

Analyst: No proof 2,000-foot sex offender residency law works

By TODD DORMAN, Globe Gazette Des Moines Bureau

DES MOINES — A state analyst told Iowa lawmakers Monday that there is no data to support the argument that Iowa's law barring sex offenders from living near schools or day cares is reducing the number of crimes against children.

"The Legislature thought it was going to do something that would help make Iowa safer. But it doesn't appear that's been the case," said Paul Stageberg, director of Iowa's office of Criminal and Juvenile Justice Planning, after testifying at the Statehouse.

But the law has resulted in more charges against offenders who violated the state's sex offender registry law, Stageberg said. And there are more registered offenders whose whereabouts are unknown.

The figures were presented to a legislative panel considering changes to the law, which prohibits offenders whose victims are children from living within 2,000 feet of schools or day cares. Local officials started enforcing the law in 2005.

Numerous groups representing victims, prosecutors and law enforcement have called for the law's repeal. But Statehouse leaders are wary of scrapping the politically popular get-tough law.

"I support the 2,000-foot rule," Gov. Chet Culver said last week on Iowa Public Television's "Iowa Press" program. "I think public safety and protecting our children needs to be a high priority."

But some contend there is little evidence the law improves public safety.

Stageberg said there were 445 convictions in Iowa for sex offenses against minor victims between September 2005 and August 2006. That's compared to 433 convictions during the previous year.

Stageberg said the number of offenses against children has remained relatively steady since 2000. The 2,000-foot law, he contends, had no effect.

One reason, Stageberg said, is that the crimes the law seeks to target are rare.

Between July 1, 2005, and June 30, 2006, Stageberg said, only one person in Iowa was convicted of a sex offense against a minor in which the offender was a stranger to the victim. No such offenses have occurred since July 1, 2006.

The vast majority of sex offenses against minors, according to experts, are committed by family members, acquaintances or others known to the victim.

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