News

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Bills introduced in the North Carolina General Assembly would broaden the state's power to investigate child sexual abuse crimes and raise the statute of limitations on claims of past abuse.

The proposals, labeled the Sexual Assault Fast reporting and Enforcement Child Act, or SAFE Child Act, gained early support from a Republican and Democrat lawmakers.

Several legislators appeared alongside child welfare advocates at a March 7 news conference in Raleigh led by North Carolina Attorney General Josh Stein.

"It doesn't matter whether you're a parent or a policymaker, nothing is more important than keeping children safe from sexual abuse," Stein said. "It's critical that we protect kids wherever they are or spend time, whether that's in their home or at summer camp or an afterschool activity or online."

With the proposed legislation, Stein said, "More children who were abused will see justice, and more abusers will see prison time."

Following Stein's news conference, the Diocese of Raleigh posted a statement on its website stating, "The Diocese of Raleigh looks forward to reviewing the proposed act recently announced by Attorney General Stein and supports efforts to further protect North Carolina's children from sexual abuse."

"Bishop (Luis) Zarama and the diocese support additional measures that would further clarify or expedite reports of suspected abuse and aid survivors in healing," the statement continued.

The legislation would extend the statute of limitations on misdemeanor child sexual abuse cases from two years after the alleged assault occurred to 10 years. Felony abuse cases already have no time limit on prosecution.

The statute of limitations on civil lawsuits related to claims of past child sexual abuse would extend to when the alleged victim reaches the age of 45 (in the House version) or age of 50 (in the Senate version). Under current law, the statute of limitations on civil lawsuits generally expires when the victim turns 21.

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Noting that victims often don't come forward until years — sometimes even decades — later, Stein said, "We fully anticipate that more charges will be brought and more civil claims will be brought, because we know a great deal more about the psychological impact of abuse of children."

The proposed legislation would also empower the attorney general to convene an investigative grand jury to examine child sexual abuse claims — a power currently not available in North Carolina.

The legislation would also mandate that all "high risk" sex offenders register their computer's IP address in addition to their physical address on the North Carolina sex offender registry.

Another provision would require any adult or institution that suspects child abuse to report it to local police — not just to the North Carolina Department of Social Services as current law mandates. Failure to report abuse would be a misdemeanor.

Both the Charlotte and Raleigh dioceses already report all allegations of child sexual abuse to the Department of Social Services as well as to the North Carolina Conference of District Attorneys, which then routes the report to the appropriate local law enforcement agency to investigate.

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Guilfoyle is editor of the Catholic News Herald, the newspaper of the Diocese of Charlotte.