



JW Child Abuse

Jehovah's Witness Child Abuse Case Documents and News



IN THE COURTS, NEWS

Pennsylvania Opens Grand Jury Criminal Investigation Into Jehovah's Witnesses

AUGUST 15, 2022 2 COMMENTS

Published February 6th, 2020

In 1884, the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society was incorporated in the Court of Common Pleas in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. The movement of Charles Taze Russell became an established religious business, a tax-exempt corporation that would go on to control the lives of more than 8 million devoted followers.

One hundred years later and four hours southeast of Allegheny, I was baptized as one of Jehovah's Witnesses in a tiled, heated baptismal pool in Crownsville Maryland. I was 16.

Thirty-five years after that, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania served me with a subpoena to testify in a Grand Jury investigation into alleged criminal activity by the very same religious organization to which I devoted the formative and working years of my life. Let me explain why this happened.

I grew up in Baltimore, Maryland, the only child of devoted Jehovah's Witness parents who had embraced the religion following the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the escalation of the Vietnam war. Jehovah's Witnesses pounded the pavements of Baltimore, preaching the imminence of Armageddon.

Watchtower vice-president and oracle Frederick W. Franz famously came to Baltimore in 1946, delivering multiple conventions speeches, including the epic book release of *Life Everlasting in Freedom of the Sons of God*. This 400+ page publication unveiled a shocking timetable of world events, including the revelation that 1975 would mark the most significant modern date in history.

From that moment forward, everything changed. Urgency over the date 1975 drove Witnesses into a subtle frenzy, with Organization overseers using these new revelations as spiritual cattle prods, driving many to sell their homes and preach the news of the ends of the world.

When I was 8 years old, 1975 came and went, but new predictions emerged, and the old ones were revised. As a child, I could not accept that I was being lied to, so I trusted Jehovah's Witnesses and their appointed elders.

Among the most trusted elders was a man named Charles Brineshults. Charlie, as he was known, was a long-time appointed elder, a widower, and held the distinction of being one of the elite few remaining "anointed" Jehovah's Witnesses on Earth. He was also a serial pedophile, but I didn't know that.



Charles "Charlie" Brineshults, Baltimore Sun, August 20, 1966

Even as a child my instincts told me something was not right. Brineshults shuffled from family to family, latching on to the generosity of anyone who would take him in. Of course, the homes he selected and the families he embraced all had children. Vulnerable children.

It was not until about 10 years ago during a group vacation that a close friend and longstanding elder heard the name Brineshults in conversation, and he piped in "Oh yeah, he diddled kids, you didn't know?"

"What?" I exclaimed as I shot a piercing gaze across the South Carolina beach resort, expecting to hear this was some kind of joke. But it wasn't. As it turns out, it was an open secret among dozens of families and nearly all of the elders in the congregation circuits I grew up in.

I was horrified. At that moment I could instantly recall sitting in the rear of a Kingdom Hall after a meeting, watching Charlie approach me with my father nearby. "Mark is so polite when he answers the phone, I am very impressed. He speaks so clearly and with such maturity."

I was barely 10 years old. Like so many others, I was unaware I was being groomed, and were it not for the screen of my extra-protective mother, I would most certainly have been one of his many victims.

And then there was Ongsingco.

Louis Ongsingco was a charismatic Watchtower-appointed pioneer minister and self-declared pied piper of the local Jehovah's Witness children. He was engaging, well-traveled, and he liked girls. Young girls.



Search ...

Search:
Civil Lawsuits - United States

POST CATEGORIES
Select Category

RECENT POSTS
Jehovah's Witnesses Post Mandatory Reporting Training Instructions, Existing Policies Investigation Into Jehovah's Witnesses

Fessler Trial - Jury Selection
Fessler Trial - Opening Statements
Fessler Trial - Part 1
Fessler Trial - Part 2

ARCHIVES
Select Month

Confessions, Silence, ...

ENTARY
RETS OF CLERGY

Al-Jazeera examines the role of clergy confidentiality, and how it has devastated the

ENTARY
RETS OF CLERGY

Al-Jazeera examines the role of clergy confidentiality, and how it has devastated the lives of victims of child abuse in the Jehovah's Witness and Mormon Churches.

RECENT COMMENTS

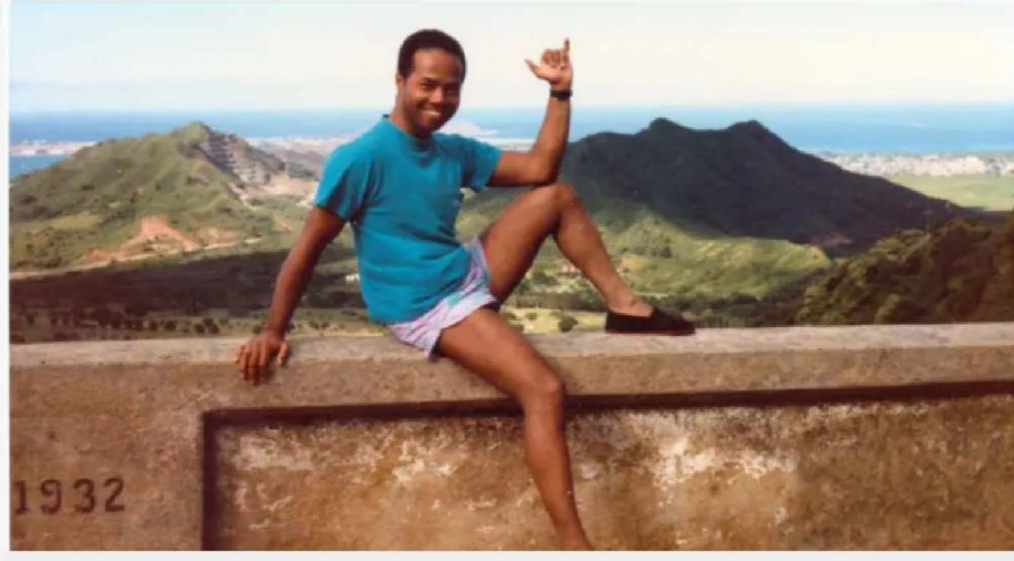
Jamie Schouten on About

50ShadesofNewLight on 2017: Fessler Prevails in Jehovah's Witness Child Abuse Trial, Elder Admits Shredding Files - Part 2

Audrey Kennedy-Tripp on About

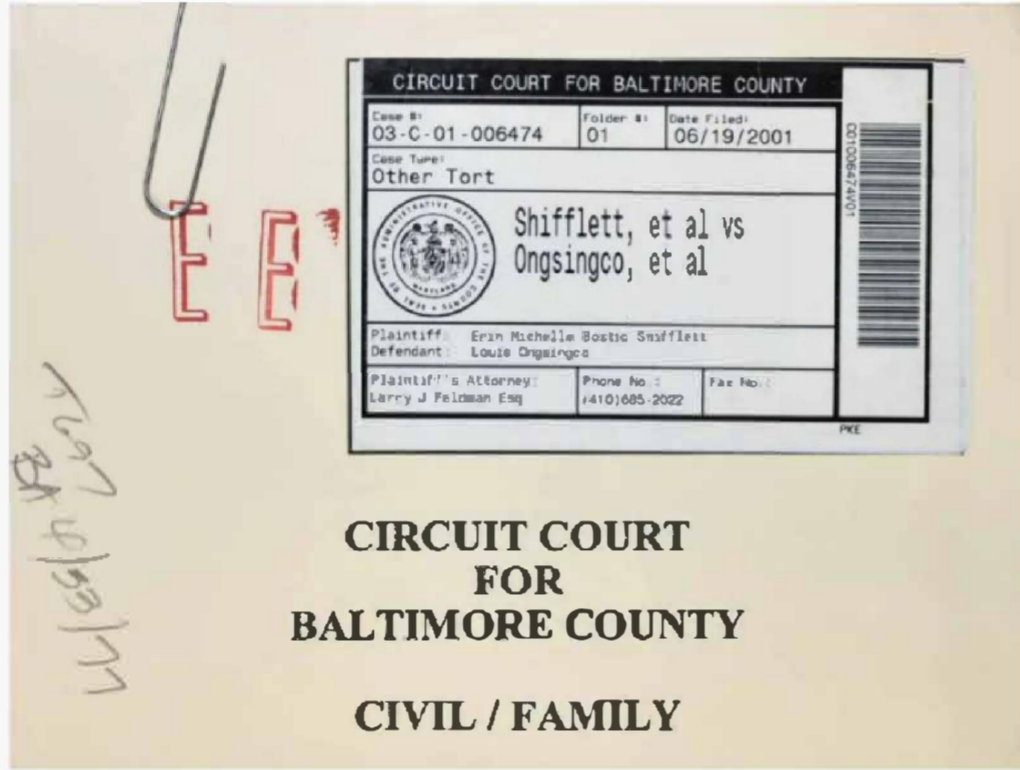
Phillip on 2017: Fessler Prevails in Jehovah's Witness Child Abuse Trial, Elder Admits Shredding Files - Part 2

Mark O'Donnell on Pennsylvania Opens Grand Jury Criminal Investigation Into Jehovah's Witnesses



Louis Ongsingco

Louis was a jet-setting flight attendant who frequently returned from Paris or London with expensive chocolates and other gifts for the kids he liked the most. He was also a massage therapist. He had a smooth-talking way of conversing with teen girls, advancing his hands further and further from their shoulders to their backs, then finally crossing the lines between friendly conduct and full-on sexual assault. I saw this myself. I was barely a teenager when I approached local elder Robert "Bob" Manke about Ongsingco's behavior with girls. Where else would I go? My parents couldn't control Louis, and I didn't know that this was a matter for the police. How could I? So I trusted that Manke and the other elders would handle the situation. They didn't. Instead, they told Ongsingco that I had outed him, which led to severe chastisement from Louis himself. It was frightening. Meanwhile, Louis kept up his behavior, and decades passed. After leaving the Witness religion in 2013, I wanted to see what happened to this man. After a brief investigation, I discovered that Louis Ongsingco went on to sexually assault multiple women, both Jehovah's Witnesses, and non-Witnesses. By 2001 at least seven different women filed two lawsuits against Ongsingco.



These lawsuits are independent of additional allegations against Ongsingco, including those of two women who claim that Ongsingco placed his hands down the front of their shirts when they were teenagers. One of those women came forward to the Atlantic in 2019 and was interviewed by journalist Doug Quenqua, who investigated Jehovah's Witnesses in his article The Secret Database of Child Abuse.

The Atlantic Article

In 2018 I was introduced to Douglas Quenqua, a respected writer whose work has appeared in the New York Times, CNBC, BuzzFeed, and other periodicals. Doug had learned that I had received hundreds of pages of child abuse case documents from several Jehovah's Witness congregations, and he wanted to learn more. Over the course of 2018, we spent a number of days discussing these documents, and why Jehovah's Witnesses had not reported these cases to the police. The incidents were horrifying, and worse yet, they revealed that most of the perpetrators were still at large, and were in contact with children. On March 22nd, 2019, the Atlantic released Doug's article. 24 Hours later, two elders rang our doorbell before 10 AM. We did not answer. When we checked our security camera later, it was apparent who these men were. They were church elders from the Perry Hall Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses in Maryland. One of the two elders is the father of a woman who was sexually assaulted by not one, but two Jehovah's Witness men. The men were Brineshults and Ongsingco.



I remember thinking how pathetic it was to be chased down by the very men who have been covering up child abuse for years, and whose children were among the victims. On April 14th, 2019, Watchtower representative and local church elder Joel Raniolo mailed two certified letters to my home, demanding that we attend a judicial hearing at the Perry Hall church. When resched, Raniolo refused to divulge why he had sent the letters, and how he had obtained our personal information. On May 14th, 2019, another Church elder announced to the Perry Hall congregation that Mark and

Kimberly O'Donnell are no longer Jehovah's Witnesses. It had been 35 years since my indoctrination and baptism back in February 1984.

The Pennsylvania Grand Jury

In the weeks following the release of the Atlantic article, national and global attention became focused on the Jehovah's Witness religion. In particular, the Pennsylvania Office of the Attorney General took notice of the allegations of corruption within the Witness Organization.

The State of Pennsylvania is no stranger to the cover-up of abuse within religious organizations. In 2018, the Attorney General's office released the [results of a two-year investigation into the Catholic church](#), following multiple substantiated reports of child sexual abuse and corresponding cover-ups.

On July 2nd, 2019 I was interviewed in my home by the Deputy Assistant Attorney General of Pennsylvania, along with a Special Investigator for the State. For more than three hours I provided documentation and details concerning the policies and practices of Jehovah's Witnesses, especially in connection with child abuse.

On July 29th a Special Investigator arrived at my Baltimore home and served a subpoena for me to appear before the 45th Investigative Grand Jury of the State of Pennsylvania.

Finally, on August 22nd, 2019, I arrived at the State Capitol before 7:30 AM and was sworn in by Judge J. Wesley Oler in his chambers. Moments later I entered the large Grand Jury room, where 23 grand jurors and approximately 12-15 alternates were stationed at their desks, positioned to take notes and record their questions on paper.

A Grand Jury is a special tool used by state and federal governments to investigate criminal allegations against persons or institutions. The powers of grand juries are wide-ranging and potent. They include the ability to subpoena and compel witnesses to testify, and those witnesses are encouraged to speak freely and without fear of reprisal.

Any form of retaliation is taken seriously by the office of the Attorney General and the presiding judge. Of course, Jehovah's Witnesses had already executed retaliation on my wife and me in response to our efforts to shed light on the epidemic child abuse problem within the religion.

My testimony lasted more than two straight hours as I sat facing the Grand Jury and the Deputy Attorney General, together with several State Attorneys and Special Investigators.

Grand Juries can be cathartic experiences for cooperative witnesses who testify on the side of civil justice. That was my experience.

For the first half of my initial testimony, I recounted my personal history within the Jehovah's Witness religion, beginning with my religiously isolated childhood. It was an opportunity to share my experiences with a large group of citizens who will ultimately make important decisions when they vote on the choices presented to them.

There were moments of levity amidst the proceedings, including a curious exchange in which I discussed the history of the Witnesses' custom Bible, the New World Translation. I explained how the translation was largely the brainchild of Frederick W. Franz, whose linguistic education was limited to a maximum of two years study of Greek, and no training in Hebrew.

The irony of this information was not lost upon the investigating members of the Grand Jury.

The Grand Jury and the JW Organization

As the morning progressed, my testimony turned to the driving force behind the reason these people were assembled in this room - to comprehend whether the religious hierarchy which drives this religion is responsible for the failure to report the crime of child abuse.

A large whiteboard was placed to my left, facing the grand jurors. At the very top, the letters "GB" were written in large letters, then circled. It was clear that the Deputy Attorney General of Pennsylvania understood that the decisions and power of this religion lay at the top of a complicated network of corporations, congregations, Circuit Overseers, and churchgoers.

I spent some time attempting to explain the spider web of mechanisms used by Jehovah's Witnesses, describing the difference between their view of the spiritual and the legal.

Branch Committees, Corporations, Circuit Overseers, Congregations, Elders, Ministerial Servants, Pioneers, Publishers - all of these found their way to the diagram of the Witness organization. Lines were drawn connecting all of the organizational machinery which comprises the Jehovah's Witness religion. In the end, all roads terminated at the Governing Body.

After testifying for more than two hours, I was excused and held in a waiting area while the Grand Jurors scribbled their questions on paper and handed them to the Deputy Assistant Attorney General, after which I was brought back into the room, and given the opportunity to respond to the questions.

The process was dignified, and thorough, but clearly an incremental process. Four months later, I found myself escorted once again into the halls of Pennsylvania justice, this time in a brand new government complex even more secure than the prior Strawberry Square location.

Grand juries are most often 18 months in length, with citizen jurors obliged to comply with the civic duty once per month for several days at a stretch. In some cases, grand juries are extended another 6 months. So it was no surprise that I returned 4 months after my initial testimony, this time to discuss documents.

Documents

The smoking gun of certain crimes lies in the creation of a paper trail of evidence that substantiates repetitive negligent or criminal behavior. If there's one thing the Jehovah's Witnesses are not lacking, it's documents.

From the inception of Watch Tower Pennsylvania in 1884, Jehovah's Witnesses have been in the document business. As the religion branched from printing Bibles and books to buying and selling real estate, the global corporations expanded, and so did the need to maintain centralized control over a growing member base.

By the 1970s, the Witnesses had tightened controls over congregation elders, formed Governing Body Committees, and published letters to all Elders on various corporation letterheads. They even began publishing a [secret elder's manual](#) with strict instructions that it be concealed from anyone not an elder.

The expansion of congregation elder bodies meant that members trusted local elders to handle certain matters which would otherwise be best handled by law enforcement. Elder bodies became the police department for Jehovah's Witnesses.

As the organization became further centralized, policy letters became the norm. While many documents dealt with routine activities for the church, other letters started to emerge which seemed to border on matters best left for law enforcement.

On July 1st, 1989, Watchtower New York issued a now-famous [six-page letter to all congregation elders](#), labeled "confidential." This letter warned elders not to divulge confidential information to "unauthorized" persons, including the police.



to be transgression, but the discreetly." Problems are cre matters that should be kept co, heed to the counsel: "Do not re another." (Proverbs 25:9) Oft well-being of the congregation & tongue by an elder can result in individual, the congregation, and society.

It was clear that the rising number of child abuse cases in the Organization needed to be addressed, but Watchtower insisted that their New York Legal department act as first point of contact for any elders who learn of abuse.

This letter served as the opening salvo in a policy of obstruction of justice for victims of child abuse and the law enforcement agents who could have helped them.

On December 18th, 2018, I sat before the Pennsylvania Grand Jury, listening to the reading of the entire six-page letter from 1989.

It began to hit me how serious these letters were, and how vital they are to the investigation into Jehovah's Witnesses. Every line, every paragraph was dissected and scrutinized. And then more letters were introduced.

On March 14, 1987, Watchtower released yet another directive to elders, and this time they asked for documentation of known child abusers serving in any congregation. It was, in effect, an official announcement of a secret database of child abusers.

On Page two, the letter stated:

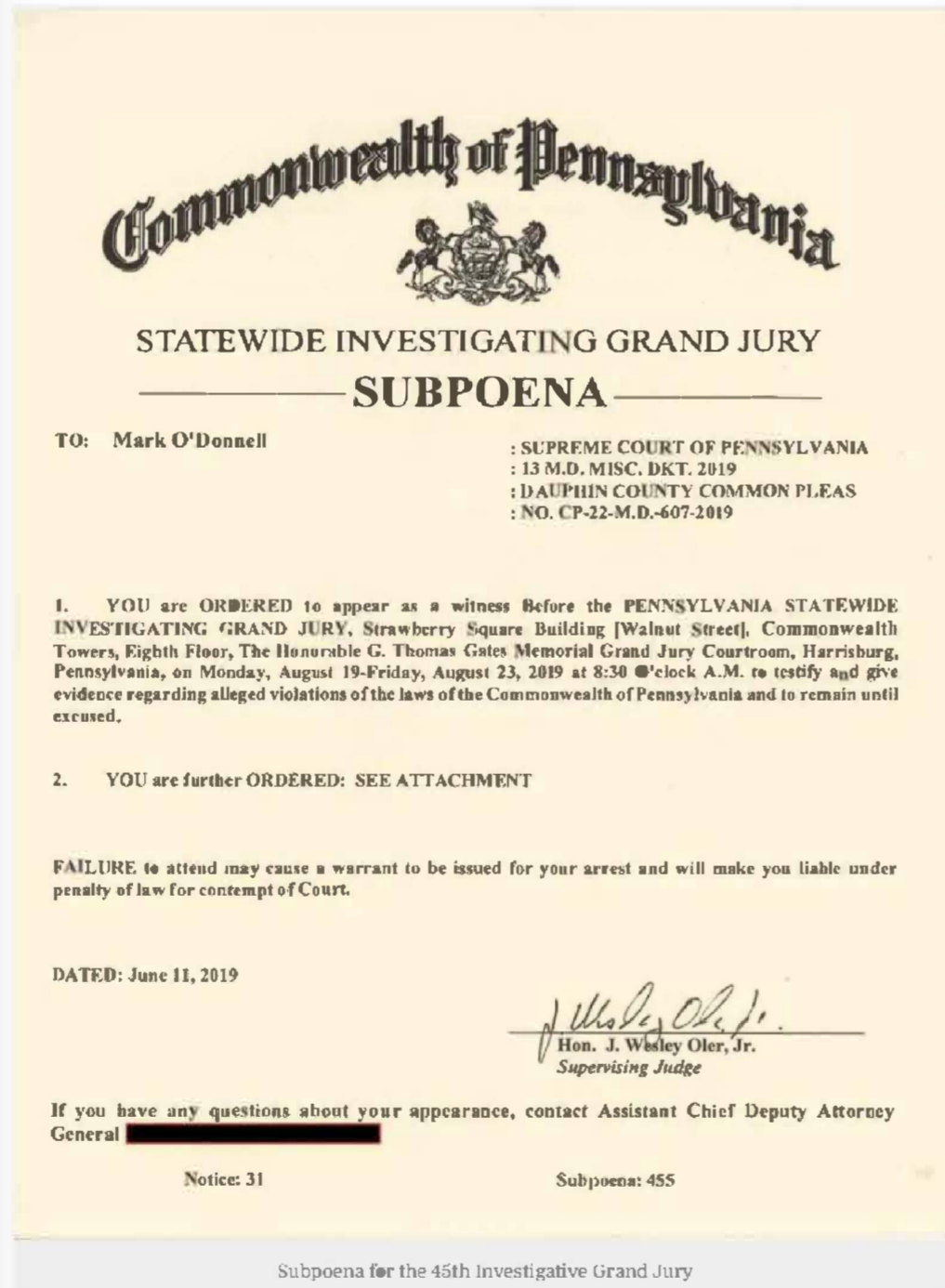
“However, the body of elders should discuss this matter and give the Society a report on anyone who is currently serving or who formerly served in a Society-appointed position in your congregation who is known to have been guilty of child molestation in the past.”

This single sentence has formed the basis for a series of civil lawsuits in California in which attorney Irwin Zalkin and his team have worked many years to expose, knowing that Watchtower is harboring the names of thousands of child abusers in its database. Many of the abusers are still at large and serving in positions of authority among Jehovah's Witnesses

These were just a few of the many letters I reviewed and certified as authentic for the Pennsylvania Grand Jury.

What Effect Will the Grand Jury Have?

I cannot speculate on the full nature of this investigation, as these proceedings are sealed off from the public and the press. The Office of the Attorney General cannot confirm or deny that there is an investigation. They cannot confirm or deny that they will seek to investigate and subpoena specific individuals, such as victims, attorneys, experts, active elders, or members of the organization who serve at the highest level.



Only those who testify, and who have not been placed under a gag order from the presiding judge may discuss their testimony, if they choose to do so. Otherwise, until their investigation is complete, they will not comment.

There are a number of possible consequences of this Grand Jury investigation, and it may take some time before we see the results. One outcome is a presentment- a recommendation that charges be filed against a person or organization. Another outcome is a formal report, like the Catholic Church report released in 2018.

Whatever the case, the Office of the Attorney General has the power to issue search warrants and subpoenas, to compel testimony, and may even cross state lines to accomplish their work.

After a lifetime in the Jehovah's Witness organization, having seen the damaging effects of child abuse and the cover-up of these crimes, I am thankful that the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania has finally turned its attention to the organization which silenced the voices of survivors and those who champion their rights.

This article was originally published on February 8th, 2020. The USA Today followed this article by publishing their report on the same day.

USA Today Article: <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/investigations/2020/02/08/jehovahs-witnesses-under-investigation-pennsylvania-attorney-generals-office/3425240001/>

The Philadelphia Inquirer published their article later the same day.

Philadelphia Inquirer Article: <https://www.inquirer.com/news/pennsylvania-grand-jury-investigating-jehovah-witnesses-sex-abuse-cover-up-20200209.html>

On Monday, February 10th, 2020, Reveal News and the Center for Investigative Journalists published a report by journalist Trey Bundy.

Reveal News Article: <https://revealnews.org/article/pennsylvania-opens-grand-jury-investigation-into-jehovahs-witnesses-cover-up-of-child-sex-abuse/>

The Philadelphia Inquirer journalist David Gambacorta followed his original article with a follow-up on February 14th, 2020.

Philadelphia Inquirer Report #2: <https://www.inquirer.com/news/jehovahs-witnesses-sex-abuse-cover-up-pennsylvania-grand-jury-investigation-20200214.html>




Additional article references to the investigation:

From the Soloff and Zervanos Law Firm: <https://www.soloffandzervanos.com/blog/2020/02/pennsylvania-open-grand-jury-investigation-into-jehovahs-witness-child-sex-abuse-cover-up.shtml>

Share:

Tagged Child Abuse Jehovah's Witnesses, Pennsylvania Grand Jury Investigation

Related Articles

			
Jehovah's Witness Elders Fined for Failure to Report Child Abuse: Watchtower Settles with Delaware	Child Abuse Records Reveal Extensive Data Collection by Jehovah's Witnesses	Jehovah's Witness Elder Arrested on Four Counts of Felony Sexual Assault of Minors, Criminal Trial Set	2017: Jury Selection Complete in Fessler Versus Watchtower Child Abuse Case - Trial Date Set

← 2019: Governing Body of Jehovah's Witnesses Named as Defendants in Child Abuse Lawsuits
Jehovah's Witnesses Post Mandatory Reporting Training Instructions. Existing Policies Unchanged →

2 thoughts on "Pennsylvania Opens Grand Jury Criminal Investigation Into Jehovah's Witnesses"

 **GRO-A** says:
April 16, 2023 at 2:39 am

Kia ora Mark

I follow your work and thank you for it. I've just been watching your discussion with The Critical Thinkers.

Just FYI:


Do you know that their is a Royal Commission into Abuse in Care in Aotearoa New Zealand which has just been extended out to March next year. I have made a submission regarding my experiences growing up as a JW and as an adult.

They started originally with Catholics and Anglicans but extended it out about a year ago to include Jehovah's Witnesses, Glorivale and Exclusive Brethren.

Ma te wa
 **GRO-A**

Reply

 Mark O'Donnell says:
April 17, 2023 at 6:01 pm

Thank you  **GRO-A** for your bravery and strength to be able to make a submission in your country. I know this will inspire others to come forward and hopefully achieve some sense of relief and solidarity with so many who have suffered with these secrets. Please keep me posted on how this Commission is going!

Reply

Leave a Reply

Your email address will not be published. Required fields are marked *

Comment *

Name *

Email *

Website

Save my name, email, and website in this browser for the next time I comment.

This site uses Akismet to reduce spam. [Learn how your comment data is processed](#)