

Chair Hudson-Hillyer, Vice-Chair Mathews, Ranking member Galonski, I express my gratitude for the opportunity to address HB 322.

Born and raised in the Catholic Church, I became an altar boy at a young age. However, my life took a dark turn when I fell victim to pedophile priests within my church community. The subsequent years were marked by enduring trauma, and it was only through EMDR therapy that I found relief from the nightmares and flashbacks that plagued me.

In my role as one of the most senior altar boys, I was promised special privileges and responsibilities. Instead, I became a victim of abuse, subjected to the violation of my innocence. This heinous act was the culmination of years of grooming orchestrated not only by the assaulting priest but also by other priests who had systematically targeted me and my peers.

The insidious process began with subtle touches, inappropriate jokes, and the manipulation of sacramental rituals. The abusive priests used games, treats, and outings to establish control, creating an environment where predatory behavior thrived. When a predatory priest was reassigned, the cycle of grooming continued seamlessly with the arrival of a new clergy member.

Grooming, at my church, was a coordinated effort. My friends, family, and fellow parishioners were unknowingly deceived by a group of men posing as priests, who ran a child trafficking ring within our church, though there were a number of adults who had observed concerning grooming behavior in these priests, but who lacked any effective legal avenues to report their observations.

I had encounters with at least seven pedophile priests at St Joan of Arc church in Powell, Ohio. Four of them are now listed on BishopAccountability.org, a registry of accused priests.

My story takes a surprising turn in that, decades later, when I filed a police report, a woman emerged as a crucial witness. In an EMDR therapy session, I recalled her aiding my escape from a pursuing priest. Her confirmation of the assault she witnessed in the church lobby ensured that my voice would be heard.

The proposed bill, especially its provisions criminalizing grooming in Ohio, is commendable. Recognizing that if it takes a village to raise a child, it also takes a village to abuse one. This legislation equips Ohioans with a crucial tool to identify and report suspicious behavior, potentially preventing child abuse and allowing the community to work together to identify patterns of behavior that would amount to the grooming of a child.

Through the chair, I extend my applause to Rep Seitz and also Rep Abrams for bringing this bill to fruition. If this legislation protects even one child from experiencing what I endured, it will be a resounding success.

Child sex abuse trauma extends beyond the act itself, encompassing isolation, flashbacks, nightmares, and suicidal tendencies. Late disclosure, as evidenced by a study on Boy Scout survivors conducted by CHILDUSA, underscores the need for proactive measures. Of approximately 1,500 BSA survivors surveyed, the length of their delayed disclosure was an average of 29 years. This delayed revelation of abuse hampers justice, making it imperative for the General Assembly to adopt innovative solutions to curb child sex abuse, but I believe this legislation helps to remove the stigma of child sex abuse, and the stigma of reporting it.

This legislation serves as a vital addition to existing laws, providing new tools to identify, catch, and prevent child abusers. While justice often eludes survivors, the primary aim of these bills is prevention, safeguarding the well-being of future generations.

Being a survivor of child trafficking, I can tell you from my own experience that making a grooming a crime is essential to the safety of Ohio's children.