

# Transforming Fear into Power: The Politicization of Child Sexual Abuse

By [Ingrid Drake](#), [AlterNet](#) . Posted [January 7, 2007](#) .

Politicians trying to gain points are pushing laws to “get tough” on child sexual offenders. But a new movement has a better idea — work with offenders instead of ostracizing them.

Trailing in the polls a week and a half before Election Day 2006, then-Governor Bob Ehrlich (MD-R) announced new funds to track sex offenders. The press secretary for Ehrlich's opponent, Martin O'Malley, called the move "clearly political."

It is hard to find a campaign anywhere -- for Attorney General, Senate or School Board -- where one candidate is not pronouncing that another candidate has been too soft on pedophiles. This follows a national trend -- from California to Wisconsin to the U.S. Congress -- of the passage of "get-tough-on-offenders" legislation. Republican state representative from Georgia, Jerry Keen, captured the mood when he said, "We want to make it so tough, that [child sex offenders] are not going to live in Georgia once they are released."

Yet those most impacted by child sexual abuse -- survivors, their supporters, and those who work with perpetrators -- are critical of these new public policies, saying they do little to address the enormous problem. The United Nations reported last year that 150 million girls are sexually abused each year, (14 percent of the planet's child population), as well as seven percent of boys.

Largely ignored by both the mainstream and progressive media, a grassroots movement is empowering communities to prevent and respond to child sexual abuse (CSA), while holding perpetrators accountable.

## **Facing Our Own Monsters**

Articulate, passionate, and regarded by her peers as an effective advocate, Gianna Gariglietti, Executive Director of [Citizens Against Sexual Assault \(CASA\)](#) in Harrisonburg, Virginia, was invited to join a Task Force for developing the state's sexual violence prevention strategy.

As part of her training, Gariglietti was asked to attend a speech by a man who sexually abused children 20 years ago. "I didn't want to do it," recalled the counselor who has provided services to child and adult survivors of sexual violence for years. "I just thought, ugh."

Gariglietti pulled along a co-worker and attended the workshop, which ended up dramatically changing the way CASA did its work. "It was an unbelievable experience ... hearing offenders, who are in recovery say, 'I didn't want to do this, I wanted some help. When someone called me out on my behavior, I was relieved,'" recalls Gariglietti, the mother of a young son.

For years, CASA's staff had responded to phone inquiries for help from perpetrators, or potential perpetrators, with a quick and cold, "I'm sorry, we don't do that here. Good bye." After the conference, and a partnership with conference sponsor Stop it Now!, a national prevention organization, CASA became more aware of services for perpetrators. "Now we're more likely to say, 'We don't do that here, but here are some resources that you can turn to,'" explains Gariglietti.

The MA-based [Stop it Now!](#) has been working for years to dispel what it considers the dangerous practice of demonizing child sex offenders. "The stark truth is that more often than not, people who sexually abuse children really are 'nice people' who commit monstrous acts," reads one of its monthly newsletters. "Our wish to place them squarely in one camp or the other is perhaps the greatest single barrier that prevents us from recognizing the behaviors that lead to sexual abuse."

CASA, a nine person organization serving Central Virginia, is now in partnership with the Virginia Department of Health, which identified CSA as a statewide public health crisis after finding 1 in 4 women and 1 in 5 men have been victims of child sexual assault.

From its office in a red brick building, nestled in the Shenandoah Mountain valley, CASA's programming more closely reflects the realities of CSA: young people under 18 years of age perpetrate 29 percent of assaults; and almost half of the perpetrators were identified as family members, and only 10 percent were strangers.

CASA is doing more to counsel families where one child is victim and another child is a perpetrator, a key priority for many who know the issue well.

"There is a lot of attention on 'the sicko,' and we do not often deal when he is one of us," says Aishah Shahidah Simmons, who recently produced the [documentary film NO!](#) about African American women's experience with

sexual violence. "It's not talked about in mainstream press, even in alternative press ... about what to do when it's your brother."

Stop it Now! has been leading a shift from focusing prevention programs on children, which for years has held them responsible for speaking up about abuse, towards educating adults how to identify and respond to abuse. Like it has done in other states, Stop it Now! is collaborating with the Virginia Department of Health on a public marketing campaign with posters, radio advertisements, and roadside billboards featuring an adult holding hands with a child, with the words: "It doesn't feel right when I see them together," and Stop it Now!'s toll-free help-line for those who suspect abuse among friends and family.

In Atlanta, Stop it Now! and [Generation Five](#), a 10-year-old activist organization with a strategy to end CSA in five generations, are pulling together local leaders and groups to create standards for supporting survivors and abusers in their church, school, and community organizations.

Similar to community organizing campaigns in New York City and San Francisco, Sara Kershner, Generation Five's national organizer, is getting labor unions, immigrant groups, and domestic violence advocates to ask: "What would it look like for us to intervene?"

As communities move closer to confronting the specter of child sexual abuse in their backyards, worship halls, and family picnics, public policy has been moving in an entirely different direction.

## **A War**

"I came into office determined to put Virginia in the national lead in the battle against sexual offenders," announced VA Attorney General McDonnell, who is implementing legislation signed into law in July that includes mandatory minimum sentencing, \$6 million over two years for Global Positioning System (GPS) technology to monitor offenders, multi-million dollar improvements to the state's online sex offender registry, and prohibiting certain offenders from living within 500 feet of a school or day care center. No state funds have been allocated for CSA prevention or public education efforts like those of CASA or Stop it Now!

Based on their daily up-close work with victims, some advocates say the state investments are not wise. "You can have an ankle bracelet around somebody and see that they're not near a schoolyard, but that does not mean they're not perpetrating at home, which is where they're more likely to perpetrate anyway," says Brad Perry, the Virginia Sexual and Domestic

Violence Action Alliance's statewide organizer.

Some survivor groups also point out that increased criminalization does not take into account the sensitive nature of the crime. "We organize on both coasts, and in Atlanta, and what we hear again and again, is 'I'm not gonna turn in my dad ... I'm not gonna turn in my uncle,'" explains Staci Haines, co-founder of Generation Five. "Increasing sentencing does the opposite of its intention; it actually drives people farther underground. If someone finds out about child sexual abuse, and they know, 'O my god, now my partner, my husband, my father is gonna spend even more time in prison, I'm for sure not gonna let anyone find out about this.'"

This fear of reporting is even greater among immigrants, communities of color, and those that are low-income because of the potential loss of public benefits and tense relationships with law enforcement, adds Haines.

The sole emphasis on resolving CSA with the criminal justice system puts the burden on children. "We've got to find a way so children don't feel they messed up their family life," says Aishah Shahidah Simmons, who is an incest survivor.

Those working directly with offenders are also not convinced Virginia's attack plan will be effective. "Unfortunately a systematic approach does not get headlines," explains Scott Mandeville, a certified sex offender treatment provider and clinical social worker who works throughout the state. "Things like working with safety with children and working with parents. I think if you want to stop sex offense it's got to be from the ground up."

Attorney General McDonnell did not reply to requests to address these criticisms of the new laws. Yet, this type of legislation is not unique to Virginia.

In September of this year, the California Coalition Against Sexual Assault (CALCASA), comprised of rape crisis centers from across the state, announced its opposition to Proposition 83, a tough-on-offenders state ballot initiative named "Jessica's Law" for a 9-year old who was raped and murdered.

"With three-quarters of a billion dollars annually, and not one dime for victims, why is a victim of sexual violence's name being used?" says Robert Coombs, CALCASA's legislative director, who is deeply concerned by the amount of state money for GPS technology. "It is a heart-wrenching position for us to take, when politicians are finally taking this issue seriously. But they're taking the wrong approach."

While passed by 70 percent of the vote, a federal judge blocked Prop. 83's implementation on the grounds it is likely unconstitutional. CALCASA was concerned by evidence from other states that residency restrictions push offenders underground or into rural communities, oftentimes without access to treatment or other support systems.

After the rape and murder of Jetseta Gage, a 10-year-old girl, Iowa's state Legislature banned sex offenders whose victims are minors from living within 2,000 feet of a school or licensed day-care provider. After the law, the *Des Moines Register* reported that the number of sex offenders who had not registered with the state doubled from 142 to 298 between June 2005 and January.

"We do now have more people who do not list an address," said Elizabeth Barnhill of the Iowa Coalition Against Sexual Assault in the *Capital Times*. "People should be available for treatment and we don't know where they are. And people are shown living in a truck or under an overpass. That's the only place they can go."

The residency restrictions have made reentry of sex offenders more difficult for community corrections agencies. "In some states it has become almost impossible to find suitable housing and employment for convicted sex offenders," observes Charles Onley, with the Center for Sex Offender Management, a Dept. of Justice funded research group. Such critical perspectives of sex offender policies are rare in media coverage.

When AlterNet tracked seven months of news coverage of federal, state, and local sex offender laws and enforcement, approximately 812 stories, most of the sources were law enforcement and politicians.

"I can see why people want to ex-communicate CSA offenders," observes Grace Poore, a CSA activist and incest survivor. "When people believe there's no other alternative but to drive people out of their neighborhood then that's what they'll do. Even if it means someone else's children in another neighborhood are put at risk. Even if it means the CSA offender's whole family may have to move also because it's not an option for the family to cut themselves off from the offender." Despite funding challenges, Poore is completing "[Enemy On the Inside](#)," a documentary film exploring how to hold perpetrators accountable, without dehumanizing them. The film will be part of the long-term prevention plans of five national and local non-profits. After a viewing of the work in progress, one college student noted, "The number one message I walked away with was this: If what we are doing now to punish/rehabilitate sex offenders is not working, what will we do to

stop this in the future? We need to make a change." In fact, radically changing the way we stop CSA is underway.

### **An Activist Issue**

One of the most cutting-edge tactics CSA activists are carrying out is trying to identify the roots of the global pandemic and to prevent the creation of perpetrators.

With invitations into churches and schools in Central Virginia, CASA's staff is using the "Care for Kids" curriculum that teaches skills like empathy. "When we're talking to children, we say, 'No one has a right to touch you,'" explains Gariglietti. "We're also saying, 'You don't have a right to touch another person. You don't have a right to make another person feel uncomfortable.'"

When facilitating workshops at conferences or in community settings, the crew at Generation Five asks participants to examine which systems of domination operating in our society train people into sexually using children. "We look at sexism, or male supremacy. We look at racism. We look at economic exploitation," explains Haines. "We're not that far away from children having been property, three generations down the road. The whole idea of children being owned and operated by adults is absolutely how we operate still."

Taking a stance that people aren't born child sexual abusers, they're created, opens up the possibility of working with survivors, activist groups, and the general public to understand CSA as a problem that can be tackled. Framing CSA as a social problem requires everyone's participation, says Poore, because "this responsibility cannot be left to the criminal legal system alone but to the communities that perpetrators belong to -- which is all of us."

Tagged as: [child sexual abuse](#)

*Ingrid Drake is based in Washington, DC, where she reports regularly for Free Speech Radio News. She is also an active member of the DC Radio Co-op, sound gathering and conducting community training. Listen to an hour long [documentary](#) Ingrid Drake produced on the politicization of child sexual abuse.*