

Quebec court asked to approve sexual abuse class-action lawsuit against Jehovah's Witnesses

Proposed lawsuit accuses religious organization's leadership in Canada and U.S. of protecting alleged abusers

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A request to proceed with a class-action lawsuit that accuses the Jehovah's Witnesses of failing to protect victims of sexual abuse has been filed with Superior Court of Quebec, the law firm representing the complainants says.

The request was filed Friday by lawyer Sarah Woods on behalf of congregation members who allege they were sexually abused and feel they were poorly protected by church's leadership in Canada and its parent organization in the United States.

The request was filed in the name of Lisa Blais, a Quebec Jehovah's Witness who alleges she was abused for years by her older brother, also a Jehovah's Witness.

- [Quebec police probe possible cases of child sexual abuse in Jehovah's Witnesses congregation](#)

Blais says she complained to church officials about the alleged abuses when she was 16, and claims Jehovah's Witnesses did nothing to protect her. The allegations have not been proven in court.

Other cases of alleged abuse are in the process of being evaluated, Woods said.

The request accuses the Jehovah's Witnesses of "having set up and maintained a hierarchical religious organization in which elders, its main authority figures, have been able to commit sexual assaults with impunity."

In the request, Jehovah's Witnesses are also accused of "creating an environment that protects sexual assailants of minors," notably by "hindering denunciation to secular authorities," such as the police or Quebec's Directorate of Youth Protection.

The lawsuit lists two sub-groups of complainants: those claiming they were abused by church elders and those who claim they were abused while minors by other members of their congregation.

- [Internal process protects pedophiles, says ex-Jehovah's Witness](#)

This lawsuit names as defendants The Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, the parent company of Jehovah's Witnesses in Canada, as well as the religious organization's American headquarters and Governing Body — a group of seven men responsible for developing the policies that regulate life and religious practices of Jehovah's Witnesses.

The lawsuit is seeking \$250,000 per complainant for moral and punitive damages.

Radio-Canada says that, if approved by the court, the class-action lawsuit would be the first of its kind against the Jehovah's Witnesses, a religious movement that is already the subject of several individual lawsuits in the United States.

It's now up to the Superior Court of Quebec to determine whether the application is sufficiently substantiated to authorize the collective action.

With files from Radio-Canada's Pasquale Turbide

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