

**TO:** Honorable Members of the House Judiciary Committee

**FROM:** Marci Hamilton, Founder & CEO, CHILD USA; Professor, University of Pennsylvania

**RE:** HB 417: An Act to Amend Title 10 of the Delaware Code Relating to the Statute of Limitations for Civil Claims Based on Sexual Abuse of a Minor

**DATE:** June 17, 2024

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Dear Honorable Members of the House Judiciary Committee,

Thank you for allowing us to submit testimony in support of HB 417, which will retroactively eliminate the statutes of limitation (“SOLs”) for all claims of child sexual abuse (“CSA”). This legislation will not only bring long overdue justice to survivors, but it will also greatly reduce the present danger to children in Delaware by exposing hidden predators who are still abusing children today.

By way of introduction, Professor Marci Hamilton is a First Amendment constitutional scholar at the University of Pennsylvania. She founded CHILD USA, a national nonprofit think tank devoted to protecting children’s rights, which promotes science and trauma-informed CSA SOL reform.

**I. Research on Trauma and Disclosure Supports SOL Reform for Child Sexual Abuse**

**A. There is a Nationwide Epidemic of CSA Causing Lifelong Damage to Victims**

Currently, more than 10% of children are sexually abused, with at least one in five girls and one in thirteen boys sexually abused before they turn 18.<sup>1</sup> CSA is a social problem that occurs in all social groups and institutions, including familial, religious, educational, medical, and athletic. Nearly 90% of CSA perpetrators are someone the child knows; in fact, roughly one-third of CSA offenses are committed by family members.<sup>2</sup>

The trauma stemming from CSA is complex and individualized, and it impacts victims throughout their lifetimes:<sup>3</sup>

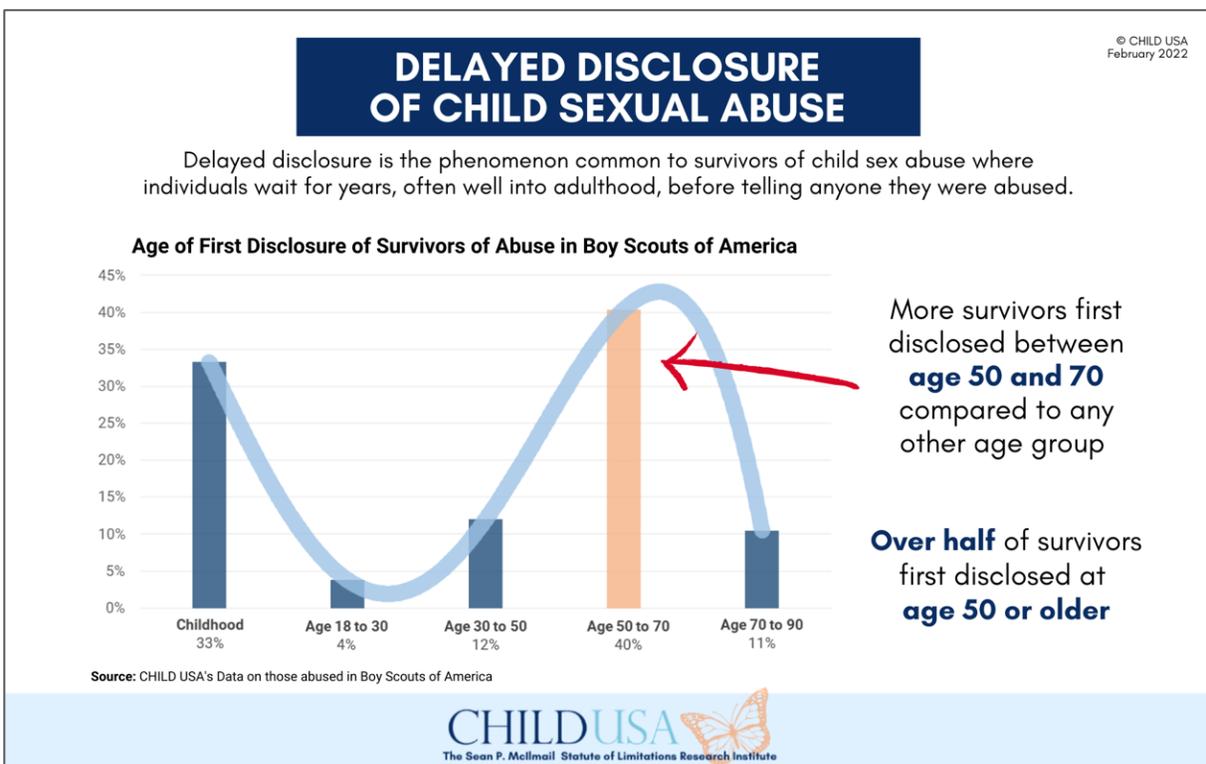
- Childhood trauma, including CSA, can have **devastating impacts on a child’s brain**,<sup>4</sup> including disrupted neurodevelopment; impaired social, emotional, and cognitive development; psychiatric and physical disease, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)<sup>5</sup>; and disability.<sup>6</sup>
- CSA victims suffer an **increased risk of suicide**—in one study, female CSA survivors were two to four times more likely to attempt suicide, and male CSA survivors were four to 11 times more likely to attempt suicide.<sup>7</sup>



- CSA leads to an increased risk of **negative outcomes across the lifespan**, such as alcohol problems, illicit drug use, depression, marriage issues, and family problems.<sup>8</sup>

## B. It Often Takes Decades Before CSA Survivors Are Ready to Disclose Their Abuse

Many victims of CSA suffer in silence for decades before they talk to anyone about their traumatic experiences. As children, CSA victims often fear the negative repercussions of disclosure, such as disruptions in family stability, loss of relationships, or involvement with the authorities.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, CSA survivors may struggle to disclose because of trauma and psychological barriers such as shame and self-blame, as well as social factors like gender-based stereotypes or the stigma surrounding victimization.<sup>10</sup> Further, many injuries resulting from CSA do not manifest until survivors are well into adulthood. These manifestations may coincide with difficulties in functioning and a further delay in disclosure of abuse.



Moreover, disclosure of CSA to the authorities for criminal prosecution or an attorney in pursuit of civil justice is a difficult and emotionally complex process, which involves the survivor knowing that he or she was abused, being willing to identify publicly as an abuse survivor, and deciding to act against their abuser. In light of these barriers to disclosure, it is not surprising that:

- In a study of survivors of abuse in Boy Scouts of America, **51%** of survivors disclosed their abuse for the first time at **age 50 or older**.
- An estimated **70%** of child sexual assault victims **never contact police** to report abuse.
- **One-third** of CSA survivors **never report** their abuse to anyone.



For both children and adults, disclosure of CSA trauma is a process and not a discrete event in which a victim comes to terms with their abuse.<sup>11</sup> To effectively protect children from abuse, SOL laws must reflect this reality.

## II. SOL Reform Serves the Public Good by Giving Survivors Access to Justice and Preventing Future Abuse

Historically, a wall of ignorance and secrecy was constructed around CSA, which has been reinforced by short SOLs that keep victims out of the legal system. Short SOLs for CSA play into the hands of the perpetrators and the institutions that cover up for them; they disable victims' voices and empowerment and leave future children vulnerable to preventable sexual assault.

CHILD USA is leading the vibrant national and global movement to eliminate civil and criminal SOLs and revive expired civil claims as a systemic solution to the preventable CSA epidemic.<sup>12</sup> **There are three compelling public purposes served by the child sexual abuse SOL reform movement**, which are explained in the graphic below:

### HOW STATUTE OF LIMITATIONS REFORM HELPS EVERYONE



**Identifies Hidden Child Predators and the Institutions that Endanger Children**  
to the public, shielding other children from future abuse.



**Punishes Bad Actors & Shifts the Cost of Abuse**  
from the victims and taxpayers to those who caused it.



**Prevents Further Abuse**  
by educating the public about the prevalence, signs, and impact of child sex abuse so that it can be prevented in the future.



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February 2022

### A. SOL Reform Identifies Hidden Child Predators and Institutions that Endanger Children

It is in society's best interest to have sex abuse survivors identify hidden child predators to the public—whenever the survivor is ready. The decades before public disclosure give perpetrators and institutions wide latitude to suppress the truth to the detriment of children, parents, and the public. Some predators abuse a high number of victims and continue abusing children well into their elderly years. For example, one study found that 7% of offenders sampled committed offenses against 41 to 450 children, and the highest time between offense to conviction was 36 years.<sup>13</sup> SOL reform helps protect Delaware's children by identifying sexual predators in our



midst. By eliminating and reviving short, restrictive SOLs, especially allowing claims for past abuse to be brought to court, hidden predators are brought into the light and are prevented from further abusing more children in Delaware.

### **B. SOL Reform Punishes Bad Actors and Shifts the Cost of Abuse**

CSA generates staggering costs that impact the nation's health care, education, criminal justice, and welfare systems. The estimated lifetime cost to society of child sexual abuse cases occurring in the US in 2015 is \$9.3 billion, and the average cost of non-fatal per female victim was estimated at \$282,734. Average cost estimates per victim include, in part, \$14,357 in child medical costs, \$9,882 in adult medical costs, \$223,581 in lost productivity, \$8,333 in child welfare costs, \$2,434 in costs associated with crime, and \$3,760 in special education costs. Costs associated with suicide deaths are estimated at \$20,387 for female victims.<sup>14</sup>

It is unfair for the victims, their families, and Delaware's taxpayers to be the only ones who bear this burden; HB 417 levels the playing field by imposing liability on the ones who caused the abuse and alleviating the burdens on the victims and taxpayers. Further, if this revival law is passed, Delaware could gain millions of dollars in revenue from Medicaid reimbursements as a result of settlement funds and damages awards that survivors recover.

### **C. SOL Reform Prevents Further Abuse**

SOL reform also educates the public about the dangers of CSA and how to prevent it. When predators and institutions are exposed, particularly high-profile ones like Larry Nassar, Jeffrey Epstein, the Boy Scouts of America, and the Catholic Church, the media publish investigations and documentaries that enlighten the public about the insidious ways child molesters operate to sexually assault children, as well as the institutional failures that enabled their abuse.<sup>15</sup> By shedding light on the problem, parents and other guardians are better able to identify abusers and responsible institutions, while the public is empowered to recognize grooming and abusive behavior and pressure youth serving organizations to implement prevention policies to report abuse in real time. Indeed, CSA publicity creates more social awareness to help keep kids safe, while also encouraging institutions to implement accountability and safe practices.

## **III. Delaware Should Continue Advancing the National CSA SOL Reform Movement by Reviving All Expired Claims**

The SOL reform movement's gold standard for CSA is for states to eliminate civil and criminal SOLs and revive expired civil claims—like Vermont, Maryland, Guam, and NMI have already done. Delaware was originally a leader in the CSA SOL reform movement, becoming one of the first states to enact a civil revival window to give survivors an opportunity to file claims for decades-old abuse that were blocked by short SOLs. Delaware now sits amongst two-dozen states across the U.S., as well as three territories, that have similarly adopted civil revival windows. However, Delaware's two-year revival window has now been outpaced by states and territories such as Maryland and Vermont, who have adopted permanent revival windows so that all CSA survivors have unlimited access to justice.

There is only one way to restore justice to Delaware's CSA survivors blocked from pursuing their claims by unfairly short SOLs—to revive their expired civil claims. Revival laws are not solely



about justice for victims; there are also important public safety reasons for allowing older claims of abuse to proceed. When victims are empowered to disclose their abuse and sue for their injuries, the public benefits from finding out who the perpetrators are, learns how to prevent CSA, and the cost of abuse is shifted to those who created it.

Delaware has enacted a patchwork of civil SOLs for CSA that has left many survivors without meaningful recourse for their injuries. Up until 2007, CSA survivors were blocked from filing suit after their twenty-first birthday. In 2007, the legislature acknowledged this was unjust and eliminated the SOL for all future CSA claims, as well as opened a two-year revival window, which closed in July 2009—**nearly fifteen years ago**. As a result, it has been fifteen years since CSA survivors with pre-2007 claims have had the ability to pursue justice in Delaware; many adult survivors are still shut out of the courts and perpetrators have yet to be held accountable. As you can see in the graphic below, **Delaware’s two-year revival law is relatively low-ranking because it does not currently help older survivors.**



The jurisdictions that have revived expired civil SOLs more broadly have gained valuable information about hidden child predators and the institutions that harbored them, enabling them to better empower victims. These revival laws do not yield a high number of cases, but instead provide long-overdue justice to older victims of child sex abuse. They also address the systemic issue of institutional CSA, which occurs with alarming frequency in athletic institutions, youth-serving organizations, medical facilities, and religious groups. Without institutional accountability for enabling or turning a blind eye to child sex abuse, the children these institutions serve remain at risk. This bill will incentivize youth serving organizations to implement prevention policies and



take action to immediately report abuse and safeguard victims and other children. A permanent revival law sends a strong message that the state will not tolerate “passing the trash” or looking the other way when a person is raping or molesting a child in their midst.

With HB 417, Delaware can remove all barriers to civil justice for survivors and achieve the gold standard for SOL reform. If passed, Delaware will stand alongside neighboring leaders, Maryland and Vermont, and the U.S. territories of Guam and the Northern Mariana Islands, who also revived all expired claims—allowing all CSA survivors to file claims for abuse whenever they are ready and no matter how long ago they were abused. HB 417 will give all survivors the time they need to do the legal and emotional work necessary to revisit their childhood traumas and coordinate with attorneys to file their cases. If there is sufficient evidence to prove civil liability, the mere passage of time should never prevent survivors from accessing justice.

#### IV. Conclusion

Once again, we commend you for supporting this legislation, which is desperately needed to validate adult survivors of CSA and protect Delaware’s children from preventable sexual abuse. Permanently reviving expired claims is a positive step for Delaware’s children and families. For more information about SOL reform, visit [childusa.org/sol/](http://childusa.org/sol/) or email [info@childusa.org](mailto:info@childusa.org). Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have questions regarding SOL reform or if we can be of assistance in any way on other child protection issues.

Sincerely,



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<sup>1</sup> G. Moody, et. al., *Establishing the international prevalence of self-reported child maltreatment: a systematic review by maltreatment type and gender*, 18(1164) BMC PUBLIC HEALTH (2018) (finding a 20.4% prevalence rate of CSA among North American girls); M. Stoltenborgh, et. al., *A Global Perspective on Child Sexual Abuse: Meta-Analysis of Prevalence Around the World*, 16(2) CHILD MALTREATMENT 79 (2011) (finding a 20.1% prevalence rate of CSA among North American girls); N. Pereda, et. al., *The prevalence of child sexual abuse in community and student samples: A meta-analysis*, 29 CLINICAL PSYCH. REV. 328, 334 (2009) (finding a 7.5% and 25.3% prevalence rate of CSA among North American boys and girls respectively).

<sup>2</sup> Perpetrators often being parents, stepparents, siblings, and grandparents. Sarah E. Ullman, *Relationship to Perpetrator, Disclosure, Social Reactions, and PTSD Symptoms in Child Sexual Abuse Survivors*, 16 J. CHILD SEX. ABUSE 19 (2007); David Finkelhor & Anne Shattuck, *Characteristics of Crimes Against Juveniles*, University of New Hampshire, Crimes Against Children Research Center (2012), available at [http://www.unh.edu/ccrc/pdf/CV26\\_Revised%20Characteristics%20of%20Crimes%20against%20Juveniles\\_5-2-12.pdf](http://www.unh.edu/ccrc/pdf/CV26_Revised%20Characteristics%20of%20Crimes%20against%20Juveniles_5-2-12.pdf).



<sup>3</sup> B. A. van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Memory & the Evolving Psychobiology of Posttraumatic Stress*, 1(5) HARVARD REV. OF PSYCHIATRY 253-65 (1994); see also Hoskell, L. & Randall, M., *The Impact of Trauma on Adult Sexual Assault Victims*, JUSTICE CANADA (2019), [https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/rp-pr/jr/trauma/trauma\\_eng.pdf](https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/rp-pr/jr/trauma/trauma_eng.pdf).

<sup>4</sup>As explained by the Center for Disease Control, “Adverse Childhood Experiences” (“ACEs”), like CSA, “have a tremendous impact on future violence victimization and perpetration, and lifelong health and opportunity.” Vincent J. Felitti et al., *Relationship of Childhood Abuse and Household Dysfunction to Many of the Leading Causes of Death in Adults: The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study*, 14(4) AM. J. PREV. MED. 245 (1998); S.R. Dube et al., *Childhood Abuse, Household Dysfunction, and the Risk of Attempted Suicide Throughout the Life Span: Findings from the Adverse Childhood Experiences Study*, 286 JAMA 24, 3089 (Dec. 2001).

<sup>5</sup> Josie Spataro et al., *Impact of Child Sexual Abuse on Mental Health: Prospective Study in Males and Females*, 184 Br. J. Psychiatry 416 (2004).

<sup>6</sup> See Felitti, at 245–58; see also R. Anda, et al., *The Enduring Effects of Abuse and Related Adverse Experiences in Childhood*, 256 EUR. ARCH PSYCHIATRY CLIN. NEUROSCIENCE 174, 175 (Nov. 2005) (“Numerous studies have established that childhood stressors such as abuse or witnessing domestic violence can lead to a variety of negative health outcomes and behaviors, such as substance abuse, suicide attempts, and depressive disorders”); M. Merricka, et al., *Unpacking the impact of adverse childhood experiences on adult mental health*, 69 CHILD ABUSE & NEGLECT 10 (July 2017); see also Sachs-Ericsson, et al., *A Review of Childhood Abuse, Health, and Pain-Related Problems: The Role of Psychiatric Disorders and Current Life Stress*, 10(2) J. TRAUMA & DISSOCIATION 170, 171 (2009) (adult survivors are thirty percent more likely to develop serious medical conditions such as cancer, diabetes, high blood pressure, stroke, and heart disease); T.L. Simpson, et al., *Concomitance between childhood sexual and physical abuse and substance use problems: A review*, 22 CLINICAL PSYCHOL. REV. 27 (2002) (adult survivors of CSA are nearly three times as likely to report substance abuse problems than their non-survivor peers).

<sup>7</sup> Beth E. Molnar et al., *Psychopathology, Childhood Sexual Abuse and other Childhood Adversities: Relative Links to Subsequent Suicidal Behaviour in the US*, 31 PSYCHOL. MED. 965 (2001).

<sup>8</sup> Shanta R. Dube et al., *Long-Term Consequences of Childhood Sexual Abuse by Gender of Victim*, 28 AM. J. PREV. MED. 430, 434 (2005).

<sup>9</sup> Delphine Collin-Vézina et al., *A Preliminary Mapping of Individual, Relational, and Social Factors that Impede Disclosure of Childhood Sexual Abuse*, 43 CHILD ABUSE NEGL. 123 (2015).

<sup>10</sup> Ramona Alaggia et al., *Facilitators and Barriers to Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) Disclosures: A Research Update (2000-2016)*, 20 TRAUMA VIOLENCE ABUSE 260, 279 (2019).

<sup>11</sup> Often, this happens in the context of therapy; sometimes it is triggered many years after the abuse by an event the victim associates with the abuse; other times it happens gradually or over time as a victim recovers their memory. Hoskell, at 24.

<sup>12</sup> For an analysis of the SOL reform movement since 2002, see CHILD USA, *History of US SOL Reform: 2002-2020*, CHILDUSA.ORG (last visited Aug. 30, 2021), available at [www.childusa.org/sol-report-2020](http://www.childusa.org/sol-report-2020).

<sup>13</sup> Michelle Elliott et al., *Child Sexual Abuse Prevention: What Offenders Tell Us*, 19 CHILD ABUSE NEGL. 579 (1995).

<sup>14</sup> Elizabeth J. Letourneau et al., *The Economic Burden of Child Sexual Abuse in the United States*, 79 CHILD ABUSE NEGL. 413 (2018).

<sup>15</sup> E.g., Netflix’s *Jeffrey Epstein: Filthy Rich*; HBO’s *At the Heart of Gold: Inside the USA Gymnastics Scandal*.

