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Another judge criticizes Jehovah's Witnesses' court tactics

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A panel of judges in Philadelphia has ruled that Jehovah's Witnesses used an "abusive tactic" to delay a trial in which a woman accused the religion's leaders of covering up her abuse as a child.

The Witnesses' parent corporation, the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York, had won a motion in a lower court to move the case from Philadelphia to York County, which currently has the largest backlog of civil cases in Pennsylvania.

The Watchtower argued that holding the trial in Philadelphia would burden witnesses who would have to travel to testify. The appellate panel overruled the lower court, calling the Watchtower's motion a "last-minute gambit to delay trial."

In her opinion

(<https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/2680592-106EDA2015.html>), Judge Patricia Jenkins refers to the Watchtower and other defendants as "the Congregations."

"The facts strongly suggest that the motion to transfer venue was the product of bad-faith collaboration between the Congregations and the four York County witnesses," she wrote.

The case was brought in 2013 by Stephanie Fessler, who claims she was sexually abused 30 to 50 times from the ages of 14 to 16 by a middle-aged woman in another congregation.

Jenkins didn't elaborate on the collaboration, but her remarks were not the first time a judge has taken issue with the Watchtower's tactics in court. In two cases in California, judges issued default judgments to plaintiffs because the Watchtower refused to produce documents and witnesses.

Fessler, 27, gave Reveal permission to use her name in this story. Jeff Fritz, Fessler's attorney, said Watchtower policies enabled her abuser.

"The congregation and the Watchtower had knowledge of child abuse that we contend they were obligated to report to law enforcement and child welfare authorities," he said. "They admit that they had knowledge of it, and they admit that they didn't report it. As a result, she was subject to continued abuse."

The Watchtower declined to comment on the case.

Fessler's lawsuit is one of more than a dozen pending against the Watchtower in the U.S. over the organization's child abuse policies.

A Reveal investigation last February

(<https://www.revealnews.org/article/jehovahs-witnesses-use-1st-amendment-to-hide-child-sex-abuse-claims/>) found that since 1989, the Watchtower had directed Jehovah's Witnesses elders to hide child sexual abuse from secular authorities. The Watchtower's pattern of secrecy subsequently was highlighted during an inquiry by an Australian government commission

(<https://www.revealnews.org/blog/jehovahs-witnesses-shield-child->

[sexual-abusers-from-police-report-says/](#)), which found that the Witnesses had failed to report more than 1,000 suspected child sexual abusers in that country.

A commission that regulates charities in England [currently is investigating \(https://www.revealnews.org/blog/in-england-more-accusations-that-jehovahs-witnesses-hid-sex-abuse/\)](#) the Witnesses' child abuse policies.

The trial in Fessler's case could begin as soon as this spring.

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