

# Penn State scandal: Senators demand stronger child abuse laws

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As Jerry Sandusky waived his right to a preliminary hearing in a Pennsylvania courtroom, Washington lawmakers Tuesday called for stronger child-abuse reporting laws. They made their demands at the first Capitol Hill hearing growing out of the Penn State scandal.

"This senator takes the position that no institution should ever be too big to report or too famous to report" child abuse "and no adult should ever feel that they're protected because of the brand that they represent," said Sen. Barbara Mikulski (D-Md.), chairwoman of the Senate health, education, labor and pensions subcommittee on children and families.

The hearing was called in response to a bevy of bills introduced in the wake of the Penn State scandal to require that anyone witnessing child abuse report it to law enforcement or a child protection agency.

"If you see something, you should say something," said Mikulski, a onetime child neglect social worker.

Thirty-two states do not require all adults to report suspected child abuse or neglect; instead, many states have in place a requirement that people with regular contact with children, such as healthcare providers and teachers, must report abuse.

There was scant mention of the scandals at Penn State and Syracuse, but the accusations of child sexual abuse against former assistant coaches at the colleges have put child abuse on Congress' agenda.

Frank P. Cervone, executive director of the Philadelphia-based Support Center for Child Advocates, told the committee that he has had dozens of conversations in recent weeks about which of the Penn State officials were required to report allegations of abuse.

"This ought to be clear to everyone," he said.

Sheldon Kennedy, a former professional hockey player who was abused during his teenage years by his coach, told the committee that his abuser was International Hockey Man of the Year.

"In Canada, that gave him almost godlike status. Sound familiar?" he told the committee.

Kennedy, who co-founded Respect Group Inc. to work to prevent child abuse, said that in child abuse cases, including his own, "there are people who had a gut feeling that something was wrong but didn't do anything about it. Their attitude was, "I don't want to get involved," "It's not my problem," "He couldn't possibly be doing that" or "the authorities will take care of it."

"That's what keeps child abusers in business," he told the committee. "And that, senators, is what you have to address."

Proposals to deny federal funds to states that fail to enact stronger child-abuse reporting laws drew criticism. "The safety of children should never be used as a leverage to require state action," Erin Sullivan Sutton, assistant commissioner for children and family services for the Minnesota Department of Human Services, said in written testimony.

The hearing produced calls for better training for recognizing child abuse. "Since the vast majority of abuse is occurring so close to home, it is critical that we train and empower adults to know the signs of abuse and to know what to do when they see it or suspect it," said Sen. Richard Burr of North Carolina, the panel's top Republican.

Even with child abuse in the spotlight, it remains uncertain whether Congress will pass legislation, especially since efforts to ramp up funding for child abuse educational programs could face resistance at a time of high budget deficits.

Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.), who has introduced legislation to strengthen requirements for reporting child abuse, cited the 1997 case of Sherrice Iverson, a 7-year-old from Los Angeles who was molested and killed in a Nevada casino bathroom. The attacker's friend witnessed the beginning of the assault but never reported it to police or tried to intervene.

She introduced legislation in 1998 to require states to enact laws that would make it a crime for a witness to fail to report the sexual abuse of a child. But "nothing happened," she said Tuesday, noting that the bill died.

"It is time to act to protect children nationwide," she said. "Just as we came together in 1994 to pass the landmark Violence Against Women Act, we should now work together to pass a Violence Against Children Act."

Sandusky, Penn State's former defensive coordinator, faces more than 50 charges stemming from accusations that he molested at least 10 boys. The scandal led to the firing of the university's president and head football Coach Joe Paterno. Sandusky has denied wrongdoing.

-- Richard Simon in Washington, D.C.