

Moms for Liberty chapter splits off over response to rape allegation against co-founder's husband

 nbcnews.com/news/amp/rcna128204

Tyler Kingkade

December 5, 2023



SHARE THIS —

A Pennsylvania chapter of the conservative activist group Moms for Liberty split from the organization Monday over the national leadership's response to [a rape allegation](#) against a co-founder's husband.

Clarissa Paige, who was Moms for Liberty's chapter chair in Northumberland County, Pennsylvania, and the state legislative lead for the group, said she was disturbed that the national leaders quickly jumped to defend Florida Republican Party Chairman Christian Ziegler and his wife, Bridget, after the [allegations](#) — and the criminal investigation into Ziegler's conduct — became public last week.

Bridget Ziegler, a school board member in Sarasota, Florida, is an original co-founder of Moms for Liberty. She has spoken at Moms for Liberty events and led training sessions for the group's members through the Leadership Institute, a conservative activist training organization. Christian Ziegler also [led a presentation at Moms for Liberty's national summit](#) in July.

[Moms for Liberty became a dominant force](#) in local and national politics revolving around culture war issues over the [past two years](#), helping to push [conservative policies](#) around LGBTQ rights in schools and elect right-wing school board members who wanted [more patriotic curricula](#). But the growing controversy arising from the sexual assault allegation threatens to derail that momentum and dethrone the Florida Republican party chair.

After the [Florida Center for Government Accountability](#) first reported on the sexual assault allegation Thursday, Moms for Liberty posted on X, formerly known as Twitter, that it was “another attempt today to ruin the reputation of a strong woman fighting for America.” Moms for Liberty deleted the tweet; co-founder Tiffany Justice said she did so because of an influx of hateful messages.

“The things people were saying were so horrific [I didn’t want to give an outlet to it](#),” she told NBC News at the time.

In an interview Tuesday, Paige said she did not think the organization should ever have gotten involved in the matter.

“It technically should have never been a Moms for Liberty issue, but by taking that stance Thursday night, it became their fight, and it shouldn’t have,” Paige said.

Paige said she and her members are starting a group called the Northumberland County Education Alliance to continue pushing for conservative policies and parental rights in local schools. Their split from Moms for Liberty was [first reported](#) by The News-Item, a newspaper in Shamokin, Pennsylvania.

“We have been truly shaken to read of the serious, criminal allegations against Christian Ziegler,” Justice and fellow co-founder Tina Descovich said in a statement Tuesday. “We believe any allegation of sexual assault should be taken seriously and fully investigated,” they said, adding that Bridget Ziegler left the group a month after its launch in January 2021. Regarding the Northumberland chapter, the co-founders said they “appreciate this chapter’s hard work and we hope they continue the fight for parental rights.”

According to a [search warrant affidavit](#) first obtained by the nonpartisan Florida Center for Government Accountability and shared with NBC News, a woman who had known the Zieglers for 20 years reported to police that Christian Ziegler sexually assaulted her at her apartment on Oct. 2. Christian Ziegler told investigators that he had consensual sex with the woman on Oct. 2, according to the affidavit, and Bridget Ziegler told detectives that she and her husband had a consensual three-way sexual encounter with the woman last year.

Sarasota police have not confirmed or denied the authenticity of the affidavit, which has been widely reported. A lawyer for Christian Ziegler has said he expects to be fully cleared of any criminal wrongdoing once the investigation concludes. Bridget Ziegler did not respond to requests for comment.

Paige said her reaction to Bridget Ziegler's apparent admission was "Holy buckets, this is not OK."

"We can't fight against grooming of students or kids and then that's happening," she said.

Paige said there was a lot of discussion about the allegations in a private Facebook group of chapter chairs, mostly by people asking for more information. She said that the chairs seem to be split but that she expects more people may leave depending on how the national leaders respond in a Moms for Liberty all-member meeting scheduled to be hosted online Thursday.

The national leaders have not contacted Paige about her concerns or her decision to leave, she said, and they booted her out of the Facebook groups Monday night as soon as they learned she would be leaving.

But Paige said that since the news broke about her splitting off, people in other states have contacted her to ask about forming their own independent groups.

Paige started the chapter in April 2022, contributing \$60 at the time for a packet from Moms for Liberty and paying the cost for IRS registration out of her own pocket, as well.

Her chapter had been a bright spot in recent school board elections; while [nationally many right-leaning candidates lost](#) in swing states and some conservative districts — including in Philadelphia suburbs — candidates backed by the Northumberland County Moms for Liberty unseated two incumbents.

"I put quite a bit of resources out there for this chapter, and it makes me sad that this is how this chapter closes," she said.

Paige said that before the allegations against Ziegler emerged, she started having trouble getting people to join her chapter because of scandals with Moms for Liberty [in other locations](#), such as the Pennsylvania [chapter that had a registered sex offender](#) volunteering as an outreach coordinator. (Moms for Liberty said that person had [passed a background check](#).) Paige said she hopes restarting with a new name will allow her group to move forward.