

Just imagine how tough it must be for an elected official in Harrisburg to stand up and shield sexual predators and church leaders and other authorities who covered up the abuse of children.

That must take guts - and unmitigated gall.

Yet, a Berks County lawmaker, Democratic State Rep. Thomas R. Caltagirone, is proving that he's just the man for this dirty job.

As chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, Caltagirone has put himself squarely in opposition to legislation that would enable victims to sue their abusers beyond the statute of limitations.

As in California and Delaware, where the first of these types of statutes were enacted, the Harrisburg proposal seeks to root out the truth about assaults by clergy, teachers, youth-group leaders, and the like - predators who, but for this law change, could not be held to account for long-ago assaults.

Caltagirone's refusal even to hold a hearing on the measure is bad enough. Last week, he also insulted and slighted abuse victims with the outrageous claim that their sole motivation was to win hefty monetary awards. "That's what it's all about, the money. It's not about justice," Caltagirone told an Inquirer reporter.

That's a breathtakingly cynical view of victims who, as children, suffered enormous hurt at the hands of their abusers, particularly coming from a lawmaker who can't be bothered to hear them.

Since Caltagirone appears to be doing the bidding of the Pennsylvania Catholic Conference (and the insurance industry), his dismissive comments hardly jibe with the Philadelphia archdiocese's professed compassion for victims.

Then again, the conference's opposition centers mostly on the cost of settlements and insurance. So who's concerned about the almighty dollar here?

Catholic officials talk about this issue as if the church has been unfairly targeted. With 63 Philadelphia-area priests identified by a 2005 grand jury for abusing hundreds of children over decades, Catholic leaders should fear more scrutiny. But last week's guilty plea in a sexual assault by a former Presbyterian minister in Delaware County shows such predators exist in many groups.

No one should blame victims for seeking compensation to defray the cost of what could be a lifetime of counseling to deal the scars of childhood attacks.

But victims and their supporters - including Philadelphia District Attorney Lynne M. Abraham, who lobbied lawmakers last week - readily acknowledge that civil suits over decades-old abuse allegations will not be easy to win. As such, their most likely reward will be in exposing the truth, including who was involved in cover-ups that allowed abusers to escape justice.

Far from dashing victims' hopes, maybe Caltagirone has helped boost their efforts. After all, he lashed out at them - proving their cause is too compelling to ignore.