

<http://www.star-telegram.com/news/story/544048.html>

DPS to post Texas sex offenders' job data

By TRACI SHURLEY

Star-Telegram staff writer

This year, visitors to the Texas Department of Public Safety's Web site can find out where the state's registered sex offenders are working and can sign up for a notification system for their home ZIP code.

The changes, which resulted from a \$1.2 million software upgrade, will be welcomed by some North Texans.

In Mansfield, members of one neighborhood group that recently organized around concerns about where sex offenders live say they're glad to get any information they can. Sex offender employment information will help residents keep tabs on those they consider dangerous, said Steve Kyle, a Mansfield father of two who helped organize a recent meeting about a registered sex offender in his neighborhood.

"The guy comes and goes at very odd hours," Kyle said. "In our community, we'd at least be able to know if he's working, and if we knew where he was working, it might give you some indication of when he would be coming and going."

The changes

About 47,000 registered sex offenders live in Texas. Their names, birth dates, addresses, physical descriptions including shoe size and limited information about the conviction for which they are required to register is available on the DPS Web site, said Tela Mange, an agency spokeswoman.

The upgrade came about in part because of federal regulations related to the Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act of 2006, Mange said. That act requires states to comply with a number of disclosure rules by 2010 or risk losing some federal funds. The new features also reflect Attorney General Greg Abbott's opinions about what information should be available to the public.

Twice in February 2007, Abbott issued opinions that law enforcement agencies should release sex offenders' employment information.

Besides work information and e-mail notifications, the new system will also allow people to search for a full listing of sex offenders in their ZIP code. The software doesn't now allow generation of a ZIP code list of more than 100 names, Mange said.

Restrictions in place

Registered sex offenders can be restricted in where they live and work as long as they are on parole or probation.

But those restrictions don't continue after an offender successfully completes supervision.

As a result, many Tarrant County communities, including Arlington, Southlake, Watauga and Richland Hills, have adopted ordinances in the past few years to limit where sex offenders can live, typically more than 1,000 feet from schools or other places where children gather.

In Mansfield, the subject of sex offender residency restrictions has been discussed among city leaders for several months and played a large role in the resignation of the mayor this year. Now, in part because of concerns from Kyle's community, the issue is once again on the City Council's agenda.

Mansfield's Web site has its own listing of sex offenders with a link to the state database. Residents can also sign up for computerized RSS alerts that notify them of any new or changed registration in the city.

Kyle said he didn't know about the city's notification system until after a man convicted of sexually assaulting an 11-year-old girl moved into his Walnut Creek Valley neighborhood.

Now, he said, parents in the neighborhood are cautioning their children more than ever and keeping an eye on their new neighbor. Giving the public more information about offenders would make that easier, he said.

Caution offered

Shari Julian, who teaches in Texas Wesleyan University's criminal justice and sociology department, said she worries that the workplace information could result in "collateral damage" by creating dangerous situations for businesses that have chosen to give a registered sex offender a second chance.

Julian said she's not justifying sex offenders' crimes. But, she said, the state needs to do a better job of separating classes of offenders if authorities are going

to continue making more information available about their lives and adding more restrictions.

"We have to figure out who got on there because somebody's dad was ticked off because their 16-year-old daughter was seeing a guy who just turned 20 and they ended up getting married and having kids," Julian said.

Sgt. Cheryl Johnson, who oversees the Fort Worth Police Department's sex crimes, registration, apprehension and monitoring unit, said the addition of work addresses to the registry will be helpful to the public. But she cautions that people need to remember that not every sexual predator can be found by looking on the registry Web site.

"I'm just as concerned about the sex offenders we don't know about as I am the ones that are registered with us," Johnson said.

This report includes material from the *Star-Telegram* archives.

PROPOSED MANSFIELD ORDINANCE

The Mansfield City Council is scheduled tonight to consider regulations that would apply to registered sex offenders who were convicted of crimes against children younger than 16. Offenders who have completed their probation or parole are not now limited in where they can live. The first of three required votes and the first of two public hearings are set for the 7 p.m. meeting at City Hall, 1200 E. Broad St.

The proposal would:

Prohibit offenders from living within 1,000 feet of a school, day care, playground, youth center, public swimming pool or video arcade.

Forbid renting a house or trailer to an offender not allowed to live within a 1,000-foot safety zone.

Require police to mail alerts to neighborhoods when an offender moves nearby. Police would also notify the school district.

Fine an offender up to \$500 for each day of a violation.

In the know

Texas Department of Public Safety Web site: www.txdps.state.tx.us

TRACI SHURLEY, 817-548-5494
tshurley@star-telegram.com