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ERIN MERRYN'S LAW PASSES HOUSE UNANIMOUSLY

Bill would address and prevent child sexual abuse

Charleston, WV: On Wednesday, the West Virginia House of Delegates passed Erin Merryn's Law (HB 2527) unanimously, 99-0. The law creates a **State Task Force on the Prevention of Sexual Abuse of Children**, which will make recommendations to adopt and implement policies, including training for school personnel on child sexual abuse and age-appropriate awareness curriculum for students. Lead sponsor of the bill, Delegate Amanda Pasdon, stated, "Protecting and supporting our children and families is a top priority for me. We each must do our part to protect our future and our most valuable asset - our children."

"I applaud the House of Delegates for their unified stance on this bill, which has the potential to make a difference in the lives of thousands of West Virginia children," says Emily Chittenden-Laird, Executive Director of the West Virginia Child Advocacy Network. "The importance of knowing what to do if a child tells you they have been — or are being — sexually abused cannot be understated. We need look no further than our own communities to know that child sexual abuse happens, it's often where you least expect it, and adults can and should take steps to protect a child if they suspect something is wrong."

National statistics state that 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 6 boys will be sexually assaulted by their 18th birthday. 85% of these children delay disclosing that the abuse is happening for at least a year, with some never telling. Last year Child Advocacy Centers served 2863 West Virginia children, 75% of whom were alleged victims of child sexual abuse. Both from a statistical and anecdotal perspective, it is clear that child sexual abuse is underreported by both children and the adults who they tell.

Child sexual abuse survivor and Charleston resident, Crystal Good, believes West Virginians need proper education on responding to abuse. "I was 5 when my abuse started. The signs of my abuse were present, but no one asked the necessary questions, so the abuse continued. I disclosed to my family doctor and the school counselor, and neither reported. When I was 12, I was taught at school that what was happening to me wasn't ok, but nobody told me what to do about it.

"If we're going to change the systems and protect children, we need accountability. Erin Merryn's Law will take away fear and disbelief and replace it with education and protective action."

Child advocates are praising the Legislature's action. "It is time for our state to take bold action to protect our children," stated Jim McKay, State Coordinator of Prevent Child Abuse West Virginia. "By joining with other states who have passed Erin Merryn's Law, West Virginia can begin taking the steps necessary to prepare teachers and others who work with children in helping prevent child sexual abuse and responding more effectively in the unfortunate event when it occurs."

20 states have passed Erin Merryn's Law, and an additional 21 states have introduced the bill this year. The bill now moves to the State Senate, where it will be referenced to the Judiciary Committee. Erin Merryn's Law is named after Erin Merryn, a survivor of child sexual abuse and nationally recognized child advocate. After receiving her Bachelor's Degree in Social Work, Erin has made it her mission to pass legislation in all 50 states which require states to enact child sexual abuse prevention efforts including providing age appropriate sex abuse prevention education in all grades.

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West Virginia Child Advocacy Network (WVCAN) provides statewide leadership in the fight against child abuse while working side-by-side with the 21 Child Advocacy Centers throughout the state. WVCAN provides training, technical assistance, leadership, legislative and policy advocacy, and overall coordination to Child Advocacy Centers around the state. A CAC is a child-friendly facility in which child protection, criminal justice, and child treatment professionals work together to investigate abuse, hold offenders accountable, and help children heal. Rather than having a child taken from agency to agency to endure multiple interviews, the CAC model brings the system to the child for an effective, child-centered, healing process. As the statewide authority on multidisciplinary approaches to supporting child victims of abuse, WVCAN's purpose is to empower local communities to provide comprehensive, coordinated and compassionate services to victims of child abuse.