

Bill advances to end gap in Megan Law

Sex offenders would have to re-register every time they move.

By Louis Galvan
The Fresno Bee

(Published Saturday, April 5, 2003, 4:51 AM)

A bill that would close a loophole in the state's Megan Law by requiring sex offenders to register each time they move, regardless if they have lived in the area before, is on pace to be ready for Gov. Davis' signature.

Assembly Member Sarah Reyes, D-Fresno, is author of Assembly Bill 150, which was introduced to the Assembly in January. Friday, Reyes said the bill received a bipartisan vote of 77-0 when it passed through the Assembly March 27.

She said the bill is expected to be passed by the Senate late this month and placed before Davis by the middle of May. The bill would become law immediately upon Davis' signature.

In addition to clarifying that sex offenders must register each time they move, regardless of whether they have lived in the area before or not, the bill also would make each failure to register a separate criminal offense.

"The state of California lost track of more than 33,000 convicted sex offenders, despite the fact that they are required by law to register," said Reyes, referring to an Associated Press story in January that the state did not know the whereabouts of at least 44% of the ex-convicts required to update their whereabouts at least annually.

"That number is astounding. It is my hope this legislation will lower the number of offenders who are not registered, so we can protect our children."

Her bill is aimed at a loophole that was discovered recently when a convicted sex offender, who had registered in one county, moved and registered in another county, but then returned to the first county without registering. The offender argued in court that California law does not require sex offenders to re-register if they move to a jurisdiction where they once registered.

The defendant lost his appeal, but the case showed the law was not explicit about the need for registrants to re-register.

Reyes' comments came during her visit to the Lowell Elementary Resource Center, across the street from Lowell Elementary School in the 100 block of North Poplar Avenue, where she showed off three new computers donated to the center by Reyes and Southern California Edison.

The computers will be available for residents of the neighborhood to log on to the Megan's Law Web site to find out where registered sex offenders reside in their area.

Reyes said the center was chosen because the area around the school has the highest number of registered sex offenders in the city.

Fresno police Capt. Rene Martin said current figures show one high-risk sex offender and about 20 serious sex offenders living in the area.

Martin saw low-rent housing and halfway homes in the area are some of the factors involved in attracting the large number of sex offenders to the neighborhood.

Fresno County sheriff's Capt. Tom Gettie said his office supported Reyes' bill and her efforts to help the residents of the neighborhood.

Ray Avila, principal at Lowell, said the school is aware of the high number of sex offenders living in the area and already is doing certain things to look out for the safety of the children, including supporting a volunteer program in which parents take turns watching children each day as they walk to and from school.