

Rebecca Surendorff
Ohioans for Child Protection
Opponent Testimony HB 281
November 19, 2024

Chairman Hillyer, Vice Chair Mathews, Ranking Member Isaacsohn and members of the House Civil Justice Committee, thank you for giving me the opportunity to provide testimony on HB 281.

I am Rebecca Surendorff, the co-chair of Ohioans for Child Protection, a grassroots effort of parents and grandparents to prevent child sex abuse and provide paths to justice for victims. We formed in the aftermath of a high-profile child rape case in Majority Leader Seitz's district.

Many of you are familiar with the basic details of the Fr. Geoff Drew case, due to my previous testimony supporting Majority Leader Seitz and Representative Abrams bill HB 322. Geoff Drew was a music minister and teacher in Cincinnati Catholic schools in the 80's and 90's. At this time Green Township still had an active Farm Bureau, small town feel, and I was growing up as the 5th generation on my family farm. Unbeknownst to me, Geoff Drew was abusing my classmate and at least one other boy, at my local Catholic school, during the day, in the school and church building.

Fr Drew joined the seminary in 1999 and was ordained in 2004 despite a variety of concerns regarding his conduct with minors. Geoff Drew was then moved to Montgomery County and Butler County accumulating child protective service calls, a group letter by 40 schoolboys with complaints of inappropriate touches, and criminal investigations in Butler County in 2013 and 2015. In 2018, Drew was returned to Hamilton County as pastor of St. Ignatius, the largest Catholic Elementary School in Ohio. St. Ignatius was also in Green Township and is an affluent parish. This was a full circle moment because a man that preyed upon young boys when it was a small working-class community was still able to access kids when it was an affluent suburban religious community. Sexual Violence is so pervasive in our state that no person and no community is immune.

In the fall of 2018, a third criminal investigation into Geoff Drew opened in Butler County, while he continued to have superintendent like authority at St. Ignatius School. The Archdiocese of Cincinnati was aware of the prior investigations could have limited Geoff Drew's access and authority over vulnerable children, they did not. In August 2019, Fr. Geoff Drew (ordained 2004) was arrested for 9 counts of child rape in Hamilton County, and later plead guilty (December 2021).

Fixed offenders average 150 victims in their lifetime and child sex abuse victims average age to disclose is 52. When an institution neglectfully, recklessly or knowingly gives a predator access to children or abandons the person in peril, a civil suit may be the best path for that victim to seek some measure of justice.

The Center for Community Solutions issued the Status of Girls Report this year. They found that 21% of girls in Ohio experienced sexual violence in the last 12 months, which is above the national average. [Status of Girls \(communitysolutions.com\)](https://communitysolutions.com/status-of-girls)

The CDC estimates that 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 20 boys experience sexual abuse and in 2015 the economic burden was estimated at 9.3 billion <https://www.cdc.gov/child-abuse-neglect/about/about-child-sexual-abuse.html>

The University of New Hampshire estimates that 1 in 6 kids are exploited online, over 60% of whom the offender already knew the victim in their offline life.

<https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2797339>

Can you imagine if 1 out of 5 cars were stolen in Ohio? What kind of urgency and resources would we bring to that problem? We have before us awful statistics reflecting the painful reality of sexual violence in Ohio. We should be opening the doors of justice as widely as possible to every person that has endured this injury to their person. Shouldn't we administer justice without denial or delay? When trusted organizations such as our schools, churches, scouting organizations enable abuse they should face consequences for both their actions and inactions. Civil suits can result in both transparency into the coverup of these crimes and can result in enforceable safety measures to protect children. Narrow access to civil courts will just incentivize coverup and border on making Ohio a financial sanctuary state for institutions that enable sexual violence of our children and vulnerable adults.

Please let us work together to break the cycle of violence in Ohio.

Thank you