

Tackett warns county's 127 sex offenders

Those living near schools, daycares could be prosecuted

By KRIS HILGEDICK
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Letters will be sent to 127 registered sex offenders in Cole County, warning them about a 2004 state statute that bars them from living within 1,000 feet of a school or daycare.

Cole County Prosecutor Bill Tackett said the certified letters are expected to go out Monday.

Tackett, who lobbied for the legislation, said he first noted the situation while working on his campaign.

"I was going door-to-door in (the Belair neighborhood), campaigning," he said. "I knocked on the door and I knew the guy."

He had come face-to-face with a man he helped put behind bars for a sex crime. He said he was unnerved that a convicted offender could live so close to an elementary school.

A law passed in 2004 prohibits any person who has been convicted of certain sex-related crimes from residing within 1,000 feet of a school or child care facility. Violation of the provision is a Class D felony. A second or subsequent offense is a class B felony.

If a school or child care facility is opened within 1,000 feet of where an offender already lives, the person must notify the sheriff of this fact within one week, or face charges.

Not all of the offenders on the list were convicted of child-related sex crimes. (Some of the offenders were convicted of offenses such as indecent exposure or sexual misconduct.)

The crimes go back about 15 years, he estimated.

"I'm familiar with most of the people," he said.

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State statute requires the Cole County Sheriff's Office to keep and publish a current list of offenders convicted of 31 different sex-related crimes. The list includes: statutory rape, deviant sexual assault, prostitution, child abuse, child molestation, sodomy, indecent exposure, to name a few.

Tackett said the need to act became apparent when he realized most school principals weren't aware some offenders live in neighborhoods near their schools.

"No one is designated to check on this," he said, adding the sheriff's office is too busy to keep track of dozens of countywide offenders.

Tackett said he's sending the letter to all sex offenders on the list potentially affected by the law.

Not all of them, however, live near schools or daycares. He did not know how many may have to find a new address.

But Tackett believes the law demands those who do live within 1,000 feet of a school or daycare to move.

"I'm asking them to contact me. I'll work with them if I see they are trying to move in a reasonable fashion," he said. "The key is, to be in compliance with the law."

He was uncertain if that would entail waiting for the person's house to be sold on the market or for their lease to be honored.

He said he's more concerned that some unregistered offenders live in the county.

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