

Rebecca Surendorff
Ohioans for Child Protection
Proponent Testimony HB 322
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Chairman Hillyer, Vice Chair Mathews, Ranking Member Galonski and members of the House Civil Justice Committee, thank you for giving me the opportunity to provide testimony on HB 322.

I am Rebecca Surendorff, the co-chair of Ohioans for Child Protection, a grassroots effort of parents and grandparents in Ohio to advocate for stronger child sex abuse laws in Ohio. Our goals are simple. We want prevention of child sex abuse and access to justice for victims. We formed in the aftermath of a high-profile child rape case in Majority Leader Seitz's district. Please also see our group's submitted white paper on grooming and an additional resource about use of the term grooming and the misappropriation of that term to harm the LGBTQ+ community.

So why am I here? I am not a victim, and I am not an attorney. I am a lifelong Ohio resident and mom that learned that Ohio's child sex abuse laws were failing victims and falling short in prevention.

In August 2019 Fr. Geoff Drew (ordained 2004) was arrested for 9 counts of child rape in Hamilton County, Ohio. Fr. Geoff Drew's most recent assignment was pastor of St. Ignatius School, the largest Catholic Elementary School in Ohio. Pastors have superintendent like authority in the schools that they run here in our state. My four children were all students at St. Ignatius in grades 8, 6, 4, and kindergarten the year Fr. Geoff Drew ran the school.

Before Drew was a priest, in the mid 80's and early 90's he was the music minister, music teacher and the grade school band director at my elementary school, St. Jude. I look back now with adult's eyes, and I can reexamine memories that lacked significance in the past. Drew would approach boys in the classroom from behind and would massage their shoulders and then stick his hand down the back of their shirt. He would approach boys on recess and hug them from behind. Drew also frequently kept boys after class and regularly called them out of class. I also knew he vacationed frequently with boys, but it all felt normal as a child, because it was the reality I was presented with. These are just my memories, but court documents in Drew's 2019 arrest and 2021 conviction created a frightening picture of red flag grooming behavior with minors over the course of 3 decades in 3 Ohio counties.

After The Boston Globe's Spotlight Report and the implementation of the Child Protection Decree Catholic volunteers began to receive Virtus and Safe Parish Training. This training included information about grooming. We learned about this precursor to child sexual assault that begins in seemingly innocent ways and builds to a distinct alarming picture. This training was in some ways very effective because the court documents show that reporting about Drew was sporadic prior to 2002 and it skyrocketed after. The case file is thick, but the highlights include a formal seminary complaint regarding minors, a 2005 group letter of 40+ boys at St. Rita's in Dayton, a child protective services report from a St. Rita teacher, 2 more child protective services reports and criminal investigations in Butler County regarding his conduct with minors in 2013, 2015 and 2018.

Fr. Drew was running St. Ignatius School in Hamilton County while under investigation in Butler County in 2018.

We trained adults to spot grooming, they reported it and then law enforcement had no statute to use. Private institutions do not have to follow their written policies, but laws can be enforced by our justice system. The patch work of private institution policies is failing kids.

In 2019, my former classmate Paul was finally the person to stop Fr. Geoff Drew. Paul courageously came forward to report that Geoff Drew raped him multiple times at school starting in fourth grade. The trauma and PTSD associated with childhood sex abuse is enormous. The average age to disclose abuse is age 52. Paul bravely came forward at 41. Drew had a second child victim come forward but he was denied his day in court because Ohio is one of the few states that provide a statute of limitations to child rapist. Drew's file was filled with the sexual comments to minors, giving them pornography, alcohol, rubbing his crotch on them in the form of a hug, over nights with minors, and so many young boys that reported problems.

Ohio should criminalize aspects of grooming that deviate from normal adult interaction with minors. This includes in person acts and communications that desensitize the child to sexual content, unwanted sexual contact, or manipulates a child to comply/ commit sexual acts or take sexualized pictures. At its core grooming is a psychological abuse of the child which includes spiritual abuse when the predator is a cleric. I believe HB 322 will give law enforcement the ability to prevent sexual abuse when grooming in its sexualization stages and create a chargeable offense that uses material evidence from telecommunication devices. It will allow responsible adults to report to police using the same language in their professional and volunteer training. It can take decades for child sexual assault victims to be ready to take the assault to court. At times assault victims are ready to disclose the grooming, but are not ready to disclose the rape. Grooming charges could still give a victim their day in court and create the public record needed to further public safety. This bill requires a pattern of behavior like stalking. Stalking in individual acts can appear innocent but taken in aggregate it creates a picture of a crime. Early stages of grooming can be innocent, but in aggregate and sexualized stages it is well outside the bounds of a normal adult relationship with a minor. I am confident we can criminalize grooming in Ohio, protect children and respect the dignity of all people in Ohio.

Thank you to the committee.