

Many factors can keep child-abuse claims quiet

An assistant principal in a Mount Vernon elementary school watched as a father hit his son in the head twice.

As part of that allegation, according to police reports and a civil lawsuit, the administrator, Ralph Burts, left the father, a custodian in the school, and son alone in the room where the boy ultimately ended up with a fractured skull.

Burts never reported the 2009 incident to police, one of several cases in recent years in the Lower Hudson Valley that mirrors the controversy embroiling Penn State University: authority figures failing to report serious allegations of abuse.

"It's institutional cover-up," said Laura Schwartz, executive director of the White Plains-based Child Abuse Prevention Center of New York. "The fact that they couldn't put the children first, whatever their priorities were, that they couldn't protect these children, it's horrendous."

The controversy at Penn State — in which beloved football coach Joe Paterno did not report to police allegations that his defensive coordinator, Jerry Sandusky, had raped several boys — has left the public asking the same question: Why?

Why would someone not immediately report suspected abuse, particularly of a child?

Experts say the issue goes beyond the national and common cover-ups involving the Catholic Church hiding acts of rape committed by priests and colleges not reporting on-campus sexual assaults. Individuals, even those in dozens of professions considered "mandatory reporters," who by law must report all suspected abuse, may not divulge it out of deference to a venerable institution.

Supervisors may fear the loss of their job if the perpetrator is a subordinate, while other people keep quiet out of a sense of friendship or loyalty.

But it's crucial for those who learn of abuse to report it quickly, even if victims choose not to, said Thomas Zugibe, Rockland County's district attorney.

"A person who has been victimized is not in a position to make that decision on their

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own," he said. "There's an element of domination and control by the offender over the victim, who is absolutely petrified and doesn't feel they can go forward."

In a civil lawsuit about to go to trial, Laura Bliss of Putnam Valley claims that, as a child, she was drugged and raped in a middle school classroom by a teacher, Dennis Tave, in 2001.

The suit, in U.S. District Court in White Plains, which seeks \$17 million in damages, contends school administrators knew of allegations that Tave had engaged in inappropriate sexual conduct with other female students but failed to report them. Bliss' alleged abuse continued for two years until she finally came forward, according to the suit.

There was no criminal indictment in the case, and a 2008 state Commission of Investigation report criticized how school officials, police and prosecutors handled it. Tave declined comment, and school officials could not be reached for comment Friday.

At Penn State, it's alleged that Paterno and other athletics officials were made aware of Sandusky's alleged crimes but, instead of reporting it to police or university officials, they took only minor steps to monitor him and attempted to limit his access to children in an outside youth program.

"Penn State had a reputation that they had to uphold. The football team is very powerful," said Schwartz, a member of the

Westchester Task Force on Child Abuse and Neglect. "They end up with tunnel vision that the most important thing at the time is the institution (and) they don't protect the children."

In December 2005, an official at Bedford Hills Elementary School became aware of allegations that a young female student had sex with an adult male.

The girl had told other students, at least one of whom told a parent. The parent is said to have informed Principal Victoria Graboski, who didn't pass it along, and the abuse continued another six months.

Graboski later faced criminal charges for not reporting the allegation.

The misdemeanor charges against her were ultimately dismissed. She was later rehired by the district as a special-education teacher and agreed to take part in a public education campaign about reporting suspected abuse.

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Jere Hochman, Bedford's superintendent, said the district trains all of its staff on abuse-reporting requirements. He was not with the district at the time of the incident and could not say whether employees regularly received such training in the past.

When abuse victims are not believed or don't receive immediate help after divulging their abuse, the psychological damage can be deepened, Schwartz said.

Worse, said Zugibe, silence empowers abusers.

"You're allowing more victims to be created going forward if you don't act on it," he said.

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