

STATEMENT OF ERIN NEIL

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BRIDGEPORT**

On Raised Bill No. 6532

"An Act Concerning the Statute of Limitations for

Bringing an Action for Damages for the Sexual Assault of a Minor"

Good morning Senator McDonald, Representative Lawlor and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you concerning HB 6532.

My name is Erin Neil, I am the Director of the Safe Environment Program for the Diocese of Bridgeport. I am also a licensed clinical social worker. Joining me is Dolores Skovich, fellow Director of SE programs for the Archdiocese of Hartford.

Bill 6532 is problematic for two reasons. First, it does nothing to address the lack of a level playing field. And second, it does nothing to protect children.

This bill, like the current statute of limitations, applies **only** to private institutions. State and municipal entities are not held to the same standard. That means a very low level of civil recourse for victims of child sexual abuse committed by a state employee, a public school teacher, a coach, a classroom aide, a police officer or any public official, and there have been cases like these here in CT. Child sexual abuse is a societal problem and is not unique to private institutions, yet government run agencies are immune from civil action by its victims.

We are all committed to keeping our children safe. Allow me to share with you the actions taken by the Catholic Church to safeguard children and the results of those actions.

Safe Environment programs were established in U.S. Dioceses by the Catholic Bishops in 2002. Since their inception anyone involved in ministry must clear a criminal background check, read and acknowledge the written Codes of Conduct and complete child sexual abuse awareness and prevention training. This standard applies to priests, deacons, lay employees, volunteers, children and youth. Safe Environment programs are well established throughout CT and training has reached over 200,000 adults and children. Additionally, we've conducted more than 50,000 criminal background checks.

Setting standards is one thing, meeting them is another. Each year compliance with Safe Environment standards is audited by external firms and each year all standards are met and in some cases exceeded.

The Catholic Church provides the largest and most consistent child sexual abuse prevention effort in the State of CT and in fact it is our hope that the State considers implementing these same standards for our public school children.

The Church has responded in a model way to the problem of child sexual abuse unmatched by any governmental or educational institution. Nevertheless, bill 6532 unfairly targets private institutions and threatens to deplete the very resources of an organization that helps to protect so many

children in our State. We already have in place one of the longest statutes in the country yet it is very concerning that the current statute and these proposed changes do nothing to help children who are abused in our public schools or in government run institutions. These institutions should not be immune! One victim of child sexual abuse is too many and it is devastating regardless of where the abuse took place.

Allow me to say a few words about the victim assistance programs that are in place in all 3 of the CT dioceses. These programs provide healing and outreach to survivors of child sexual abuse committed by any person from the Church and, in many cases, by persons not from the Church. We provide help to victims and their families including counseling, financial and other forms of outreach specific to the person's needs. We offer this outreach regardless of whether the abuse occurred recently or in the past and for as long as necessary for healing to take place. All victims are offered an apology and a meeting with their Archbishop or Bishop.

Safe Environments has proven a resource for people beyond the Catholic Church and the majority of calls and assistance that we provide does not concern priests. In fact the majority of calls I receive concern incidents involving two children and abuse within families. What many people do not realize is that today, child sexual abuse is a rare occurrence in the Catholic Church. Most abuse involving the Church occurred in the 1960's and 1970's, yet abuse remains a current day problem in public schools and in government run agencies.

Child sexual abuse is a pervasive societal problem and abuse is committed most often (89% of the time) by people we know and we fully expect to be trustworthy. **Carol Shakeshaft analyzed data collected by the American Association of University Women in 2000 and reported that an estimated 4.5 million public school students sometime between k-12 are subject to sexual misconduct by an employee of a public school including teachers, classroom aides, school principals, school counselors and coaches.**

DO NOT advance 6532. It does nothing to protect children, it does not encourage the timely reporting of abuse and it is simply unfair.

Thank you