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LIFT STATUTE OF LIMITATIONS

Commentary: Virginia must prioritize justice for survivors of childhood sex abuse

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Apr 30, 2024

Last week, a prominent Northern Virginia church, The Falls Church Anglican, **released the findings of its investigation** into a former director of youth ministries who sexually abused children for more than a decade while serving as the church's youth director and subsequently as director of adult discipleship. This horrific, years-long abuse by Jeff Taylor highlights the need for change in how Virginia enables survivors of childhood sexual abuse to seek justice against their abusers and the organizations that turn a blind eye.

Survivors of childhood sexual abuse face immense challenges in coming forward and seeking justice. Many suffer in silence for years, grappling with shame, fear and trauma. This is especially true for men who were abused as children, as we've seen in many cases of clergy sexual abuse. When survivors do summon the courage to seek legal recourse, they are often met with daunting statutes of limitations and similar restrictive laws that prevent them from filing civil claims against their abusers and the institutions that enabled the abuse. These statutes and related laws serve as barriers to justice, shielding perpetrators and complicit organizations from accountability and allowing them to evade re-

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Virginia lags behind many other states in providing justice to survivors of childhood sexual abuse. The civil justice system in Virginia has not kept pace with the needs of survivors seeking recourse. Unlike 29 states and three territories that have enacted revival legislation for the applicable statute of limitations — including New York, New Jersey, Maryland, Washington, D.C. and North Carolina — Virginia has yet to provide survivors with a meaningful opportunity to pursue civil claims against their abusers and the institutions that facilitated their abuse.

It is long past time for Virginia to take action and prioritize survivors.

A crucial step in addressing this injustice is the enactment of permanent revival legislation for filing civil claims. Passing such a law in Virginia would lift the statute of limitations, allowing survivors whose claims were previously time-barred to pursue legal action. Revival legislation has been implemented successfully in other jurisdictions, enabling survivors to access the justice they deserve and holding perpetrators and institutions accountable for their misconduct. By enacting a similar law, Virginia would signal its commitment to supporting survivors and not the perpetrators and enablers of those crimes.



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The civil justice system in Virginia has not kept pace with the needs of survivors seeking recourse.

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It is also critical that employers are held to account for the actions of their employees whom they knew, or should have known, were perpetrators of child sexual abuse. Currently, survivors have a limited ability to seek justice against these employers, many of whom are large institutions that failed to safeguard against abuse. As a result, even assuming a claim is not time-barred by the current statute of limitations, Virginia law often prohibits institutional civil liability for the enabling entities. New legislation aimed at providing survivors accessibility to the civil courts must include provisions that hold the institutional enablers responsible for the conduct of their employees.

The time for action is now. Virginia must stand on the side of survivors and ensure that they have access to the civil justice system. Eliminating the statute of limitations or enacting sufficiently viable revival legislation and holding institutional enablers accountable are necessary steps toward achieving this goal. It is incumbent upon the Virginia General Assembly to prioritize the needs of survivors over the demands of powerful corporations and organizations. By taking decisive action, Virginia can demonstrate its commitment to justice, accountability and compassion for survivors of childhood sexual abuse.

15 photos of the Richmond City Jail from The Times-Dispatch archives