News



The Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul, which serves as the home church of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Providence, is seen Feb. 24, 2026, in Providence, Rhode Island. (AP photo/Charles Krupa)



by Brian Fraga

Staff Reporter

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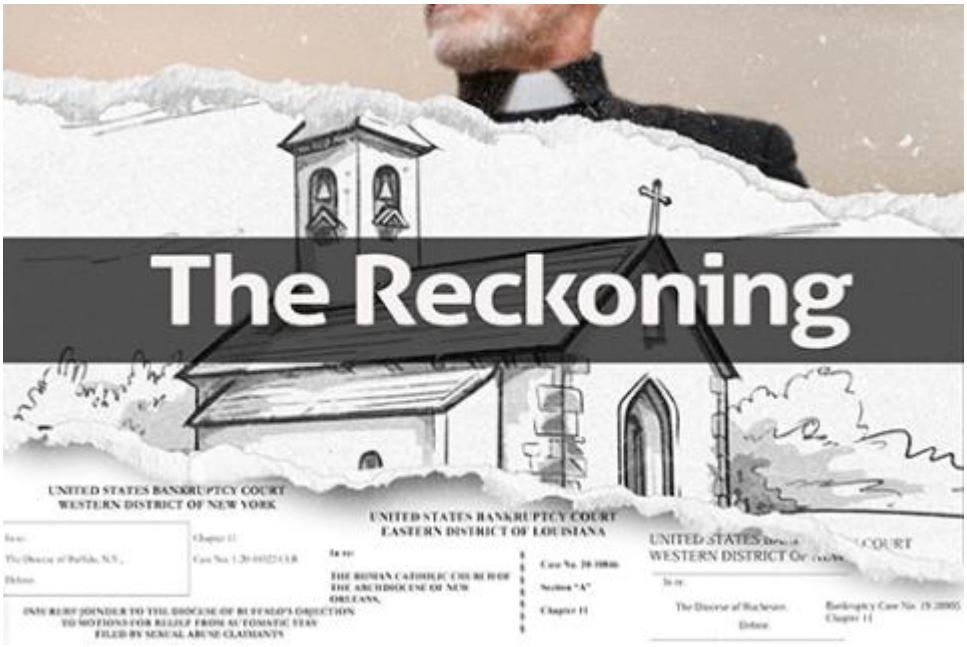
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Rhode Island, home to the country's largest Catholic population per capita, could become the next state to allow survivors who were sexually abused decades ago to sue their abusers and the institutions that allowed the abuse to happen.

Spurred in large part by the state attorney general's recent report that found 75 priests abused more than 300 children since 1950 while serving in the Diocese of Providence, Rhode Island, lawmakers are considering legislation that would allow previously expired civil claims against institutions and supervisors responsible for enabling or covering up sexual abuse.

"This is about protecting children and bringing justice to those who could never ever seek it all these years," said Rhode Island State Rep. Carol Hagan McEntee, who serves as the chairperson of the State House Judiciary Committee.



(NCR logo/Toni-Ann Ortiz)

During a March 12 public hearing in Providence, McEntee spoke in favor of the statute of limitations bill she sponsored that would establish a two-year "revival window" in which plaintiffs with expired complaints could file lawsuits. The window

would open on July 1 and close on June 30, 2028.

The Rhode Island State House of Representatives passed a similar bill last year, but the Senate did not advance the proposed law because of concerns about its constitutionality. The state attorney general's report, however, has some people calling for action.

"This bill needs to pass this year," McEntee said at the hearing. Referring to the general assembly, she added, "If we don't pass this bill this year, we are complicit." McEntee held aloft a copy of Rhode Island Attorney General Peter Neronha's March 4 report, describing it as "Rhode Island's Epstein Files."

"If someone reads this report and doesn't feel outrage and disgust, their moral compass is broken," said State Rep. Julie Casimiro, a member of the state House Judiciary Committee.



Rhode Island Attorney General Peter Neronha speaks during a news conference in Providence Dec. 18, 2025. (OSV News/Reuters/Brian Snyder)

"I hope this is the year we get the bill passed," said Ann Hagan Webb, who was abused by a parish priest in Rhode Island when she was a child. Now a psychologist and advocate for clergy sex abuse survivors, Webb told National Catholic Reporter that survivors have waited more than six years for Neronha's report.

"And here it is, and it's scathing," said Webb, who is McEntee's sister. Webb said local clergy sex abuse survivors have been working with state lawmakers since 2018 to pass a version of the statute of limitations legislation.

"I think if we have any chance in any year, this is it," she said.

Boston attorney Mitchell Garabedian, who has represented scores of clergy sex abuse survivors, told NCR that he plans to testify in favor of the legislation in Rhode Island when the state Senate's judiciary committee takes up the bill.

"Passing the bill would hold the Diocese of Providence and the Catholic Church accountable," Garabedian said. "Clergy sex abuse in Rhode Island goes back decades upon decades. The Catholic Church realizes how broad and deep the scope of clergy sex abuse is."

Jonathan Orent, a Rhode Island attorney who has represented sex abuse survivors, told NCR that passing McEntee's bill would be an "extremely powerful step" in securing justice for survivors.

"The reality is that because of the nature of these molestation cases, it takes individuals different amounts of time to be able to have the courage to come forward, and to be able to emotionally process the damage that has been done over all these years," Orent said.

Related: Sprawling investigation finds decades of sexual abuse among Catholic priests in Rhode Island

Orent noted that Neronha's report recommended the kind of legislation that McEntee is sponsoring to amend Rhode Island's civil statute of limitations for sexual abuse survivors.

"I think what the attorney general was asking for is really a statute of limitations that is compatible with the science, which says victims take a lot of time to process and be able to come forward, that it's not an easy thing to do for a victim to come forward and seek justice, that the law should be in the victim's favor, and that it should be on the side of justice in this regard," Orent said.



A file photo shows the facade of the Cathedral of Sts. Peter and Paul in Providence, Rhode Island. Peter Neronha, Rhode Island attorney general, publicly released March 4, 2026, the anticipated report on his six-year historical records review of clergy sexual abuse in the Diocese of Providence. (OSV News photo/courtesy Rhode Island Catholic)

Fr. Bernard Healey, the director of the Rhode Island Catholic Conference, however, expressed the conference's "deep concern" over the bill, which he argued "complicates and impedes the administration of justice and does little to protect victims."

"A basic principle of American law, statutes of limitations ensure fairness in our legal system by requiring lawsuits to be filed promptly," Healey said in written testimony submitted to the Rhode Island state House Judiciary Committee and shared with NCR.

Without statutes of limitations, Healey wrote, nonprofits and churches could face lawsuits alleging abuse from several decades ago.

"It is nearly impossible for an institution that did not commit the abuse to defend against a lawsuit from thirty, forty, fifty, or sixty years past because, over time, witnesses' memories become unreliable, evidence is lost or never found, and in many instances, perpetrators or witnesses may be deceased," Healey's testimony said.

Healey also noted that five states in the last five years — New Hampshire, Maine, Colorado, Kentucky, and Utah — have struck down similar legislation attempting to revive time-barred childhood sexual abuse claims. "The proposal to eliminate statute of limitations is so extreme that it is not surprising that Rhode Island courts have already concluded that such an application would be violative of constitutional due process," Healey wrote.

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During a press conference March 4 where he presented his report, Neronha told reporters that his office was prepared to defend a bill to amend the statute of limitations if opponents attacked it as unconstitutional. He added that some Catholic dioceses across the country were "not relying on legislation" to compensate survivors.

"The [Diocese of Providence] could do this voluntarily," Neronha said. "We're opening up this window because the diocese won't. The diocese could do the right thing. It doesn't have to be forced to do it."

During the March 4 press conference, as The Associated Press reported, Neronha also said that his office wanted to expand the statute of limitations for second-degree sexual assault and expand the civil statute of limitations on certain child sexual abuse claims.

According to WRPI.com, McEntee introduced three other related pieces of legislation in the wake of the report. One addresses the statute of limitations for second-degree sexual assault.

In his testimony, Healey said the Providence Diocese to date has paid more than $21 million in legal settlements to victims of clergy sex abuse and that it has provided and continues to provide millions of dollars for direct financial assistance for victims' counseling.

"The Diocese of Providence accepts their responsibility for the abuse that occurred within our ranks and will support survivors as long as necessary," Healey said.

Also arguing that nearly 40 Catholic dioceses across the United States have gone into bankruptcy as a result of states amending their statutes of limitations, Healey said McEntee's bill would "severely undermine the Catholic community's ministries in Rhode Island" and likely result in lost jobs and impaired programs and services to the poor and needy.

Webb, who accused the Catholic Church of "doing everything in its power to prevent justice for survivors," said it was "ludicrous" for church officials to argue that the bill will bankrupt the church in Rhode Island.

"It's a scare tactic for the Catholic population of Rhode Island to think that there won't be any money left for Catholic Charities or to feed the poor," said Webb, who added that the legislation is intended to hold the church and its leaders accountable.

"I do think if we can make them accountable," she said, "It will be a better church and a safer place for children."

This story appears in the **The Reckoning** feature series. View the full series.