

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

March 30, 2011 at 12:02pm

Virginia extends statute of limitations

by Zoe Ryan

Virginia Gov. Bob McDonnell signed into law on March 26 a bill that extends the statute of limitations for sexual abuse civil lawsuits to 20 years.

The bill passed the Virginia Senate on Feb. 3 (see article) and the Virginia House of Delegates passed the bill Feb. 24, sending it to the Republican governor for his signature.

The law goes into effect July 1.

Currently in Virginia, the statute of limitations for sexual abuse is two years from when the person is 18 years old, from the time of the abuse, or from the time of discovery.

With the passage of the new bill, Virginia joins a small number of states that have statutes of limitations of more than eight years. Forty states and Washington D.C. have a limit of eight years or less, according to Jeff Caruso, executive director of the Virginia Catholic Conference.

The House bill was introduced by David B. Albo, R-Fairfax, and the Senate bill was introduced by Frederick M. Quayle, R-Chesapeake. Each bill originally proposed a 25-year cap.

The House at first amended its bill from the 25-year limit to an 8-year limit. The Virginia Catholic Conference was present at that committee hearing and lobbied for an 8-year limit.

The issue with a long limit, such as 25 years, was that the extended amount of time could possibly bring about problems, such as memories fading or witnesses becoming unreachable, Caruso told NCR in a telephone interview Feb. 1.

The issue with a short limit was that the window of time for victims to come forward was too narrow. The

average victim doesn't come forward until their 40s, said Becky Ianni, director for the Washington DC/Virginia chapters of SNAP, or the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests.

Ianni attended several committee hearings of the bill. She and other victims of sexual abuse shared their stories of being abused.

SNAP issued a press release March 29.

"We hope this legislation will be the first step in reforming other predator-friendly laws," the statement said.

McDonnell is Virginia's second Catholic governor.

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