

Testimony of
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Safe Shores – The DC Children’s Advocacy Center
Before the
Council of the District of Columbia
Committee on Judiciary & Public Safety
Public Hearing on
Bill 22-0021, The “Sexual Abuse Statute of
Limitations Elimination Amendment Act of 2017”
and
Bill 22-0028, The “Childhood Protection Against
Sexual Abuse Amendment Act of 2017”

June 15, 2017

Good morning, Chairman Allen and members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to speak briefly today on behalf of Safe Shores – The DC Children’s Advocacy Center in support of the two bills being considered today.

My name is Michele Booth Cole, and I serve as the executive director of Safe Shores. For over two decades, Safe Shores has worked with child victims of sexual abuse in partnership with public and private agencies pursuant to DC Code §4-1351.1. Our partners are the Metropolitan Police Department, Child and Family Services Agency, Office of the Attorney General for DC, the US Attorney’s Office for DC, and Children’s National Health Systems, and together we comprise DC’s Multidisciplinary Team on Child Abuse Investigations and Prosecution or MDT. We respond to and address cases of alleged child sexual abuse, alleged child physical abuse and cases involving young witnesses to extreme, often fatal violence.

Safe Shores’ priority is the safety, health and wellbeing of the children of the District of Columbia. And we define a child as anyone up to 18 years of age.

Of the more than 1,500 children Safe Shores served last year, the majority – approximately 65 to 70 percent – involved cases of alleged sexual abuse.

While 1,500 may sound like a lot of children – and it is, in reality this is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the number of youth in DC who are affected by the heinous crime of child sexual abuse.

We know that the majority of children do not disclose their abuse when they’re young, if ever. It’s only upon reaching adulthood that many survivors of child sexual abuse, though not all, have enough distance from their abuser to acknowledge and process the betrayal and the harm they suffered. It’s only then when they can begin to process the mental, emotional and physical toll that child sexual abuse has taken on their lives. Further, it’s worth noting that the struggle to disclose is exacerbated because child sexual abuse is one of the few crimes where the stigma and blame are hung around the victim’s neck like an anvil.

It only stands to reason then, that when child sexual abuse survivors are positioned to take the courageous step of seeking justice and holding their abuser accountable, they should have the unrestricted opportunity to do so.

Child sexual abuse is a crime of secrecy, shame and relationship. Child predators work strategically to interject themselves in to the lives of children and ingratiate themselves with victims’ families and caregivers. This manipulation is planned, intentional and malevolent by design. Child sexual abuse is a crime that uses children’s innocence, trust, and needs against them. A perpetrator’s ultimate goal is unfettered access to the child or children they’ve targeted.

For these reasons, child sexual abuse is a crime that can take many years and a great deal of highly skilled support for survivors to heal, since the full scope and impact of the crime may

only become truly known well into adulthood. So, this begs the question: should a survivor of child sexual abuse be further penalized for a crime they suffered by not having the option -- once they are ready -- to hold their perpetrator accountable?

I'd like to close by quoting Albert Cornell Chesley, with his permission. Al is a native Washingtonian, a former American football linebacker in the National Football League who played with the Philadelphia Eagles and the Chicago Bears. These days Al is a brave and vocal survivor of child sexual abuse and a national advocate for extending the statutes of limitation for survivors of child sexual abuse.

In an interview he said: "I had success, I reached great heights: a national championship, the Super Bowl. But I was so screwed up inside. Child sexual abuse is the worst crime committed, next to murder. It kills a kid's spirit."

At Safe Shores we work with kids to help revive their wounded spirits and restore their sense of trust and hope. The kids do the hard work to set themselves on the path of healing. This work is a central part of the restoration that will position them to lead the joyful and meaningful lives each of us should experience.

The other important piece of many survivors' healing and restoration from the spirit-killing crime of child sexual abuse is pursuing legal redress against their abuser. I can't imagine why, in good conscious, any person of conscience and who cares about justice, would deny that chance to any survivor.

Thank you for your time and attention. I'm glad to answer any questions you might have.