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Measure targets child molesters in youth organizations

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The Senate passed a bill yesterday to bar child molesters from volunteering for youth organizations unless they get permission from the state Parole Board.

The bill would make it a crime for adult and juvenile sex offenders whose victims were under 18 to "hold a position or otherwise participate, in a paid or unpaid capacity, in a youth-serving organization."

A spokesman for the Public Defender's Office said the wording of the bill could have the "unintended consequence" of barring juveniles who molested other youngsters from playing in a Little League or joining the Boy Scouts.

"We are very troubled by the possibility that this legislation will prevent teenagers, adolescents, youths from social activities -- primarily sports and team sports -- that will be beneficial in their development," Tom Rosenthal, a spokesman for Public Defender Yvonne Smith Segars, said.

Assemblyman John Girgenti (D-Passaic), the sponsor, said he did not intend the bill to apply that broadly.

"We're talking about coaches, counselors, people like that who are in a supervisory position," Girgenti said. He said he knew of no instance of a child molester obtaining such a position and intended his bill as a "safeguard."

Under the bill, a child molester who obtained a position with a youth organization would face three to five years in prison, unless he had written permission from the state Parole Board. Its executive director, Michael Dowling, said he knew of no convicted child molester who has such permission.

Anyone who "knowingly" appointed a child molester to serve with a youth organization would face up to 18 months in prison.

The bill (S-639) has been pending in various forms since 2002. It passed the Senate 36-0 and goes to the Assembly for further consideration.

A state association of 11 Girl Scout councils applauded its passage.

"We are grateful that the Legislature has taken this step to further ensure the safety of our girls and all young children in our state who participate in sports, scouting, camps, and other afterschool programs," Helen Wronksi, chair of the New Jersey Girl Scout Councils, said.

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