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# Prosecutors say Jerry Sandusky case mirrors child-sex cases in midstate

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By **MATT MILLER**, The Patriot-News [Follow](#)

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Dauphin County Chief Deputy District Attorney Sean McCormack says a long time frame can be necessary to investigate child-molestation cases. "We know how hard these cases are to prove in court," he said. "You want to have all the evidence before you file charges."

Four days after former Penn State defensive coordinator Jerry Sandusky was charged with molesting eight boys, a Harrisburg man named Hector Colon faced a judge in a Dauphin County courtroom.

Colon, too, had been charged with sexually abusing children. He had been convicted of raping one young girl and of repeatedly molesting two others.

All of the victims were younger than 10 when the abuse began. It lasted five years, until one of the girls summoned the courage to come forward and report it.

"You took my childhood dreams away," one victim shouted at Colon before Judge Scott A. Evans sentenced him to 25 to 55 years in state prison. "I feel as if I'll never be able to get over this."

While the Sandusky case and the scandal it has caused for Penn State draw unabated national media attention, scenes like those in the Colon case play out far more quietly every day in courthouses across the state and nation, said midstate prosecutors who have handled scores of sex-crimes cases involving children.

Sadly, they said, there is a lot of deja vu in the allegations against Sandusky.

"Unfortunately, this is a lot more prevalent than we would even want to think about," said Jennifer Gettle, a chief deputy district attorney for Dauphin County. "On the Wednesday after [Sandusky] was charged, I was in court in a case where there were six victims."

In an indictment lodged by the state attorney general's office, Sandusky is accused of molesting

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boys in incidents dating to 1998.

Most of the alleged victims were underprivileged children participating in The Second Mile, a charity Sandusky founded. In some cases Sandusky, who has publicly denied any guilt, is accused of abusing victims on university property.

More potential victims are coming forward with allegations, state investigators have said.

On its face, the case against Sandusky might be stronger than most child molestation cases, given the fact that there are multiple accusers and possible eyewitnesses, the midstate prosecutors said.

"It's not every day that you have eyewitnesses in these cases. That's rare," Gettle said. "In the majority of cases, there's no physical evidence because of delayed reporting."

Based on what she's read of the evidence in the Sandusky case, "we would undoubtedly prosecute," said Christylee Peck, a Cumberland County senior assistant district attorney who will become a county judge in January.

"I think it is a case you would have some confidence in," Dauphin County Chief Deputy District Attorney Sean McCormack said. He noted that in cases where credible multiple victims come forward — he cited one county case with up to 20 possible victims — it is fairly common for the accused to plead guilty rather than go to trial.

While all cases of child molestation are unique in their details, much of what is coming out in the Sandusky probe is familiar to prosecutors versed in handling child sex abuse crimes.

Multiple victims are not unusual in such cases, they said. Predatory behavior, manipulating child victims with promises, gifts and threats, a process known as "grooming," is typical.

As with most of the charges against Sandusky, there will usually be victim statements but no physical evidence.

And often the victims are underprivileged, sometimes troubled, kids.

"Usually, the victims are children with no resources ... and no one they can turn to," Peck said. "They are reluctant to talk about it. Sometimes, they're less likely to be believed because they have other issues."

Peck said the three-year state investigation of Sandusky took longer than usual in molestation cases, but such probes can be especially tough when their targets are people who are prominent in the community.

McCormack said a long time frame can be necessary to investigate such delicate subjects. He said he can recall one molestation probe that covered two county grand jury cycles before charges were brought.

"We know how hard these cases are to prove in court," McCormack said. "You want to have all the evidence before you file charges."

There are many hurdles to overcome to convince a jury in a child-sex case, the prosecutors said, especially if the case hinges only on the victim's testimony.

"It's an extreme uphill battle. I don't think there's a slam-dunk in any of these cases," McCormack said.

One obstacle that he, Gettle and Peck cited is that child molestation, both the crime and the impact it has on the behavior of victims, is difficult for the average person to grasp.

"A lot of times, jurors don't want to believe these kinds of things can happen," Gettle said.

"People just don't understand what it's like to be a victim," McCormack said. "Victims keep [the abuse] quiet. They probably don't tell many people, if they tell anyone at all."

It is not unusual, either, for victims to maintain close relationships with their abusers, or even to think they are in love with their molesters, he said.

Delayed reporting of molestation is often the rule, not the exception.

Peck noted that she just prosecuted a case in which two girls were molested starting when they were 5 years old. Neither came forward until they were in their late teens.

"I've had people come forward in their 50s, 30 years or more after the incident occurred," Gettle said. Such belated allegations are far too old to prosecute and often are triggered by reports that the

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molester is still abusing other victims, she said.

McCormack said the scope of child molestation, much of it unreported, is evident when juries are chosen in his county to hear such cases.

One of the first things he asks members of the 35-member prospective jury panels is whether any of them or anyone they know was sexually abused as a child.

"I would say that on average five hands go up," McCormack said. "I've seen [prospective jurors] break down. They have to be helped out of the courtroom. They can't talk. They are so affected by confronting their past."

Peck, McCormack and Gettle said they hope there is a real and lasting benefit to the widespread attention the media, politicians and the public are paying as the Sandusky case unfolds.

"If anything comes out of this, I hope it's a better understanding by the public of what victims go through, of how real victims act," McCormack said.

Peck added that perhaps the furor over the Sandusky case might prompt a public outcry that will trigger solid steps to substantially curb sex crimes against children.

"All of these cases should get this amount of press," Peck said.

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**JTSpangler**

November 20, 2011 at 9:54PM

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The lesson for organizations where children are likely to be in contact with molesters (and that's all of them because molesters wear no badges and look like ordinary people) is to have a strong written policy on what sort of conduct is not tolerated and how victims and witnesses may proceed to promptly report violations. The policy must be supported from the very top, and the door for help must always be open.

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**Erica** November 21, 2011 at 1:22AM[Follow](#)

Corbett has AG had 14 OAG Staffers and Investigators assign to Bonusgate Investigation without one investigation on Republican Senators?

At the same time, Corbett assigns only one State Trooper to investigate the Sandusky Child Molestation Charges and Second Mile Foundation.

Campaign Records show Donors to Second Mile gave Corbett \$642,000 in Campaign Contributions for his run and election to be Governor.

Yet, this newspaper has never ask AG Corbett how can you allow Children to be in danger as you protected your Political Republican Senators well prosecuting your Democratic Political Foes, all in the name of Justice?

The editors of this Newspaper have never requested a Federal Investigation in Ag Corbett behavior, selective prosecution, and duplicity to date, shame on them too.

Yet, Joe Paterno is guilty of do nothing as Children were abused, raped, and scared.

Well, Et Tu Patriot News until your calls for an investigation of Tom Corbett and his tenure at the Attorney General Office.

The Only Right Thing To Do Now is ask for the entire truth to come out and timeline of those that could have stopped it, and chose another path for Political, Campaign, and Power purposes, and only a Federal Investigation can uncover the entire truth now.

Do the right thing!

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Are we EVER going to read a story about the FATHERS of these young men also stepping forward to defend their sons for their courage? They ALL know who they are. They chose to take the easy way out and abandon them which is indirectly responsible for them becoming "at risk" when they most needed a DAD.

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There is no cure for these opposite & same sex child molesters.

If convicted, the Dept of Corrections should use the big needle.

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I think even Peck could get a conviction on Sandusky.

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