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Catholic officials on Long Island have filed a legal challenge arguing that the Child Victims Act that loosened statutes of limitations on molestation cases violates the New York state constitution.

The Roman Catholic Diocese of Rockville said in a court filing Tuesday that a provision of the law enacted this year violates the due process clause of the state constitution.

"A basic tenet of every legal system, including New York's, is that statutes of limitations protect a fundamental right of repose that benefits both potential defendants and society at large by ensuring that individual rights are protected and the courts can function properly," the motion filed in Nassau County state Supreme Court says.

Jennifer Freeman, an attorney who represents plaintiffs who say they were sexually abused as children, says the diocese is "moving to shield predators" and "hide the heinous crimes that occurred under their watch."

"With this motion, the Diocese of Rockville and officials within the Catholic Church are demonstrating their cowardice, hypocrisy, and refusal to do what is right," Freeman said.

The Child Victim Act, passed earlier this year, extended the state's statute of limitations for onetime victims of child sexual abuse to file criminal charges or civil lawsuits. The law also created the one-year litigation window, which lawmakers said was needed because before the change this year New York had one of the nation's tightest statutes of limitations. More than 400 cases were filed on the first day of the litigation window in August against defendants including religious institutions, public and private schools and the Boy Scouts of America.

Freeman said the Rockville Centre diocese's motion is apparently the first to directly challenge the constitutionality of the law.

"When they are proven to be wrong it will confirm the propriety of all these cases," she said. "We're not scared by this."

The diocese's motion challenges the one-year window to file lawsuits over allegations of past abuse. Sean Dolan, a spokesman for the diocese, said Thursday that the diocese "is asking the court to rule on the legislature's authority to revive formerly time-barred claims."

Dolan said the diocese "will continue to respect all orders of the courts as they decide this motion and as they interpret and apply the laws of this state."

The Rockville Centre diocese has taken a harder line on the issue of abusive clergy members than many other Catholic dioceses around the country. The diocese has so far declined to release a list of priests who have been credibly accused of sexual abuse. Dozens of dioceses including the Manhattan-based Archdiocese of New York have released lists of accused priests.

About 80 lawsuits have so far been filed against the Rockville Centre diocese under the Child Victims Act.

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