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## **N.J. courts face surge of lawsuits as new sex abuse law takes effect**

By Blake Nelson and Joe Atmonavage

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At 12:01 a.m. on Sunday, a law firm in New Brunswick filed about 40 civil suits against the Boys Scouts of America, the Catholic Church in New Jersey and other organizations alleging sexual abuse, in some cases going back decades.

A Roseland firm filed a half-dozen more.

Within the coming weeks, numerous other lawsuits will likely be filed in New Jersey as a new law goes into effect Dec. 1. that vastly expands the amount of time victims of sexual assault will be allowed to bring a lawsuit.

Victims who were previously barred from suing because the statute of limitations had expired now have a new two-year window to pursue their case. Even after the two-year period closes, people will still have more time to file after the abuse occurred. The law allows adults who were assaulted as children to file civil suits until they turn 55, or seven years after they discover that they were abused.

The legislation targets the individuals who committed the sexual assault and the nonprofits like churches, athletic organizations, schools and community organizations for whom they worked.

Expanding the statute of limitations "will afford more survivors the opportunity to hold their perpetrators accountable," said Patricia Teffenhart, executive director of the New Jersey Coalition Against Sexual Assault.

New Jersey is not the only state to change its statute of limitations law. Two dozen states have also done so recently, according to Child USA, a Philadelphia-based nonprofit.

In New York, new cases are being funneled to 45 judges who received special training, according to New York Unified Court System spokesman Lucian Chalfen.

More than 1,100 cases have been filed since August, when the law changed, although that was a lower number than anticipated, Chalfen said.

In California, where the law changes on New Year's Day, a state Senate committee warned of an unknown, but potentially significant workload of new suits in the near future. That could cause a system-wide delay, according to Peter Allen, a spokesman for the Judicial Council of California.

It is not known what impact the law could have on the court system in N.J., however, there are dozens of judicial vacancies here, said Craig Hubert, a trustee with the New Jersey State Bar Association. The lack of judges could slow the process, he said.

The N.J. Judiciary did not return requests for comment.

Law firms in New Jersey have been advertising the change for months. Brad Rice, a Roseland lawyer of Nagel and Rice who is suing the Newark Archdiocese, the Boy Scouts and a decorated youth basketball coach, said the new law benefits survivors of sexual abuse who have long felt powerless.

“The law has given people an opportunity to seek justice,” Rice said. “The law has given people the opportunity to let their voices be heard for the first time. For many, it is an empowerment. For so long, these people felt controlled and powerless by their abusers. Now, they have the power.”

The New Brunswick law firm that is preparing to file 40 cases immediately, Rebenack, Aronow and Mascolo, is working in tandem with a Seattle firm, because Washington attorneys have been handling similar cases since their statute of limitation laws began changing in 1988.

“The underlying theme in all of these (lawsuits) is the institution is the entity responsible because either they knew or should have known,” said Jay Mascolo, of Rebenack, Aronow and Mascolo.

A state Legislature fiscal report said it was impossible to project the number of new claims or costs N.J. may face. But costs would almost certainly increase. For example, when the law was more restrictive, three sexual abuse cases in recent years cost the state \$3.8 million in settlements, according to the report. Yet over the past five years alone, 465 teachers or applicants were disqualified for sexual offenses or child abuse, the report said.

Attorneys who have handled similar cases in other states said N.J. should expect an initial rush of lawsuits that will lead to more public awareness, which can trigger a second wave of lawsuits.

“As more and more stories came out, it just snowballed,” said Jason Amala, a Seattle-based attorney whose firm has handled more than 100 similar suits.

Almost all of those cases settled, Amala said, while only a few went to trial. However, institutions rarely admitted wrongdoing early in the process, he said, which often led to extended court battles.

While it is not known how many victims may file a lawsuit, in recent years several organizations have identified possible abusers, including the the Boy Scouts, an organization that used to be headquartered in New Brunswick. A Boy Scouts of America

spokesperson said it is “outraged” by any accusations made against the organization and will pay for counseling for those who say they have been affected.

“We care deeply about all victims of child abuse and sincerely apologize to anyone who was harmed during their time in Scouting,” a spokesperson said. “We are outraged that there have been times when individuals took advantage of our program to abuse innocent children.”

And earlier this year, New Jersey’s five Catholic dioceses identified 188 clergy members who have been “credibly accused” of abuse.

A spokesman for the Archdiocese of Newark said in a statement that they would continue to work with victims, lawyers and law enforcement in order to “resolve allegations” and “bring closure to victims.”