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Landmark Idaho sex abuse suit filed

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BOISE – It took years for Ron Morgan to muster the strength to go public with the story of how a volunteer scout leader sexually abused him as a young teen.

But this morning, standing on the courthouse steps in Boise, Morgan spoke out - and filed a lawsuit, the first of its kind under a new state law extending the statute of limitations in such cases. The case, filed on behalf of both Morgan and another, unnamed youngster who allegedly was repeatedly abused at the age of 9, charges that the Boy Scouts knew for more than four years that an assistant scoutmaster in the Boise area was a pedophile, but did nothing to stop the man before he was arrested in 1983.

"I'm hoping that this lawsuit will make a difference in how these organizations handle their youth programs so that there are protections in place so that people like Jim Schmidt never come in contact with kids," Morgan said today at a Boise press conference. He noted that his own 10-year-old son is now in scouting. "Since Zachary has been in scouting, it's become more of a concern to me. I don't want him or anyone else to have to go through this."

The new Idaho law facilitating today's suit went into effect on July 1. It extends the statute of limitations on child abuse cases to five years from the time of the abuse or the discovery that the abuse caused the victim injury or trauma.

"It expands the time for the victim to realize their harm," said Boise attorney Andrew Chasan. "It's a recognition of the psychological science that victims tend to suppress the memory."

Morgan, now 40 and a resident of Mesa, Ariz., and the other man say in the lawsuit that they were sexually abused by a Boy Scout assistant scoutmaster, James Philip Schmidt, in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

"We're here today because a new day has dawned for victims of childhood abuse in Idaho, and this brave young man is the first to take advantage of this new law," David Clohessy, national director of Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, a national support group, said as he stood beside Morgan. "We at SNAP ... want to applaud the Idaho Legislature for having the wisdom and compassion to enact this new law. Every time a victim comes forward ... our society becomes safer."

Clohessy, also a childhood abuse victim, said it "takes decades of pain" before many victims are able to come forward and acknowledge abuse.

Morgan said, "You think there's something wrong with you - I didn't do anything wrong. ... I've been in therapy a couple times and I've learned that naming your fears eliminates their power. So I'm hoping this will enable me to heal more completely."

Seattle-based attorney Timothy Kosnoff said in an earlier interview that the abuse took place at Boy Scout functions, and although Schmidt was arrested by Caldwell police in 1983 for child sexual abuse, the Boy Scouts organization knew about the abuse for some time before that.

The suit is seeking unspecified damages.

Ore-Ida Council Executive Director Dave Kemper said he's heard about the suit but hasn't received any formal notification yet.

"It would be premature to discuss it," Kemper said, adding that the Boy Scouts of America have a longstanding program to train adults and youth to recognize and prevent abuse.

"Victims often don't realize they've been hurt or make a connection between depression or drug abuse or other problems and child sex abuse until they are in their 30s or 40s," said Kosnoff, who has represented child sex abuse victims in Washington state for more than 10 years.

Prior to the new law, passed this winter by the Idaho State Legislature and signed into law in March by Idaho Gov. Butch Otter, it would



Ron Morgan speaks Tuesday about how child sex abuse affects him. He was one of two people to file the first child sex abuse lawsuit under a new Idaho law extending the statute of limitations on such cases. (Betsy Russell)

have been impossible for adult victims of child sexual abuse to file such suits.

Kosnoff said he anticipates this first suit under the new law will be one of many.

"In Washington, a few lawsuits were filed and then other victims came forward," he said.

Two Coeur d'Alene attorneys are also involved in the case. One of them, Leander James, said he expects more such lawsuits in Idaho. "We suspect there are quite a few out there," James said.

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