

VALLEY

Paul Maryniak, metro editor, 602.444.NEWS (6397)
or paul.maryniak@arizonarepublic.com

2 using new law to file suit against their victimizers

By Dennis Wagner
The Arizona Republic

Two women who were victimized by criminals more than a decade ago have sued the perpetrators for millions of dollars under a new state law that extends the statute of limitations in abuse cases.

Joyce Lefler is seeking damages against a man who killed her 6-year-old son, Adam, in 1983, while Sherry Alldredge is suing the stepfather who sexually abused her as a child.

First under new law

According to the Never Again Foundation, those complaints in Maricopa County Superior Court are the first to be submitted since state law was amended this year to make convicted criminals accountable in lawsuits.

In a news release, the foundation noted that abuse victims in the past have been forced to choose between helping police obtain convictions or interfering with prosecutions by seeking civil damages.

Those who helped police often discovered, after conviction, that they were prohibited by the statute of limitations from suing if two years elapsed from the date of the crime.

Legislators moved to change the law after a state Court of Appeals ruling in a child-molestation case in Navajo County. The perpetrator, William Newman, pleaded guilty to sexual misconduct with a minor, Geri Johnson, who is now an adult. In dismissing Johnson's suit, appellate judges invited Arizona lawmakers to change the rules. Six weeks later, the Legislature adopted a measure that extends the statute of limitations in many sexual- and physical-abuse cases to one year after a conviction.

Lefler, 50, claims in her suit filed Wednesday that Eugene Colombaro beat her son to death two decades ago. According to the Never Again

Foundation, Lefler was charged with murder. The case against her was dropped for lack of evidence. Eighteen years later, it was reopened. Lefler's career and marriage were ruined before investigators, with her help, obtained a conviction against Colombaro last year. He is serving an 18-year prison sentence.

In the other suit, Alldredge, now 31 and a Fort Worth police officer, alleges that stepfather Ed Nichols physically and sexually abused her from early childhood until she was 17. Alldredge confronted Nichols last year. He confessed and was sentenced in June to 17 years in prison for child molestation.

Millions being sought

Alldredge is seeking \$6 million in damages; Lefler is asking for \$20 million.

Because both defendants were convicted under plea agreements, state law prohibits them from denying the essential allegations against them in the lawsuits.

Alldredge said she intends to give any monetary award to the Never Again Foundation.

"The last thing I want is his money," she said. "I want to help other victims."

The foundation is a non-profit organization founded by Chandler attorney R. Keith Perkins to prevent abuse of women and children and to promote healing for those who have been victimized. The foundation provides free legal service to victim plaintiffs in civil actions.

Staff counsel Kent Phelps, who is handling these cases, said lawsuits are meant to bring "personal justice."

"A judgment like this will follow them (perpetrators) to their graves," he added. "It's a financial millstone around their necks."

Reach the reporter at (602) 444-8874.