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Opinion: Sexual abuse claims are plaguing Michigan; laws that protect victims are the cure

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When Michigan residents learned that former Speaker of the House Lee Chatfield was accused of sexually abusing his sister-in-law from the time she was a 15-year-old babysitter in his family's home, the news fell on weary ears. Just weeks earlier, the more than 500 victims of Michigan State University's Larry Nassar were in the news once again after receiving \$380 million in compensation for the abuse they endured as children.

The accusers of University of Michigan's Robert Anderson, who allegedly abused more than 1,000 people over 37 years, just won a \$490 million settlement. The university was led, until last week, by President Mark Schlissel, who was fired after an investigation revealed an inappropriate relationship with an employee, and criticized for presiding over seven sex scandals during his tenure.

Lee Chatfield has denied that his accuser was non-consenting and a minor at the time of the abuse. But Aaron Chatfield found the claims against his elder brother credible, and is currently cooperating with investigating authorities.

Why has Michigan been the setting for so many headline-grabbing instances of abuse? The answer can be found in our state's laws, which ChildUSA ranks near the bottom of all states for their unfriendliness to victims.

As a result, sexual abuse has manifested like a cancer cluster in our state. But laws that empower victims are the scalpel, and the victims themselves who are supported in breaking their silence can become the immune cells, beating back the disease.

In my career pursuing cases against men who used their positions of authority to commit sexual abuse — whether in politics, the church, medicine, sports or schools — my experience

has been that once one victim of a powerful abuser summons the courage to come forward, others follow.

The problem is that those survivors who do finally steel themselves for the scrutiny, the victim-blaming and the accusations of dishonesty that inevitably follow their disclosure will too often find the courtroom doors closed by statutes of limitations.

Until 2018, Michigan had the shortest statute of limitations of any U.S. state for civil child sexual abuse claims. Michigan opened a window only for Larry Nassar's victims to make claims and changed the age to report childhood sexual abuse from 19 to 28, but we must do better.

State Sen. Tom Barrett, R-Charlotte has proposed legislation to create a similar window for Robert Anderson's victims, which is laudable and critically needed. But rather than moving one abuser at a time, Michigan must open windows to investigate every allegation of sexual abuse, with due process for the accused and a fair hearing for the accuser, no matter how long ago the allegations took place.

When statutes of limitations are removed, child predators and the institutions they operate within are exposed, and others are protected from the same suffering. The financial burdens for those who seek healing are shifted from victims to perpetrators. **And as public awareness is increased, it becomes harder for predators to hide.**

In addition to a narrow statute of limitations, Michigan's Governmental Tort Liability Act prevents survivors of sexual abuse from suing the state of Michigan or any arms of the state, including state colleges and universities like the ones where Nassar and Anderson operated with impunity for years. Instead, the state throws up procedural hurdles that bar victims from making claims.

Michigan law doesn't give the state immunity from a failure to maintain highways or state buildings, negligent operation of state vehicles or negligent operation of a state hospital — because we recognize that these things can cause serious harm. It's time for Michigan to recognize that sexual abuse is a serious harm as well.

Consider that, on average, a victim of childhood sexual abuse does not come forward to report that abuse until approximately age 50, if ever. If Rebekah Chatfield, now 26, had done the same, the allegations against the former House speaker would not have come to light until somewhere around the year 2050.

Much has been said about our politically divided nation, but the basic instinct that humans and animals alike share to protect the young from harm is not, nor should it ever be, a partisan issue. More than 30 other U.S. states have passed measures to reform their statute of limitations laws, and Michigan should join them.

Sexual abuse survivors know that time does not heal all wounds. Yet our laws must give them the time they need to come to terms with their abuse, and to make the difficult disclosures that will help bring their attackers to justice.

Jamie White is the attorney for Rebekah Chatfield in her legal action against Lee Chatfield. White also represents multiple victims in the University of Michigan sexual abuse case, victims of USA Gymnastics' Dr. Larry Nassar and survivors of sexual abuse connected with Boy Scouts of America and clergy nationwide.