

Jehovah's Witnesses ordered by jury to pay \$35M to abuse survivor

The defendant said the church covered up her sexual abuse as a child at the hands of a congregation member.

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Two women who were sexually abused as children say the Jehovah's Witnesses failed to report their abuser to authorities in Montana, and instead expelled him from the congregation as punishment until he repented. Seth Wenig / AP

HELENA, Mont. — The Jehovah's Witnesses must pay \$35 million to a woman who says the church's national organization ordered Montana clergy members not to report her sexual abuse as a child at the hands of a congregation member, a jury ruled in a verdict.

A judge must review the penalty, and the Jehovah's Witnesses' national organization — Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York — plans to appeal.

Still, the 21-year-old woman's attorneys said Wednesday's verdict sends a message to the church to report child abuse to outside authorities.

"Hopefully that message is loud enough that this will cause the organization to change its priorities in a way that they will begin prioritizing the safety of children so that other children aren't abused in the future," said attorney Neil Smith Thursday.



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The Office of Public Information at the World Headquarters of Jehovah's Witnesses responded to the verdict with an unsigned statement.

"Jehovah's Witnesses abhor child abuse and strive to protect children from such acts. Watchtower is pursuing appellate review," it said.

The Montana case is one of dozens that have been filed nationwide over the past decade alleging Jehovah's Witnesses mismanaged or covered up the sexual abuse of children.

The case that prompted Wednesday's ruling involved two women, now 32 and 21, who allege a family member sexually abused them and a third family member in Thompson Falls in the 1990s and 2000s.

The women say they reported the abuse to church elders, who handled the matter internally after consulting with the national organization.

The elders expelled the abuser from the congregation in 2004 then reinstated him the next year, the lawsuit states, and the abuse of the girl who is now 21 continued.

The lawsuit claimed the local and national Jehovah's Witnesses organizations were negligent and violated a Montana law that requires them to report abuse to outside authorities.



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"Their national headquarters, called Watchtower, they control when and if anyone within their organization reports child abuse," Smith said. "Watchtower instructed everyone involved that they were not to report the matter to authorities."

Attorneys for the Jehovah's Witnesses said in court filings that Montana law exempts elders from reporting "internal ecclesiastical proceedings on a congregation member's serious sin."

The church also contended that the national organization isn't liable for the actions by Thompson Falls elders, and that too much time has passed for the women to sue.

The jury awarded the 21-year-old woman \$4 million for her injuries, plus \$30 million in punitive damages against Watchtower and \$1 million in punitive damages against the Christian Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses, another Jehovah's Witness corporation that communicates with congregations across the U.S.

The monetary award must be reviewed by the trial judge and could be reduced. A Montana law caps punitive damage awards at 3 percent of a company's net worth or \$10 million, whichever is less. A legal challenge to that law is pending before the Montana Supreme Court.

The jury dismissed claims that the church should have reported the second woman's abuse by the same congregation member. Jurors concluded church elders did not receive notice of the 32-year-old woman's abuse in 1998 as she said they did, and therefore did not have a duty to tell authorities.

The third family member who claimed abuse was not a plaintiff in the lawsuit.

The Associated Press generally does not name people who say they are a victim of a sex crime.