

State steps up monitoring of child sex offenders

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JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. — Missouri is beefing up its monitoring of convicted child sex offenders, posting thousands of photos on the Internet and using satellite technology to track repeat criminals for life.

Meanwhile, some predict that

prosecutors across the state might begin using a new law to crack down on offenders living near day-care centers and schools.

Victim's rights groups, who cite a rash of killings nationwide by repeat offenders, applaud the increased vigilance.

But even some supporters question whether state and local law enforcement have the re-

sources to enforce existing laws, much less new ones. They say registries often are out of date because police departments lack the time to update them.

"There's a real problem of manpower," said Cyrilla Bender, who heads the group Mothers Outraged by Molesters, based in Independence, Mo.

The changes to sex offender

tracking are contained in two new laws, each of which goes into effect Aug. 28.

One law allows online sex-offender databases to include photos of offenders. For years, databases maintained by county and city police have provided only names, addresses and a short description of the offense.

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Changes in the law:

1. Photos of sex offenders can be stored in county and city databases.
2. Second-time offenders must be tracked at all times with global-positioning devices.

Officials in several Missouri counties, such as Jefferson County, say they are planning to post photos as early as this month.

Offenders Monitoring adds photos, GPS tracking

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The second law requires second-time offenders to be tracked continually with global positioning devices, presumably buckled to their ankles. The law would apply only to cases tried after the law takes effect.

Both measures are similar to legislation popping up in states nationwide, said Charles Onley of the federal Center for Sex Offender Management.

Onley said states began looking at how to enhance their tracking of sex offenders after two recent murders of girls in Florida. That interest only increased after a more recent murder of a boy in Idaho. Convicted sex offenders were arrested in each case.

In the past, local law enforcement officials in Missouri have faced legal barriers in adding photos to their online sex offender registries. The new law removes those concerns. Officials in several Missouri counties, such as Jefferson County, say they are planning to post photos as early as this month.

But many large counties, like St. Louis and St. Charles, say they

can't afford to update their systems. Instead, many are referring the public to a statewide database maintained by the Missouri Highway Patrol.

Ricks said the Highway Patrol plans to post photos of nearly every sex offender on the registry within the next several weeks.

Meanwhile, the satellite tracking of repeat offenders would cover criminals whose victims are under the age of 14.

The law has raised civil rights concerns, particularly because the tracking devices must be worn even after offenders have completed parole. From a practical standpoint, others worry about cost.

Onley said some states have dropped the concept, fearing they lack the ability to track dozens of criminals. But supporters say continual vigilance isn't required. The systems could be programmed, for example, to alert when an offender approaches a school or day care.

Bender said she's eager for the new tracking law to go into effect. And she dismisses those who call the system excessive.

"My feeling is these people chose this crime," she said.

But even with the new photos and satellite technology, Bender still sees flaws in the system that pedophiles could exploit.

As it is, the accuracy of offender databases depends almost entirely on the willingness of offenders to self-report their residency. Most

are believed to do so under the threat of a felony. But critics say the most dangerous offenders could easily keep their whereabouts secret.

Cole County Prosecutor Bill Tackett said any system to keep tabs on offenders will have weaknesses, particularly given the limited resources of police. But Tackett said other effective tools aren't always being used.

Tackett recently grabbed attention statewide when he sent letters to all sex offenders in the Jefferson City area to make sure they're living at least 1,000 feet away from schools and day cares. A law passed last year spells out felony offenses for offenders who don't comply with that buffer.

Tackett's efforts quickly identified 39 offenders who are apparently violating the new law. He's given them until the beginning of the school year to either move or face prosecution.

Tackett said he's not aware of any other prosecutors who have cracked down under the new law. Prosecutors in the St. Louis area could not be reached for comment on the matter last week. But Tackett said he's being flooded with calls from prosecutors who want to follow his lead.

"It's just something that has not been paid attention to," he said of the new law.

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