky Ianni, director for the Washington DC/Virginia chapters of SNAP, or the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests.

At the House hearing on Thursday, Ianni told her story of being abused by a Catholic priest when she was young. She attended the full committee hearing Monday morning.

"I hope whatever they choose that they choose the largest number that they can," Ianni told *NCR*. "The longer time that victims have to come forward, the more perpetrators are going to be exposed. I think it will act as a deterrent for pedophiles because pedophiles use intimidation and time to their advantage, and I think all of that is going to help protect kids."

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