

Child-abuse bill OK'd

Victims get 20 more years to file charges

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HARRISBURG - The state Senate joined the House yesterday in enacting legislation to make broad changes to Pennsylvania's child sex-abuse laws, including some that were recommended by a Philadelphia grand jury that investigated abuse by Roman Catholic priests.

If Gov. Rendell signs the bill, victims of child-sex crimes will have until their 50th birthday - 20 years longer than current law allows - to file criminal complaints. Employers and supervisors could be held criminally liable if they know of alleged abuse by employees who care for children but fail to stop it, and caregivers would have to report suspected abuse regardless of whether or not the victim reports it.

Rendell spokeswoman Kate Philips would not say yesterday whether he would sign the bill. The Senate passed a version of the bill in June, but the House of Representatives altered it and approved the amended measure, 191-1, on Nov. 14. Yesterday's Senate vote was unanimous and without debate.

"There are so many people, especially victims and their families, who for one time have scored a victory," said Rep. Dennis O'Brien, R-Philadelphia, who shepherded the bill through the House. "We're not pointing the finger at any group, whether it's clergy or Boy Scouts... . Across the spectrum we have to make sure that children are protected."

The grand jury recommended legislative reforms in a September 2005 report that documented alleged assaults on minors by more than 60 Philadelphia Archdiocese priests since 1967. The report also accused church leaders of covering up the abuse.

The panel said that, under current law, too much time had elapsed for criminal charges to be filed against the church or the priests.

"What we got was unbelievably fantastic, and not just for us. It's not about me, it's about these children and these adults who came to court incredibly damaged for life" to testify during the grand jury investigation, Philadelphia District Attorney Lynne Abraham said during a news conference on the bill.

Marie Whitehead, director of the Philadelphia chapter of the Survival Network of Those Abused by Priests and Other Clergy, called the legislation "a good step in the right direction."

"If this had been in place last year, a lot of the perpetrators would have been indicted," Whitehead said.