

Should we reform the sex offender registry?

Mary Ann McGivern | Feb. 20, 2012 NCR Today

The Missouri legislature is debating a bill, HB 1700, that would end restrictions on where convicted sex offenders can live. It would remove juveniles from the public registry. It would create four tiers of registrants, ranging from those least likely to re-offend to those who are assessed to be a continued threat to public safety. It would publish the top two tiers on a website, but not their workplace addresses. It would provide paths to get off the registry, which right now, is a lifetime listing.

Missouri's registry, like most across the country, has grown large. It has 16,000 names, including the foolish who urinated in the vicinity of a parking lot security camera, enraptured high school partners (one of whom is 18) and dangerous predators. The sheer number as well as the range of crimes makes the list as it is useless.

The Crime Prevention & Public Safety committee has held numerous hearings and meetings about the registry in the last year. Committee members agree that neither housing restrictions (like living no closer than two blocks from a school) nor public website listings enhance public safety.

While the intent of Congress in creating the registry was to inform the public instead of extending punishment on the offender, the registry is a continued public shaming, an enormous burden to families and a severe obstacle to employment. What business wants to be listed as a place where a sex offender works?

The assessment to place persons in tiers would rely on counselors trained to use assessment tools to measure the likelihood of future behavior. It would use risk, not past behavior, to determine rank.

One of the consequences is that Missouri could lose \$500,000 in federal money. States not in substantial compliance with the Adam Walsh Act (SORNA) will lose 10 percent of highway patrol aid. Whether the feds would consider the above to be substantial compliance is the question. Another consequence could be that legislators are accused of being "soft on crime" and voted out of office.

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