



'Silent no more'

In South Dakota, survivors of child sex abuse join forces with state policymakers to improve prevention and response

by South Dakota Sen. Deb Soholt (Sen.Soholt@state.sd.us)

It happened in the spring of 2013. When a constituent shared her most compelling story. The one that was impossible to walk away from.

Her past included being sexually abused by her father from age 4 to 14. Using talent to overcome, she became a successful basketball player and college coach. But when the Penn State story broke, she knew the secret could no longer be kept and found healing as a courageous spokeswoman and catalyst for change. And now she wanted to know if I would get involved.

Child sexual abuse is not a topic that makes you popular. When asked as a legislator what you might be working on and this particular form of child maltreatment is shared, most quickly segue in a new direction. And who can blame them?

To face that our children experience sexual activity where consent is not or cannot be given is to accept that up to 30 percent of our kids — one in four girls and one in six boys — live this nightmare. And nearly 80 percent never tell anyone. Navigating the tortuous ground of trying to recover, or not recover, all alone.

Our original task was to implement Erin's Law in South Dakota. A child abuse victim herself, Erin Merryn is a national champion for model legislation in every state. But countless conversations with child advocacy professionals, child abuse pediatricians, social workers, counselors, school administrators, parents, victims and others led me to a new understanding about this serious issue: If meaningful change is going to happen in South Dakota, we will have to roll up our sleeves and get to work.

By that fall a small statewide coalition had been loosely formed to help, including a mother whose two grade-school boys had been abused by their uncle. Jolene Loetscher, someone willing to publicly speak about the abuse she endured as a child, graciously agreed to become the South Dakota face for the effort.

Facts, figures on child sexual abuse

✓ Most professionals in the field of child abuse estimate rates at between 8 percent and 20 percent. Adult retrospective studies show that one in four women and one in six men were sexually abused before the age of 18.

✓ It is estimated that 73 percent of child victims do not tell anyone about the abuse for at least a year and that 45 percent do not tell anyone for at least five years. Some never tell anyone about it.

✓ Children who live with a single parent who has a live-in partner are at the highest risk — 20 times more likely to be sexually abused than children living with both biological parents.

✓ Children are most vulnerable to abuse between the ages of 7 and 13; the median age for reported abuse is 9 years old.

Source: *The Children's Assessment Center*

We strive to ensure children's safety in so many ways — yet if they are being sexually abused, we leave it up to them to tell, to endure and to heal.

By the end of the 2014 legislative session, we had passed a bill (SB 154) to create the Jolene's Law Task Force. This group was asked to focus on:

- how to increase awareness of issues regarding sexual abuse of children, including warning signs that may indicate sexual abuse;
- the actions that a child who is the victim of sexual abuse could take to obtain help;
- how to best provide support and assistance to children who are victims of sexual abuse;
- policies to encourage adults to take responsibility for protecting children and to respond appropriately when abuse is suspected; and
- collaboration of public and private groups to help recognize and prevent child sexual abuse and to use research and evidence-based practices.

The task force included four legislators, three executive agency representatives, seven professionals with significant experience in working with child sexual abuse, and one survivor of such abuse — Jolene.

I was privileged to chair this group; our five meetings brought to light the depth and scope of the topic.

We explored the incidence of child sexual abuse in South Dakota; the associated mental, spiritual, physical and chronic adverse health consequences of this type of abuse; programs that could ease the disclosure of sexual abuse by a child; methods by which adults can be educated to recognize and support abuse victims, and what services are most effective in treating victims.

It was important for us to embrace child sexual abuse as an adult problem. In no other way do we make our kids responsible for their own safety, as we give them shelter, clothing, food and education, and take care of them when they are sick. And yet if they are being sexually abused, we leave it up to them — to tell, to endure, to heal.

We came to understand that the sexual abuse of children is a serious and costly public health concern. And that by reducing the issue to individual and family dynamics alone is to miss powerful communitywide or population-based strategies for change.

By immersing ourselves in the subject, we came to fully believe that it is not only possible, but highly probable, to change the landscape of abuse once and for all.

Five tenets for improvement emerged as steps around which to set goals, define strategies and secure funding:

- education/training for mandatory reporters;
- medical health, mental health and spiritual care responses to instances of violence;
- criminal justice and child protection systems;
- prevention initiatives; and
- public awareness and parent-education campaigns.

The role of mandatory reporters

To that end, the task force introduced two pieces of legislation this year: one bill (SB 71) to continue the task force for an additional year and one (SB 70) to strengthen our state's mandatory reporting law.

Under our state statute, mandatory reporters include medical professionals, counselors, and teachers and other school employees. Under SB 70, these people would have to be available to answer questions to law enforcement when an initial report of child abuse is made.

We want to make sure the person who heard the story of abuse tells it to authorities — rather than leaving it up to a supervisor. This should improve investigations of abuse allegations and better protect victims during the process. (It isn't left up to the child alone to talk to investigators about the incident.)

Further, we hope SB 70 sparks a conversation about the importance of mandatory reporting. We've learned that the primary lever for change in child sexual abuse is to strengthen our mandatory reporters. What signs of abuse should people look for? How should reporters handle incidents in which they suspect abuse? What are their responsibilities, and how should they be held accountable?

Social consciousness is something shared — when together we are aware of the difficulties and hardships within our society. For the past two years, Jolene's Law has magnified social consciousness about child sexual abuse. It is now time for our heightened awareness to translate into a shared moral imperative — where we will all be compelled to act to save our children.

As a legislator, every now and then space opens up to truly make a lasting difference. I am humbled beyond measure to link arms with others to declare that when it comes to child sexual abuse, we choose to be "silent no more." ★

South Dakota Sen. Deb Soholt, a Republican from Sioux Falls, was first elected in 2012.

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