

Sex offender restrictions may backfire

By Scott Rothschild

Thursday, November 16, 2006

Restrictions on where sex offenders can live may sound good, but actually put communities at greater risk, law enforcement and victims' rights advocates said Wednesday.

"The bottom line is, it doesn't protect children," said Pamela Dettmann, a senior assistant county attorney from Burlington, Iowa.

Kansas lawmakers are considering legislation that would prohibit sex offenders who are released from prison from living near schools or day-care centers.

But officials from Iowa said a similar new law there has had several unintended consequences.

It has forced sex offenders to live in remote areas where it is difficult for law enforcement and parole officials to keep track of them.

And the number of sex offenders who are unaccounted for has doubled since the law went into effect last year.

Additionally, some communities now have clusters of offenders living in motels or other places outside the residency restriction.

Dettmann also said that the law misdirects public attention on the problem of sex crimes against children by focusing on "stranger" offenders, when most sex crimes against children are committed by a relative or acquaintance.

Iowa officials urged Kansas lawmakers to shelve proposals on residency restrictions and instead direct efforts on treatment of sex offenders and educational programs for young children.

In Iowa, law enforcement officials and prosecutors have joined forces to try to repeal the law there.

In Kansas, a judicial committee took no action on the proposal but will make its recommendations

before the January startup of the 2007 legislative session.