

Alicia Zimov
Proponent Testimony on House Bill 105
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Members of the Senate Primary and Secondary Education Committee:

My name is Alicia Zimov. I grew up in a very affluent city in Ohio. Around the age of 11, the man I trusted the most in my life, my father, started sexually abusing me. Besides this one HUGE significant detail, I was otherwise a seemingly normal child. I went to school, participated in extracurricular activities and was an active member of my church youth group. I pretended I was ok, so I could fit in and keep HIS secret.

I wanted the abuse to stop, but I didn't know how. I didn't know WHO I could tell. I felt very alone. I was embarrassed and ashamed and I felt dirty that this was happening to me. No one at school, at my extracurriculars, or at my church talked about sexual abuse. I knew that what he was doing was wrong, but no one explained that the embarrassment and shame should fall on him, not on me. No one told me that I could speak up, that there was a safe place for me, that I would be believed, and that I wouldn't get in trouble. When I was 16, I worked up the courage to tell a teacher. She either didn't believe me, or didn't know what steps to take to report, because nothing was done. So instead, I endured until I graduated high school, and moved out. I was finally FREE from him and tried to keep the secret of my abuse locked in a closet. Until I found out 20 years later that when I left, he had moved on to my little sister.

Child sexual abuse is a silent epidemic that thrives in secrecy. 1 in 5 children is sexually abused before age 18. Children know their abusers in 90% of sexual abuse cases. These abusers are usually an authoritative figure in their life and are important to them. Child sexual abuse can happen regardless of age, race, income level, religion, or gender.

The only way to prevent and reduce the risk of sexual abuse is by having open communication with kids about their bodies, boundaries, and consent, and these conversations need to be ongoing. They need to know there are trusted people for them to talk to. Just as we teach addition and subtraction, we must teach children how to speak up for themselves. They must know they are not alone, they are not at fault, and they will not get in trouble.

Only when we create a no-tolerance policy for child abuse... Only when we believe and embrace the victim, will we begin to lighten the shroud of blame, shame and fear that surrounds child sexual abuse. It is our inherent duty to protect children, not the perpetrators. No one deserves to live in the darkness abuse creates.

It's been almost 3 years since I finally broke the silence about my abuse. I'm so proud of myself for speaking my truth and acknowledging my past. I'm so blessed to feel the lightness and freedom of not having to hide anymore. I carry myself differently now; I'm more confident and outspoken.

I look back on all those years of silence with love and compassion for myself and pride for what I've come through. The process of healing is not easy, some days harder than others, but I am getting there.

I don't want to see another child have to go through this. If we arm them with all the right knowledge, tools, support and love, we are saying enough is enough to the silence and denial that for too long has allowed abusers to go unchallenged.

My sister's and my abuser was finally held accountable for his actions, and sentenced to life in prison last year. While I celebrate this victory, I also can't help but wonder, how many others fell victim to his assaults, and could have been protected if the first victim had felt safe to come forward.

I encourage your strong support for House Bill 105. We need to give our children the knowledge about child sexual abuse to keep them safe. We need to give them permission to talk about it. Personally, I believe these conversations need to continue happen through the time students graduate from high school. Child sexual abuse does not stop once they reach the sixth grade. Far from it.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I am happy to answer any questions you might have.