

My name is Deborah Hart and I am following my oral testimony, with written record in support of HB409.

I am going to start with the premise that we all agree that child sex abuse is bad, that it devastates individuals and families, is costly to society, and has long term mental and physical health impacts on its victims and their families.

Today I want to speak specifically to a couple of things that I think this bill will address. Civil damages serve a purpose. A real and meaningful purpose. My sons were 7 and 12 when the Jerry Sandusky/Penn state sex abuse scandal broke. It was shocking and it was expensive. Over the next several years though I saw changes in the organizations that my children participated in. My youngest is an archer, and in the time period US Archery developed more stringent requirements around background checks. My older child was into Robotics. FIRST (a global robotics organization) Laid out new rules that forbade the use of mentor homes for robotics projects, required a minimum of two adults present at all activities, and modified communication channels so that children communicated with the mentor group, rather than one on one. I appreciated and trusted all of the adults who volunteered their talents in sports and extracurriculars. These rule changes helped them though and they helped our children. Some of these rule changes may have come about simply by the drive to do the right thing. It cannot be ignored though that fear of monetary loss or the inability to obtain liability insurance drove organizations to make changes... in other words to do the right thing. And these are only a couple of examples. If organizations could police themselves, we would not be here. Civil Penalties bring change. Civil penalties also give survivors a voice. I have seen first-hand how the ability to stand up in court to those that covered for an abuser, can be so healing. Many survivors wrestle with the guilt, believing that they somehow caused their abuse. Going public and testifying is not an easy thing, and I am sure something that no survivor of sexual assault takes lightly. Seeing those responsible being held accountable though can be so cathartic. A day in court is often only possible with civil penalties.

Finally, let me leave you with this. About 40 years ago a little boy was struggling at home and at school. His private school sent him to see a psychiatrist that would profoundly change his life. He was sexually abused for more than a year. The personal devastation he suffered was textbook, but yet some how he was still considered one of the lucky ones, no drug abuse, no suicide. About 5 years ago that little boy, now a grown man, joined a lawsuit to hold that private school responsible for his abuse. The tragedies of this case are too many to number, but there is one in particular that I want you all to take away. My husband thought for decades that he was alone, and what he found was not only that 32 others had come forward, but he was the youngest. He was the youngest. The reason why that is significant is that 28 years of abuse went unreported. Not undetected, but unreported. My husband's abuser should have been in jail before my husband was even born. You all have the opportunity to put some teeth in Oregon's mandatory reporting laws. While my husband's story happened a long time ago, Ms Proden's did not. This is not something that used to happen. This is not something that organizations have policed away with their rules and policies. Child sex abuse is happening today and unfortunately, I don't think that abusers are going away. Strengthening mandatory reporting laws though will limit their reach. Collectively we all have an obligation to protect the most vulnerable among us and SB 409 is a step in the right direction.