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Inspecting Megan's Law

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Thirteen years after its passage, the Legislature has decided to bring Megan's Law -- the tough state law requiring police to alert communities about the most dangerous sex offenders -- in for a checkup. Lawmakers want to know whether the law is working the way they intended.

Not only is this a good idea for Megan's Law but it is probably a good precedent that ought to be emulated with other landmark legislation.

Following the death of Megan Kanka, the 7-year-old Hamilton Township girl who was raped and murdered by a twice-convicted sex offender living across the street, public outrage was palpable. Lawmakers understandably wanted to do something. It's not uncommon for legislators to rush to enact legislation based on a horrific crime, but seldom do they come back to see whether the new law is producing the desired results.

Sens. John Girgenti (D-Bergen) and Peter Inverso (R-Bergen) have introduced legislation authorizing the review after learning of uneven application of the law. Data gathered by the Administrative Office of the Courts show there are significant and unexplained disparities in the application of Megan's Law from county to county.

Eight percent of sex offenders in Morris County and 9 percent in Passaic County were deemed by prosecutors and judges to be dangerous enough to be listed on the State Police Megan's Law Web site.

By contrast, more than 40 percent of the sex offenders in Atlantic and Cape May counties are listed on the Internet site.

Under Megan's Law, whether convicted sex offenders' names and residences are posted on the Internet depends on their classification -- tiers one through three. Tier-three offenders are automatically included in the Internet registry because they are considered the most likely to reoffend. Tier-two offenders may be in the registry. Those classified as tier one pose the least risk and are not listed on the Internet site.

The difference from county to county may simply reflect variations among sex offenders, but the fear is that offenders with very similar backgrounds face different fates. That's what Girgenti and Inverso want to find out. Under their bill, which was voted out of committee last week, the Violence Institute of New Jersey at the University of Medicine and Dentistry will study the application of the law. The proposed legislation should be enacted.

Another study, funded with a federal grant obtained by the state Corrections Department, is looking at the cost effectiveness of Megan's Law.

Together these efforts should be able to target possible weaknesses in a law that has received widespread public support.

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