



Tuesday, June 06, 2006

Law gets tough on Internet predators

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PLATTE CITY, Mo. — The Internet, the source of so much that is good and bad in the modern world, could become an easier place to track down sexual predators under a new Missouri law.

Gov. Matt Blunt was in Platte City Monday to sign ceremonial copies of a bill that enacts tougher penalties for sexual predators, including those who search for victims in corners of the World Wide Web.

"I believe that the Internet is the place where our children today are most at risk," said Platte County Prosecutor Eric Zahnd. "This bill does some very important things to allow us to clamp down and prosecute Internet predators."

Mr. Zahnd has more than a passing interest in such prosecutions. In August 2005, a federal judge acquitted Jan Helder, a Mission Hills, Kan., attorney, of using the Internet to try to entice a child into sex because the "child" he was talking to online was actually a Platte County sheriff's deputy. Mr. Zahnd has since filed state charges against Mr. Helder, which are pending. The new Missouri law says that suspects can't use as a defense the fact that their intended victim was an undercover officer.

The law also allows grants of up to \$250,000 to cyber crime units, such as the one Platte County formed in 2004. The grants require a 25 percent local match.

The Internet provisions are just a part of the sweeping bill modeled after "Jessica's law," the landmark Florida legislation named for a girl who was raped and murdered by a convicted sex offender.

Among the law's major provisions are life sentences for repeat offenders and 30-year minimum sentences for the forcible rape or sodomy of a victim under 12. Paroled offenders get lifetime supervision and are subjected to increased scrutiny on sex-offender registries.

"These are horrific crimes that leave permanent scars on young Missourians, and we need a very severe penalty," Mr. Blunt said.

Also included in the bill are provisions sponsored by St. Joseph Republicans Sen. Charlie Shields and Rep. Dr. Rob Schaaf, who, along with Rep. Martin Rucker, D-St. Joseph, attended Monday's ceremony. Mr. Shields' provision bars school bus drivers from having sexual contact with their passengers, while Dr. Schaaf was the author of an earlier sex-offenders bill that was rolled into the final product.

The state estimates that enforcement of the law would cost perhaps \$455,000 next year, a figure that could rise to \$1.2 million by fiscal year 2009. And eventually some offenders would be paroled after 30 years, only to face few opportunities and public scorn. Mr. Blunt said those were problems to address down the road.

“The child that they committed this terrible crime against has had to live with that for 30 years — I don’t have a lot of sympathy for them,” he said.

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