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AB-452 Childhood sexual assault: statute of limitations. (2023-2024)

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Assembly Bill No. 452

CHAPTER 655

An act to amend Section 340.1 of the Code of Civil Procedure, relating to childhood sexual assault.

[Approved by Governor October 10, 2023. Filed with Secretary of State October 10, 2023.]

LEGISLATIVE COUNSEL'S DIGEST

AB 452, Addis. Childhood sexual assault: statute of limitations.

Existing law requires that specified actions for recovery of damages suffered as a result of childhood sexual assault, as defined, be commenced within 22 years of the date the plaintiff attains the age of majority or within 5 years of the date the plaintiff discovers or reasonably should have discovered that psychological injury or illness occurring after the age of majority was caused by the sexual assault, whichever occurs later. Existing law prohibits certain of those actions from commencing on or after the plaintiff's 40th birthday unless the person or entity knew or had reason to know, or was otherwise on notice, of any misconduct that creates a risk of childhood sexual assault by an employee, volunteer, representative, or agent, or the person or entity failed to take reasonable steps or to implement reasonable safeguards to avoid acts of childhood sexual assault, as specified. Existing law revives claims that would otherwise have been barred as of January 1, 2020, because the applicable statute of limitations, claim presentation deadline, or any other time limit had expired and authorizes the claims to be commenced within specified time periods.

This bill would eliminate time limits for the commencement of actions for the recovery of damages suffered as a result of childhood sexual assault, as specified. The bill would eliminate the prohibition on certain actions proceeding on or after the plaintiff's 40th birthday unless specified conditions are met. The bill would specify that its provisions apply to any claim in which the childhood sexual assault occurred on and after January 1, 2024.

Vote: majority Appropriation: no Fiscal Committee: yes Local Program: no

THE PEOPLE OF THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA DO ENACT AS FOLLOWS:

SECTION 1. Section 340.1 of the Code of Civil Procedure is amended to read:

340.1. (a) There is no time limit for the commencement of any of the following actions for recovery of damages suffered as a result of childhood sexual assault:

- (1) An action against any person for committing an act of childhood sexual assault.
- (2) An action for liability against any person or entity who owed a duty of care to the plaintiff, if a wrongful or negligent act by that person or entity was a legal cause of the childhood sexual assault that resulted in the injury to the plaintiff.

(3) An action for liability against any person or entity if an intentional act by that person or entity was a legal cause of the childhood sexual assault that resulted in the injury to the plaintiff.

(b) (1) In an action described in subdivision (a), a person who is sexually assaulted and proves it was as the result of a cover up may recover up to treble damages against a defendant who is found to have covered up the sexual assault of a minor, unless prohibited by another law.

(2) For purposes of this subdivision, a "cover up" is a concerted effort to hide evidence relating to childhood sexual assault.

(c) "Childhood sexual assault" as used in this section includes any act committed against the plaintiff that occurred when the plaintiff was under the age of 18 years and that would have been proscribed by Section 266j of the Penal Code; Section 285 of the Penal Code; paragraph (1) or (2) of subdivision (b), or of subdivision (c), of Section 286 of the Penal Code; subdivision (a) or (b) of Section 288 of the Penal Code; paragraph (1) or (2) of subdivision (b), or of subdivision (c), of Section 287 or of former Section 288a of the Penal Code; subdivision (h), (i), or (j) of Section 289 of the Penal Code; any sexual conduct as defined in paragraph (1) of subdivision (d) of Section 311.4 of the Penal Code; Section 647.6 of the Penal Code; or any prior laws of this state of similar effect at the time the act was committed. This subdivision does not limit the availability of causes of action permitted under subdivision (a), including causes of action against persons or entities other than the alleged perpetrator of the abuse.

(d) This section shall not be construed to alter the otherwise applicable burden of proof, as defined in Section 115 of the Evidence Code, that a plaintiff has in a civil action subject to this section.

(e) Every plaintiff 40 years of age or older at the time the action is filed shall file certificates of merit as specified in subdivision (f).

(f) Certificates of merit setting forth the facts that support the declaration shall be executed by the attorney for the plaintiff and by a licensed mental health practitioner selected by the plaintiff declaring, respectively, as follows:

(1) That the attorney has reviewed the facts of the case, consulted with at least one mental health practitioner who the attorney reasonably believes is knowledgeable of the relevant facts and issues involved in the particular action, and concluded on the basis of that review and consultation that there is reasonable and meritorious cause for the filing of the action.

(2) That the mental health practitioner consulted is licensed to practice and practices in this state and is not a party to the action, that the practitioner is not treating and has not treated the plaintiff, and that the practitioner has interviewed the plaintiff and is knowledgeable of the relevant facts and issues involved in the particular action, and has concluded, on the basis of the practitioner's knowledge of the facts and issues, that in the practitioner's professional opinion there is a reasonable basis to believe that the plaintiff had been subject to childhood sexual abuse.

(g) If certificates are required pursuant to subdivision (e), the attorney for the plaintiff shall execute a separate certificate of merit for each defendant named in the complaint.

(h) In any action subject to subdivision (e), a defendant shall not be served, and the duty to serve a defendant with process does not attach, until the court has reviewed the certificates of merit filed pursuant to subdivision (f) with respect to that defendant, and has found, in camera, based solely on those certificates of merit, that there is reasonable and meritorious cause for the filing of the action against that defendant. At that time, the duty to serve that defendant with process shall attach.

(i) A violation of this section may constitute unprofessional conduct and may be the grounds for discipline against the attorney.

(j) The failure to file certificates in accordance with this section shall be grounds for a demurrer pursuant to Section 430.10 or a motion to strike pursuant to Section 435.

(k) In any action subject to subdivision (e), a defendant shall be named by "Doe" designation in any pleadings or papers filed in the action until there has been a showing of corroborative fact as to the charging allegations against that defendant.

(l) At any time after the action is filed, the plaintiff may apply to the court for permission to amend the complaint to substitute the name of the defendant or defendants for the fictitious designation, as follows:

(1) The application shall be accompanied by a certificate of corroborative fact executed by the attorney for the plaintiff. The certificate shall declare that the attorney has discovered one or more facts corroborative of one or more of the charging allegations against a defendant or defendants, and shall set forth in clear and concise terms the nature and substance of the corroborative fact. If the corroborative fact is evidenced by the statement of a witness or the contents of a document, the certificate shall declare that the attorney has personal knowledge of the statement of the witness or of the contents of the document, and the identity and location of the witness or document shall be included in the certificate. For purposes of this section, a fact is corroborative of an allegation if it confirms or supports the allegation. The opinion of any mental health practitioner concerning the plaintiff shall not constitute a corroborative fact for purposes of this section.

(2) If the application to name a defendant is made before that defendant's appearance in the action, neither the application nor the certificate of corroborative fact by the attorney shall be served on the defendant or defendants, nor on any other party or their counsel of record.

(3) If the application to name a defendant is made after that defendant's appearance in the action, the application shall be served on all parties and proof of service provided to the court, but the certificate of corroborative fact by the attorney shall not be served on any party or their counsel of record.

(m) The court shall review the application and the certificate of corroborative fact in camera and, based solely on the certificate and any reasonable inferences to be drawn from the certificate, shall, if one or more facts corroborative of one or more of the charging allegations against a defendant has been shown, order that the complaint may be amended to substitute the name of the defendant or defendants.

(n) The court shall keep under seal and confidential from the public and all parties to the litigation, other than the plaintiff, any and all certificates of corroborative fact filed pursuant to subdivision (l).

(o) Upon the favorable conclusion of the litigation with respect to any defendant for whom a certificate of merit was filed or for whom a certificate of merit should have been filed pursuant to this section, the court may, upon the motion of a party or upon the court's own motion, verify compliance with this section by requiring the attorney for the plaintiff who was required by subdivision (f) to execute the certificate to reveal the name, address, and telephone number of the person or persons consulted with pursuant to subdivision (f) that were relied upon by the attorney in preparation of the certificate of merit. The name, address, and telephone number shall be disclosed to the trial judge in camera and in the absence of the moving party. If the court finds there has been a failure to comply with this section, the court may order a party, a party's attorney, or both, to pay any reasonable expenses, including attorney's fees, incurred by the defendant for whom a certificate of merit should have been filed.

(p) This section applies to any claim in which the childhood sexual assault occurred on and after January 1, 2024. Notwithstanding any other law, a claim for damages based on conduct described in paragraphs (1) through (3), inclusive, of subdivision (a), in which the childhood sexual assault occurred on or before December 31, 2023 may only be commenced pursuant to the applicable statute of limitations set forth in existing law as it read on December 31, 2023.

(q) Notwithstanding any other law, including Chapter 1 of Part 3 of Division 3.6 of Title 1 of the Government Code (commencing with Section 900) and Chapter 2 of Part 3 of Division 3.6 of Title 1 of the Government Code (commencing with Section 910), a claim for damages described in paragraphs (1) through (3), inclusive, of subdivision (a), is not required to be presented to any government entity prior to the commencement of an action.