

Chairman Jones, Vice Chair Manchester, Ranking Member Robinson Jr., and members of the House Primary and Secondary Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide written proponent testimony on HB321.

While I personally know of numerous victims of child sexual abuse, I am confining my testimony to those offenses that have taken place in Ohio or involve a perpetrator who currently lives in Ohio - and lived in Ohio when the abuses were committed.

While I highly suspect these 3 predators have other victims, I am only sharing the stories that have been confirmed. The child sexual abuse incidents I am sharing involve 7 victims and span at least 3 generations and about 65 years. That's going to take a little time to share, so I want to thank you in advance for your attention.

When the heinous nature of child sexual abuse is clearly illustrated, you will realize the immense power you hold in your hands right now to do immeasurable good for children and their families. You can't fully appreciate the gift you possess or the depth of gratitude the recipient will hold until you comprehend the seething vileness and devastating destruction these predators unleash.

Thank you for allowing me to share my testimony anonymously. My personal testimony is not something I've shared with my kids, because when is an appropriate time to tell your children you were sexually abused as a child? How exactly is that conversation supposed to go? If someone has written "A Step by Step Guide to Sharing Your Childhood Sexual Abuse Trauma with Your Kids," I haven't run across it yet.

I wish I could tell you when the abuse started, but I can't. I'm sure it was happening by the time I was 12-13, and it continued until I left for college at the age of 18, but it could have started sooner.

My mind got very skilled at blocking out memories. That's a skill that I can't seem to shake. Even for special moments that I want to remember, like my wedding, honeymoon, births of our children, graduations, holidays, and vacations - I only have snapshot memories. Those snapshots are very vivid, but the in between is blank.

It's the same way with my childhood. I can remember tidbits. Tidbits of good. Tidbits of bad. I remember my dad getting up early with me when I was sick and turning on cartoons. I remember him rubbing my back and his hands roaming where they shouldn't. I remember changing clothes in my bedroom and feeling eyes on me - then catching my dad's reflection in the hallway window as he sat on the commode masturbating while he watched me. I remember his comment after I rebuffed his attempted kiss, "No wonder you don't have a boyfriend. You don't even know how to French kiss."

Whatever discomfort you are feeling right now hearing these words, I promise you that it pales in comparison to the shame and embarrassment the child of sexual abuse feels.

That's why we don't speak out. Young children don't know what to say. Older children don't want to say it. And, especially when it's at the hands of a trusted family member, friend, school official, or authority figure. We don't think anyone will believe us.

This is one reason Erin's Law is so vital in the schools. It gets the conversation started. It lets kids hear adults say, "No adult should act this way with you. It's okay to tell someone. We will listen to you and believe you." Hearing that would have been life changing for me.

In addition to blocking memories, avoidance was my other coping mechanism of choice. Once I could drive, I just stayed gone. My high school resume was impressive. I joined or auditioned for everything. When I look at my senior yearbook that lists all of the activities I was involved in, I get exhausted just reading them.

If I wasn't home, I wasn't being abused. My strategy was effective. People thought I was an overachiever. I was just trying to feel safe. I was escaping the abuse through immersing myself in extracurricular activities. I took off for college as soon as I could.

Others aren't as fortunate. Some choose the extracurricular activity of prostitution. Sexual abuse victims' lower self esteem makes them an easy target for sex trafficking - which just continues the cycle of abuse.

Some chose to escape through substance abuse or self-harm behaviors. Those behaviors help them escape by altering their minds and letting them forget - or by momentarily numbing the pain. Others choose to numb the pain permanently through suicide.

It's easy to view these behaviors as weak, but they are nothing more than a child trying his or her best to cope after having been violated. These behaviors often continue into adulthood, not because they are life-giving, but because they are habits that become a way of life.

I was abused for 5-6+ years. I shared only 3 specific instances from those years of abuse: roving hands, masturbating while he watched me undress, and trying to French kiss me. My guess is that when you hear just those few details you are ready for them to stop. You may have squirmed uncomfortably. You may have been annoyed that I made you listen to them a second time.

Now, imagine that you aren't just listening. Imagine that it's actually happening to you. The kid you, not the adult you. Imagine you want to make it stop, but you can't. Because you're a kid, and no one has given you the tools to make it stop. So you do the best you can.

This is another reason it's critical to implement Erin's Law as soon as possible. It gives kids, teachers, and parents the tools they need to recognize and stop child sexual abuse.

I was 20 years old before I shared the abuse with anyone.

Ironically, when I started telling people what happened to me, the response I got was not shock, but "I always thought something like that might be going on." They had that gut instinct, but they didn't know how to act on it.

If someone had been trained in what to look for, they might have had their suspicions confirmed. They might have had concrete steps to take - a path forward to help. If they had intervened on my behalf, my sister probably would not have been victimized.

I was in my late 20's when I broached the topic with my sister. I was afraid to hear what she might say. My worst fears were confirmed. She was sexually abused, too. Our dad started with her sometime after I left. She's 7 years younger than me, so she had a long time at home, alone to fend for herself.

I've lived with the guilt of that abuse. If I had spoken up, I could have spared her.

I've learned to extend grace to my childhood self. I was doing the best I could to survive the abuse that was happening to me. I remembering feeling like I was protecting her at the same time - if he was abusing me, he was leaving her alone. As an adult, I see the flaws in that thinking; but as child it made sense.

I also told myself that once I was gone he would stop. Again, the adult me hangs her head in shame, but at the same time extends grace to a kid whose psyche had been injured by years of sexual abuse.

Abuse skews the victim's thought processes. It makes relationships difficult at best and dangerous at worst. Without proper intervention, abuse sets victims up for lifelong dysfunction.

I've struggled with intimacy in my relationships because of the abuse I endured as a child. As far as I've come, there are still times I flinch at my husband's touch. We've been married almost 3 decades.

My sister's struggles as the result of her childhood abuse ultimately put my children in harm's way.

If the programs in Erin's Law had been in effect when I was a child, it could have spared me years of abuse. If I had been given the words, the bravery, and the audience to speak my truth, my sister would likely never have been abused.

If my sister hadn't been victimized, my daughter wouldn't have been victimized. Because sexual abuse is generational. When you stop the abuser, you prevent the cycle of abuse from continuing.

For every person the sexual predator doesn't get to abuse, that's an entire family line that sexual abuse doesn't get to touch.

For every victim you walk with on a journey of healing from sexual abuse, that's a generational line you've released from the gripping effects of sexual abuse. You aren't just ministering to the victim's wounds, you are changing the entire generation moving forward.

The sooner the abuse can be identified, the sooner the healing can begin. Erin's Law can help victims of child abuse begin to heal as a child rather than having to wait until they reach adulthood, when they have accumulated years of emotional damage.

One of our daughters was victimized by my sister's husband. He displayed grooming behavior on a family vacation.

Thankfully, because of what happened to me with my dad, I was proactive with my kids from a very young age, teaching them about inappropriate touching and empowering them to say no. Still, when someone who is supposed to protect you chooses instead to violate you, that leaves a scar you have to heal from. Grooming behaviors are especially traumatizing and confusing when they are perpetrated upon adolescent children who are developing sexually.

Even with all of the prevention work I'd done with my kids, our daughter still didn't say anything immediately after the sexual abuse. In retrospect there were very slight behavioral cues, but nothing that sent off red flags for me at the time. Unfortunately, by the time our daughter told us about the incident (3 months after it happened), my sister was already well into planning her

wedding. Even though I sent them the court documents showing irrefutable proof that he had raped his teenage niece, my sister and parents couldn't walk away from the wedding.

I know that seems unconscionable, but the roots of sexual abuse run deep, spread wide, and create a deceptive web that makes it difficult to see reality clearly. That's what I need for you see clearly. I need you to see just how evil this enemy is. I need you to be angered by how destructive it is. I need you to be fighting mad.

Relationships are forever skewed until healing is achieved. And by then, the damage may be too great to repair. I need you to be willing to fight for those relationships right now. I need you to recognize that Erin's Law is a formidable weapon that's within your grasp!

When my sister, my only sibling, told me she was going ahead with her wedding plans, I had to tell her that my family wouldn't be there. I couldn't be her matron of honor. None of my family could attend her wedding.

I didn't talk to my family or have any communication with them for over 3 months. I didn't have a peace about interacting with them, until one day the Lord released me to reach out with cards and a small gift. Eventually, we started talking on the phone. It will be 6 years this fall since we've seen each other. I don't know that I'll ever see them again.

Sexual abuse destroys individuals. It destroys families. In a myriad of ways. For generations.

When you begin to unravel the generations of sexual abuse, you recognize the great need for the programs like those offered through Erin's Law to come alongside victims and their families to teach healthy responses to abuse and help families heal from destructive coping mechanisms.

My mom's reaction to finding out her husband had sexually abused her child was to act wounded, as though she were the victim. After a very brief time, she went back to acting as though nothing had happened. Her coping mechanism of choice is denial. She has mastered it brilliantly. She's been perfecting it practically her entire life.

I didn't find out until I was in my 30's that my mom had been sexually abused as a child by a trusted family friend. I didn't find out from her. I don't think she is even aware that I know. No justice was sought. What message does that convey to a child? What kind of poor perception must that child have of their personal worth?

This is one of the precious gifts Erin's Law has to offer: the gift of being seen and valued. Erin's Law is a huge neon sign telling kids they matter.

My dad and his brother abused their sister and their children. My dad, uncle, and cousin have no idea that I know.

My sister pretty much married our dad - the good and the bad - except her husband was actually arrested for raping another one of his nieces 7 years before he abused my daughter.

The day before his trial was to start, he pled out. The revised charges read essentially the same as the original; he was charged with sexually violating a minor. But the plea took it from felony rape down to misdemeanor assault. He still had to have sex offender training and he served 6 months of jail time, but he was able to avoid having his name listed on the Sex Offender Registry.

My sister had done her due diligence and found his arrest record. If he had been listed in the Registry, she would have seen that. He never would have had access to our daughter.

As I have opened up, stories have flooded out. I promise you that on a daily basis you are surrounded by victims of child sexual abuse. We don't wear signs, shout our trauma from the rooftops, or share our stories over tea. But we are there, most of us hoping we are masking the shame well enough that it doesn't peek through our carefully crafted facades.

I've been more descriptive than I planned to be - or honestly, wanted to be. Given this bill's history in my home state, it is evident that Ohio legislators have not yet reached the threshold of discomfort required for action to be mandatory. Given the pervasive damage sexual abuse wreaks on children and their families, the thought of continued inaction is intolerable.

You need to be unforgettable today. Your skin needs to crawl with these stories. At the end of the day, you need to be moved to action. The pedophiles aren't going to stop sexually abusing children. You need to pass and enact laws that will equip children to sound the alarm.

The Ohio House first passed a bill (HB85) for Erin's law with bipartisan support on May 24, 2016. Overwhelmingly, with a vote of 90 "Yes" to 7 "No".

At that time, the statistics on child sexual abuse in the United States was that 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 6 boys would be sexually abused by the age of 18. That statistic has risen to 1 in 3 girls and 1 in 5 boys (The Advocacy Center) - and that's with 30% of cases of sexual abuse never being reported (Child Sex Abuse Prevention and Protection Center).

When HB85 was passed in 2016, 27 states had already passed Erin's Law. Today, as you revisit this bill four years later, another 10 states have already passed this bill into law. Countless children in those 37 states have been saved from the life-altering effects of sexual abuse, while Ohio children continue to be victimized with abandon.

2016, the year that the Ohio House passed HB85, was 2 years after our daughter became a statistic at the hands of a man that Ohio courts allowed to plea bargain his way off the Sex Offender Registry in 2007.

The only reason HB321 has come up again for a vote is because your constituents made some noise. Lots of noise. Because last year 88 Ohio elementary school children were sexually abused by their gym teacher. Those are 88 victims whose names you know. How many more victims of child sexual abuse have come forward but haven't made enough noise to come to your attention? How many more haven't found their voices yet?

Erin's law was first introduced to the House on February 25, 2015. The lost innocence of every child sexually abused in Ohio since that day is on the hands of the Ohio legislature. That's the day the Ohio legislature became accountable. That's the first day Ohio had the chance to save the innocence of children through Erin's law. Ohio legislators had the opportunity and the responsibility to give them a voice 5 years ago. Your children are still waiting for you to act.

Erin's Law creates an avenue for children to understand that what is being done to them is wrong. It validates those yucky feelings children have when a predator begins to groom them. Yucky feelings exponentially worse than what you felt today listening to these testimonies. Yucky feelings that don't go away when the child leaves the room.

Erin's Law gives children the words to say and actions to take when a predator approaches them. It gives them permission to say, "No."

Erin's Law gives children the words to use to share what's happening. So often, children can't express what's going on in their worlds. They don't know how to explain grown up things that shouldn't be happening to them. They shouldn't have to know how to explain those grown up things. But, sadly, 1 in 3 girls and 1 in 5 boys need the words so they can make the abuse stop.

When they don't have the words to say, they speak through their behavior. That's why it's so important for teachers and parents to be aware of behaviors that can signal cries for help. Ideally, that's a component of Erin's Law as well.

Erin's Law tells children they are valued. Predators tell victims they can't tell. Erin's Law lets children know there are adults in their lives who know that sexual abuse is wrong, who will listen to the child, and who will believe them.

To someone who has never been abused, that seems unnecessary. I assure you, this component is crucial to victims coming forward.

Erin's Law lets children know they are brave. It gives them permission to speak and words to say. It lets them know their brave little voices have a receptive audience. Erin's Law is so affirming because it lets abused children know they are valued.

Erin's law was passed by the house 4 years ago this month as HB85. Nine months ago, it was re-introduced to the Ohio House as HB321. You've had nine months to act. The legislature had actually had over 5 years to make this right, since the first bill was introduced in February of 2015. That's 5 years that children could have been being advocated for.

The legislature and judicial systems of Ohio have been failing the children that they are supposed to protect long enough. Ladies and gentlemen, it's time to step up.

My prayer is that the brave voices who have told their stories here today have pushed you past your tolerance into a discomfort so disconcerting that it moves you to swift, decisive action and compels you to urge your Senate counterparts to act likewise.

You have the opportunity and obligation to let the children of Ohio know that they are highly valued. Let Erin's Law give them words to speak and train the adults in their lives to have eyes to see and ears to hear.

Chairman Jones and members of the House Primary and Secondary Education Committee, thank you again for this opportunity. I strongly encourage you to pass Erin's Law (HB321) and stay in your Senate comrades ears until they've done the same.