



OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR

OCT 12 2013

To the Members of the California State Senate:

I am returning Senate Bill 131 without my signature.

This bill makes amendments to the statute of limitations relating to claims of childhood sexual abuse. Specifically, it amends and significantly expands a 2002 law to “revive” certain claims that previously had been time barred.

Statutes of limitation reach back to Roman law and were specifically enshrined in the English common law by the Limitations Act of 1623. Ever since, and in every state, including California, various limits have been imposed on the time when lawsuits may still be initiated. Even though valid and profoundly important claims are at stake, all jurisdictions have seen fit to bar actions after a lapse of years.

The reason for such a universal practice is one of fairness. There comes a time when an individual or organization should be secure in the reasonable expectation that past acts are indeed in the past and not subject to further lawsuits. With the passage of time, evidence may be lost or disposed of, memories fade and witnesses move away or die.

Over the years, California’s laws regarding time limits for childhood sexual abuse cases have been amended many times. The changes have affected not only how long a person has to make a claim, but also who may be sued for the sexual abuse. The issue of who is subject to liability is an important distinction as the law in this area has always and rightfully imposed longer periods of liability for an actual perpetrator of sexual abuse than for an organization that employed that perpetrator. This makes sense as third parties are in a very different position than perpetrators with respect to both evidence and memories.

For claims against a perpetrator of abuse, the current law is that a claimant must sue within eight years of attaining the age of majority (i.e. age 26) or “within three years of the date the plaintiff discovers or reasonably should have discovered that psychological injury or illness occurring after the age of majority was caused by the sexual abuse,

whichever period expires later...” However, for claims against a third party – e.g. an organization that employed the perpetrator of the abuse – the general rule since 1998 was that a claimant must sue before he or she turns 26. A later discovered psychological injury – no matter how compelling – could not be brought against a third party by a person older than 26.

When a number of high profile sex abuse scandals in both public and private institutions came to light, many felt that the third party limitation rule described above was too harsh and that claimants over 26 should be able to recover damages for later discovered injuries from certain, more culpable entities.

In 2002, the California Legislature weighed the competing considerations on this issue and enacted SB 1779, which did the following: (1) It identified for the first time a new subcategory of third party defendants which no longer would have the protection of the age 26 cutoff for claims. Going forward these defendants – entities who knew or should have known of the sexual abuse and failed to take action – now could be sued within three years of the date of discovery of a claim. (2) Looking backwards, SB 1779 also revived for one year only (2003) all claims that had previously lapsed because of the statute of limitation. This very unusual “one year revival” of lapsed claims allowed victims relief but also set a defined cut-off time for these lapsed claims.

In reliance on the clear language and intent of this statute, the private third party defendants covered by this bill took actions to resolve these legacy claims of victims older than 26. Over 1,000 claims were filed against the Catholic Church alone, some involving alleged abuse as far back as the 1930s. By 2007, the Catholic Church in California had paid out more than \$1.2 billion to settle the claims filed during this one year revival period. Other private and non-profit employers were sued and paid out as well.

For the public third parties covered by this bill, however, a very different result occurred. There is no doubt that in 2002, when SB 1779 was enacted, it was intended to apply to both public and private entities. Indeed, it would be unreasonable, if not shocking, for the Legislature to intentionally discriminate against one set of victims, e.g. those whose abusers happened to be employed by a public instead of a private entity. However, due to a drafting error, the California Supreme Court held in 2007 that SB 1779 did not actually apply to public or governmental agencies. So, unlike private institutions, public schools and government entities were shielded from the one year revival of lapsed claims. As a result, the similarly situated victims of these entities were not accorded the remedies of SB 1779.

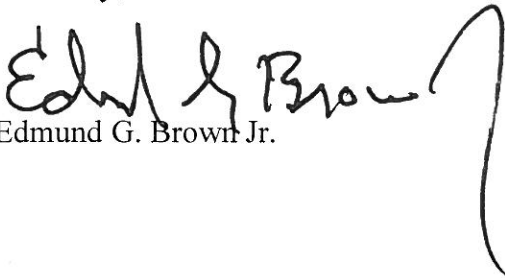
In 2008, the Legislature addressed this unfair distinction between victims of public as opposed to private institutions. Note, however, that the bill enacted, SB 640, did not restore equity between these two sets of victims. Instead of subjecting public/governmental entities to all of the provisions of the 2002 law, the Legislature only allowed victims of public institutions to sue under the new rules prospectively—from 2009 forward—and provided no “one year revival” period.

In passing this 2008 law, I can't believe the legislature decided that victims of abuse by a public entity are somehow less deserving than those who suffered abuse by a private entity. The children assaulted by Jerry Sandusky at Penn State or the teachers at Miramonte Elementary School in Los Angeles are no less worthy because of the nature of the institution they attended. Rather, I believe that legislators, in good faith, weighed the merits of such claims against the equities of allowing claims to be brought against third parties years after the abuse occurred. The Legislature concluded that fairness required that certain claims should be allowed, but only going forward.

This brings us to the bill now before me, SB 131. This bill does not change a victim's ability to sue a perpetrator. This bill also does not change the significant inequity that exists between private and public entities. What this bill does do is go back to the only group, i.e. private institutions, that have already been subjected to the unusual "one year revival period" and makes them, and them alone, subject to suit indefinitely. This extraordinary extension of the statute of limitations, which legislators chose not to apply to public institutions, is simply too open-ended and unfair.

For all these reasons, I am returning SB 131 without my signature.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Edmund G. Brown Jr.", with a long, sweeping flourish extending downwards and to the right.

Edmund G. Brown Jr.